

Topic 2

“Know that philosophy is able to perfect the human soul by bringing it to know the reality of existents according to their proper essences, as well as accurately assessing their existence by way of proofs grasped by the mind; or else accepted by tradition, as befits the majority of human beings” - Mulla Sadra.

The nature of essences, and the manner in which they manifest has been an extremely relevant topic in philosophy since the times of Aristotle. A towering influence in philosophy, the question of “being” dominated especially the philosophy of medieval times, both in the Islamic world through philosophers like Averroes and Avicenna, and later in Christian Europe through authors such as Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Thomas Aquinas. However, this question was certainly not left resolved in those times - philosophers such as Santayana, Hume, Whitehead, Leibniz, Deleuze, and so many others have continued to debate this issue in the centuries that have passed. Yet this discussion was not simply left to be had in the ivory towers, restricted solely to ontological concerns: philosophers were also concerned with the impact our metaphysical understanding of the world around us affects how we act as human beings, and how philosophy can help us improve ourselves in a world that can often seem bleak, chaotic, or depressing. While philosophy may seem like an unemotional exercise, the profound effect of the “question of being” can have on someone has been encapsulated in countless immortal moments in our most treasured works of art - from when Hamlet asked if it is better to “be or not to be” - to when Duchamp forced museum-goers to think about what really classifies as art and is within its boundaries by placing a toilet appliance in the middle of the museum floor. However, this is not strictly the domain of the intellectuals - most people tend to experience what is known as an “existential crisis” during their lifetimes, a disquietude at the nature of being, questioning why they should move on. This is often linked to the essence of the world, a perceived detachment from things as they really are. Furthermore, dissociative disorders are on the rise worldwide, indicating that the question of how we can grasp the true essence of things is an important question that must enter the public conversation. Therefore, it is only fair that I tackle this problem myself. The following paper will dissect the prompt into three fundamental questions that underlie it:

- The question of the metaphysical nature of essences. Here, there will be a discussion of various challenges to the idea that essences are real aspects of the existence of the world, which will then promptly be challenged by a point of view that wishes to maintain the existence of essences, albeit in a perhaps less traditional manner.
- The question of if such a question can even be assessed at all. Are we even in any position to claim that things such as essences exist? Here, again, will be entertained an argument that claims that, from pragmatism, we can understand such metaphysical principles, and a position that questions the validity of our understanding of the exterior world. The question of if knowledge through tradition is valid will also be discussed.
- Lastly, we will tackle the claim that understanding the (presumably real) nature of essences is beneficial for the development of the human soul. Here, we will address claims that skepticism is, in fact, better for the perfection of the human soul, and

finally a counterclaim that opposes the previous claim and seeks to lay out a possible manner in which such a daunting task may be achieved following the common philosophical thread which has been laid throughout all three defense of realism against the skeptics.

These three points are going to form the basis of the structure of the essay. Therefore, let us begin with the first one. The idea of an “essence” as commonly understood derives directly from the works of Aristotle, usually in the context of a doctrine called hylomorphism. Aristotelians maintain that any object, such as a chair, or a pen, is both matter and form; or, in other terms, existence and essence. An example one could use is a candle - while, according to Aristotle, a candle’s materiality is comprised of wax shaped a certain way, it also has an essence, an essential quality which makes it a candle and not just simply wax, which makes it, in a sense, transcend its pure material existence, and gives it its identity.

While this doctrine might be immediately plausible, since it seems that candles are indeed somewhat distinct from mounds of wax, and are a category that any of us can recognize in our day to day lives in our world around us, this issue is hotly contested in the world of philosophy. A major reason why it is so controversial is the fact that essences are fundamentally invisible. While the “existence” pole of the nature of a candle is visible, the “essential” pole of it is absolutely unperceivable. We cannot directly pick out qualities from the world that can be pointed to as the “essence” of any given object or thing. While Aristotle and his followers never claimed that that was the case, our understanding of objects purely derives from experience. We do not have an a priori understanding of what a candle is, or what wax is - these categories are also given by our experiences. Nobody is born knowing what a candle is. Furthermore, even if such immaterial things such as “essences” existed, it is impossible for us to interact with anything that is not directly material. When we touch something, that means it has materiality; when we hear something, that also means it has materiality, and so on. We have no sense for the immaterial - even spiritual experiences must be mediated by the material world.

It may seem now that we have a convincing argument against our understanding of the existence of essences. However, this has not disproved, in any sense of the word, essences as a metaphysical entity - instead, it’s been sufficiently proven that they are epistemologically untenable. However, why should we posit the existence of things that are fundamentally unprovable? In science, hypotheses do not posit any more variables than necessary in order for the conclusion the scientist wishes to reach to be feasible, for that would only increase the likelihood that the hypothesis is proven wrong, and if the simplest possible hypothesis is proven wrong through a more complicated answer, than it proves that this added layer of complexity was not trivial and useless in the first place. If we wish to find the truth through philosophy like the scientists do, then in our “experiment” we must not posit unnecessary additional ontological entities such as “essences”, for when we perceive a cup, we perceive the light reflecting on it, the liquid that is contained inside, perhaps an ice cube if you live somewhere warm. A series of impressions that, in our mind’s eye, forms the image of an enduring, singular object. Yet, we do not perceive its “essence”, we know it is a cup through... well, how do we know it is a cup if nothing in its appearance indicates as such? Well, we know it is a cup through our social background. We were taught to recognize it as a cup through our upbringing. There are tribal societies in Africa that do not have any separate

word for green and blue. The two colors are virtually indistinguishable for them - if you placed a green cup and a blue cup in front of them, they would not be able to tell you which is green and which is blue, because despite the fact that they perceive refracted wavelengths of a certain frequency (the material nature of existence) as we do, our experience is impacted by how we were taught to divide the world. A contemporary linguist from the University of California Berkeley named Eleanor Rosch has investigated how we classify things we perceive, eventually coming up with a theory commonly known as "prototype theory". According to her, we classify objects according to varying degrees of how much they belong to a given category, even if rationally any object that belongs to a category belongs as much as any other (a good lesson for life). Therefore, while both a penguin and a raven are birds, in our subconscious ravens are closer to our prototypical image of a bird than penguins. If you were asked to draw the first image that came to mind when someone says the word "bird", it is immensely probable you would not draw a penguin. A common example of such a set, originally argued by Ludwig Wittgenstein, is the concept of a "game". There is no way to define a "game" that encompasses the breadth of everything that we call a game. Must it contain physical activity? Well then chess is no longer a game, and neither are board games. Must it be entertaining? I imagine that for professional players of a game, they could perhaps not be very entertaining but stressful - and, in fact, one can be forced to play a game while it still remains a game. Must it be a group activity? What about the card game solitaire? Or video games? As you can see, there is no possible single definition of such a set. We categorize things according to the world around us, even if that category doesn't make that much sense.

However, this point of view is shallow. Essences do exist, just not in the way that hylomorphism maintains. Our experiences of the world are not solely comprised of looking at cups and observing them intently. If one does that, then of course such an object would appear static and lifeless, only its materiality and nothing more, a simple gunk of matter. However, that is not the case. Think about the chair you're sitting in right now. Were you previously aware of its existence as you are at this moment? Millions of nerve endings are pressed against it, in fact our spines are constantly being compressed whenever we sit, but unless we make ourselves be acutely aware of it, we do not perceive it. We feel it, although passively - it exists as a function, and not as an observed object - it is more chair to us than its component parts. Heidegger was a philosopher that concerned himself with this form of perception. A famous example of his is someone hammering a nail - the person is not actively aware of the existence of the hammer. Rather the hammer exists as an extension of their body, an extension of their own consciousness, exerting their will onto the nail through repeatedly colliding against it. Again, such a hammer seems to have a symbolic existence, one that is not only externally related as a static piece of matter but also internally so, both conceptual and material, that is left out of the narrative made by the reductionist argument above. Another example which also challenges the idea above is Alfred North Whitehead's example of a light shining in someone's face. If we shine a bright light into someone's retinas, that person will flinch. It's physiologically inevitable. A more skeptical philosopher could say that it is entirely possible that both events were coincidental, that it is unnecessary to posit that a light has qualities of relations onto humans independent of its observable characteristics and thus we can posit that it was all a big coincidence. However, if we ask the person whose eyes got hurt, they would not be able to separate the cause of the flinch and the light itself - they are one and the same. Causation, a quality that is not observable in

itself, can be derived through empirical means to exist through its relations, as what could be considered an “essence”. This fits in comfortably with the philosophy of German philosopher Leibniz, or more specifically Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of his philosophy. According to the philosophical principles of Leibniz, any singular quality of an object which is truthful is inherent to its existence. Or, in other words, anything that can be said about an object which is true is inherent to its identity. Take the example of Julius Caesar. If we hold that the phrase “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” is true, then this aspect of Caesar, namely crossing the Rubicon, is inherent to this existence, since this is a distinguishable quality of a singular entity. To see how this fits within Leibniz’s ontology, only consider his Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. Would a Caesar that did not cross the Rubicon be distinct from one who did? Yes, and therefore it is inherent to the identity of that object, since it distinguishes it from an otherwise identical one, and permits it to exist. However, this affirmation has significant ontological implications, namely that now included in the identity of an object, Caesar, we have in it another object, the Rubicon. Since this is not the only example one can come up with, we can assume that this forms an endless web of relations, of participation of every single object in the identity of the other and vice versa, to the point that every single object in existence is present in the internal identity of the next. Therefore, essences are relational, and constantly in flux as more Caesars cross more Rubicons to make more and more relations, growing into a single greater, immanent subject. All the reductionist philosophers above did was ignore essence, rather than refute it.

Now, we must move on to the second point in question - about whether understanding essence is even a tenable point, and how our knowledge of such a thing can exist. In order to analyse how that might be the case in the context of our new ontological understanding of essence, we can turn to the first chapter of Whitehead’s book *Process and Reality*. In the chapter, he lays out a brief description of his metaphilosophical approach to his construction of an entirely new ontological system. Following the methods of philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza and the aforementioned Leibniz, he began with a few certain principles. Some of them are quite uncontroversial, such as the idea that a metaphysical system must be logically coherent - I think most philosophers searched for that in constructing their ideas anyways. However, we will focus on one of them - the idea that a philosophical system must be epistemically adequate and comprehensive. There is significant context as to why Whitehead felt that such a qualifier, that a philosophy must fit in with every aspect of one’s experience that can be deduced, was important. When we grow up, we are generally unquestioning of the world around us and the categories surrounding what we observe. Or, if we are inquisitive about those things, we tend to accept the arbitrary answers that the communities that we grew up in are able to provide. We cannot get away from this “dogma” - it is written into our subconscious, from years of calling parrots “parrots” and chairs “chairs” and interacting with the world as it is real. This is the impact of tradition in our knowledge - it leaves an indelible mark in our perception. While any Tibetan monk will be able to tell you that one can transcend the material world, it’s also the case that we cannot ever escape this period of unquestioning dogma - it is the epistemological equivalent of the Original Sin. Therefore, while it is the duty of a good philosopher to think critically about those categories and ideas and even repudiate them if necessary, ignoring them is not a tenable position. Our understanding of the world must be included in how we view it. Therefore, we are able to access essences, since, while we cannot deduce from only how a sphere is shaped that it can roll unless we’ve seen one roll before, our experiences have

allowed us to unlock these non-positional understandings of objects that transcend inordinate matter and in fact are relational and alive. They contain what Leibniz called "appetite" - constant movement, growth, action. Our world seems to be shaped around us - there is perhaps no stronger argument for intelligent design that our world does seem to conform with remarkable accuracy to how we think. Perhaps there will always be things that we cannot understand, but the fact that we can build skyscrapers and bridges and houses and eliminate something like smallpox from the face of the Earth except for a single laboratory proves that this is to some extent not very random at all. Or, rather, it is random insofar as that makes sense - such is the case of quantum indeterminacy and the role of mutations in natural selection. While many philosophers have tried to undermine this viewpoint, saying that this cannot be deduced from any first principles, we act as if these things are the case, and that is unignorable. How are we supposed to believe essences are unreachable when we act as if they aren't? We have no choice but to take the leap of faith in this case. To accept that we can know existents according to their essences, and that our rationality and ways of proof are correct, despite being flawed.

However, there is an argument against the idea expressed above defending the prompt's reasoning. Our experiences are not always logical. Any of us frequently perceives illusions in our daily lives. Something that is closer to us seems larger than what is far, and yet we deduce that in fact, it is possible that those two things may be the same size, due to perspective. Why? If we follow the idea that all knowledge is derived from experience, which is maintained above, and that our philosophy must be logically coherent, then we are in no place to doubt what is maintained by our existence. Is what we observe at any given point logic enough? If we hold that experiences are impressions that result from the flow of time, and that things cease to exist once they are in the past, then nothing about our present experiences are inherently linked to the past. If we return to Leibniz and Caesar crossing the Rubicon, his ontological claims must mean that Caesar crossing the Rubicon was always part of the existence of Caesar, and the world. Which is clearly not true, especially if we consider that an inherent part of our experience is the fact that change is inherent to our perception. If we think of riding an elevator as an example, we might think that if time stopped, it would be like if the elevator stopped at a floor, and we looked out at a static image. Yet, is it not the case that you can focus on a part of the image, and then another, and another? Is this not only possible due to time passing? If time were to stop, none of us could ever know, since our consciousness occurs over time. In fact, time stopping could not even happen, since existence relies on time moving to exist. If time stopped, and restarted, this would be the same as nothing happening. And nothing doesn't happen all the time, therefore time is both perpetually stopped and never stopped. In conclusion, time stopping is an incoherent concept, and change is inherent to perception. Therefore, we have no grounds for asserting that the bottle in the front is the same size as the bottle in the back, even if we think it can be physically proven, since the persistence of the past is ontologically impossible. Therefore, our knowledge over time is not reliable, since nothing links the present to the past, and since essences, as the identity of an object, must persist over time to be a comprehensible concept, it cannot be said that we could ever know what essences even are. Is it possible that essences exist? Yet, that could be the case. Yet there are an infinite amount of explanations for the present, and the present after that, and the infinity of presents that will come after those ones. It is just another drop in an ocean of irrationality that we could not ever, in any meaningful sense, "know". Because of the disjointed nature of

time, and therefore experience, tradition counts for nothing in our understanding of the world, and neither does essence.

We can extend this skepticism to the third aspect being discussed, namely the idea that understanding the world around us according to the essence of the objects that surround us is, in fact, not beneficial for the “soul”. This idea has existed for centuries in philosophy. A famous champion of it was Thomas Aquinas, who believed that we could understand God through reason, and evaluating religion rationally would help people gain a great appreciation for spirituality and thus have more meaning in our lives. Yet what meaning can be found in an illusion? It is not the idea of God that is an illusion, but rather the idea that something that is characterized as pure essence can be known through reason. These people do not have an accurate picture of God even if their religion is completely right. Such a feat would be, as established earlier, entirely impossible. In fact, most forms of dogmatic knowledge are, in fact, mere illusion, sleights of hand. As long as we hold on to these artifacts, we see the world through these broken categories, we will always be restless, always doubtful, since deep down we know just how arbitrary they are. In order to come to peace with the world, and improve ourselves, we must confront the truth face to face. Sure, once we remove our dogmas, we are left with little. But many philosophers, such as Pyrrho, found peace in this reality. Pyrrho was a radical skeptic from Greece that believed that nothing could be proved to be real. Therefore, he simply lived his life suspending belief in the reality of things. He accepted that the rock he sat on, the bed he slept on, even his friends and family could be illusions just as much as they could be real. Therefore, he lived his life in quiet contentment, with inner peace at having uncovered the uncertain nature of the world. The Stoics were similar. They understood that reality could not be controlled, and therefore lived their life peacefully in the understanding that they could control their own reactions to things perceived as negative. It is not necessary to posit whether things, in their essence, are good or bad, but merely address our own grievances with them and come to terms with them as what they appear to us to be - simple appearances. If we pretend like these things appear to us with any greater reality, then we will not be able to properly diagnose the problems of our soul, and thus not perfect ourselves. Philosophy is an enterprise of truth. In that sense, accepting “truths grasped by the mind” about objects is necessary to our well-being. Yet accepting the “essences” of things is detrimental to ourselves.

On the other hand, do we not treat things as though they exist? Do we not sit on rocks as though they are real, or is there a part of us that acts as if it is fake? When we hurt ourselves, when a light is flashed on our eyes, do we act as if those things are fake? Experience is indeed immanent, and singular. In that sense, Aquinas was wrong. We cannot know of a thing that is perfectly transcendent, not even partially material, only pure essence. And regarding that, Mulla Sadra does only bring up essences in relation to “existents”, and essences in themselves. All of our experiences are of the same category and type - as science and philosophy has found, our senses are inherently linked. Therefore, we must follow Duns Scotus’ idea of the univocity of being - the idea that being is one. So, while there may be pure existence in the world (in the form of the wax), and essence (or, perhaps more accurately, a conceptual pole), in how the wax turns into a candle in its context, these are two sides of a single ontological coin. While this may have been denied in the wake of Aquinas’ towering influence over Catholic dogma, which wishes to separate itself from the material pole of existence towards transcendence, plenty of religions have sought to perfect the soul through the apprehension of essence in an immanent manner. A notable example is

Gnosticism. While the Gnostics believe in a transcendent God, the Monad, the religion seeks not to rid oneself of an inherently evil material existence but rather ascend and construct through constructing meaning through symbols. Therefore, the symbol of the Ouroboros, for example, reflects the univocity of being, the way that nature is intertwined with itself, that God is not entirely separate from this world but rather part of it. The Buddhists also reflect this worldview - they seek to transcend the world by coming to peace with the material existence that surrounds them and within it ascending to a different plane of existence. Is it not telling that they do not believe in a deity as we commonly conceive one, and believe that one can achieve the "goal" of their religion while still alive rather than having to wait for death? The Death of God is relevant not in the traditional sense of death but precisely because of how it exists in the context of humans - it is the absence of immanence. In the religions of tribal societies, God is in the trees, the sun, and the ocean. Same with Spinozist naturalism. Yet in the major forms of Christianity and Islam that are followed by about half the population of the world, God is nowhere. Is that much different from death? The importance of Nietzsche's famous provocation that "God is Dead" lies not in the radicality of his rejection of God - he was not the first nor the last atheist. Rather, it lies in how by placing the categories of good and evil as transcendent, they are completely deprived of any context. Yet everything has a context - as we saw with Caesar and the Rubicon, everything is related. Therefore, to perfect one's soul, one must group the essence with the existence, accept the immanence of these opposite forces, two sides of one truly singular object, a fragment of an interrelated whole. This is how one can perfect the human soul - by bringing it to know the reality of existents according to their proper essences.

In conclusion, despite both sides making good points both giving their perspective regarding the nature of essence, reason, and how this links with the perfection of the soul, the point of the prompt is correct within the framework of our new ontological framework regarding the subject. Making our way through metaphysics, epistemology, and finally ethics and theology, we have seen exactly how essences exist in our world, how we interact with them through our experience, and how we can maintain the univocity of being while still preserving the plurality and diversity of life. While skepticism is always healthy and important in order to keep our rationality as coherent as we possibly can, we can see that the reductionist and Humean approach to the prompt relies on a selection of evidence that is improper for a philosopher, a professional that must seek the truth in all forms of experience, be it the tradition, or dogma, that we inherit from the world that surrounds us, or scientific observation, or just hammering a nail into a wall.