

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 Sadrā, *The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect, Introduction to the First Journey*, 17th century. From: David Burrell, ‘Mulla Sadra's Ontology Revisited’. In: *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 6, 2010, p. 54.

Essence and Knowledge - A comparative evaluation of Classical and Analytic philosophy in giving us knowledge of existent objects in accordance with their proper essences

Introduction

The author of the claim in question seems to be suggesting a metaphilosophical claim about the aims and methods of philosophy, specifically that philosophy seeks to bring us to know the reality of existent objects according to their proper essences, doing so through proofs grasped by the mind, or through tradition. I shall begin by analysing the claim into two major claims, one metaphysical and one epistemic:

Metaphysical claim: Existent objects have proper essences

Epistemic claim: It is possible to know the reality of existent objects according to their proper essences

I will not be considering these two claims in isolation, since the epistemic claim depends on the metaphysical claim. Depending on how one construes the proper essences of objects, the proper essence may be known through different methods, or may not even be known at all. Conversely, if there seems to be no way to know that about the proper essences of existent objects, then the metaphysical claim that existent objects have proper essences at all would be put into question. In my essay, I will be contrasting and evaluating two major conceptions of proper essences that might support the metaphysical claim, drawing from Classical and Analytical traditions of philosophy. However, in both cases, I cast doubt on the epistemic claim that philosophy can give us knowledge proper essences, as each of the traditions construe it. I thus reject the author's greater, metaphilosophical claim that philosophy seeks to bring us to know the reality of the existent objects according to their proper essences.

Chapter 1: Classical philosophy

The idea of objects having an "essence" is an extremely persistent one throughout classical philosophy. Many philosophers treat "essence" as a singular concept, usually meaning the features of an object that are essential to an object in that the object would no longer be the object without this feature. However, I would like to draw a distinction between the conceptions of essences - essences of individual concrete objects, and essences of general classes of objects.

In the first case, consider an individual object like Aristotle. In day to day business, Aristotle undergoes changes. That is to say, if we make a list of all of the properties or features of Aristotle, this list would change over time, with Aristotle gaining some properties and losing others. Despite this, it is intuitive to say that Aristotle can survive such changes. Such a line of reasoning is widespread amongst Ancient Greek philosophers, with one example being that even if the nose of Aristotle is different, or undergoes a change (perhaps due to a rather strong punch), Aristotle would not become a different person, and would still remain Aristotle. Yet, it also seems intuitive that Aristotle would no longer be Aristotle if some other features of Aristotle changed. For example, if Aristotle is murdered, then Aristotle would

cease to exist. Thus, the collection of atoms that used to co-exist with Aristotle's body would no longer be considered Aristotle.

Therefore, Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle made a distinction between essential features and accidental features. An object can survive change if merely its accidental features are changed, but if an object's essential features are changed, the object would cease to be, and instead change into a different object.

For a person, it might be argued that the essential feature of a person is the soul, as though the physical body can undergo multiple changes, whether injury or the shedding of cells, the person would still persist. Hence, it seems to be the case that the essential properties of a person are not its material properties. Such an argument may be made by Platonic philosophers, who postulate the existence of a soul as the essential features of human beings.

For ordinary objects, it might be argued that the essential feature of an ordinary object is its function. Though an object or a tool may be altered physically or undergo changes through use, it remains the same object. Similarly therefore, it does not seem possible to identify the essence of an individual object with its physical properties. However, as it also seems impossible that physical, non-human objects have souls as humans do, since most of them do not even have consciousness or sentience, the closest, and some would argue only non-material property of non-sentient physical objects is its function. An that can be made is the Ship of Theseus. Theseus was a classical hero, and in his celebration, his ship is sailed every year. However, due to decay, the ship's parts are gradually replaced year after year, until all the parts are completely replaced. It seems conceivable that the Ship of Theseus has survived those changes, and this can be explained for by the fact that the essence of the Ship of Theseus, that is, what makes the Ship of Theseus the Ship of Theseus, is its function as the ship that is paraded every year and recognised and celebrated as the Ship of Theseus. In so far as this occurs therefore, the essence of the Ship of Theseus is preserved, and the Ship of Theseus survives. However, as I will discuss later, this claim is controversial.

However, recall that I also postulated that essences should not only be thought of as essences of individual objects, but also essences of classes of objects. Consider here, a general concept

like “a dog”. We might ask, what makes a dog a dog? If we consider two dogs, dog A and dog B, what makes a dog a dog has to be something that is not only shared by both dogs, but necessarily shared by both dogs. That is, the essence of “dogginess”, what makes a dog a dog, has to be a quality that is not only shared by both dogs, but also be a quality without which an object would not be a dog. In comparison, consider the quality of having spots. While some dogs would have spots, other objects which we would also consider to be dogs would not have spots. Hence the essence of what makes a dog a dog cannot be the property of spottiness. However, given that most features of a dog are features that not all dogs share - such as a certain weight, or appearance, on what grounds then, do we still call all of them dogs? And not only do we individually categorise certain objects as dogs and certain objects as non-dogs, this can be done by all speakers of languages with the concept of “dogs” in it. Thus, there seems to be a need for there to be an essential property of dogginess that all dogs partake in. For Plato, this is a universal Form, a Form of the dog. The Form of a dog does not exist spatially or temporally, as we need to Form of the dog to be exemplified in multiple points in space and time concurrently. Rather, the Form of the dog, and Forms in general, exist outside of space and time, and is what defines the essence of groups of objects like dogs or cats, or tables.

Taking stock, the subclaim we are analysing is that existent objects have proper essences. Considering existent objects both individually (the Ship of Theseus) and generally (dogs), I have provided arguments rooted in Classical philosophy that there are essences pertaining to both individual objects and classes of objects.

However, if we look at what Classical philosophers have identified as the proper essences of existing objects, we realise that these essences are usually non-material, and in the case of Forms, even non-spatiotemporal. This should not be surprising as most physical properties of things are contingent, liable to change, and not usually necessary for an object to be itself. For example, the essence of a fork should not be identified with its physical materials - after all a fork may just as well be made of wood as it is made of metal, but rather its function. However, the fact that essences of objects seem to be non-material or non-spatial temporal casts into doubt both the existence and knowability of the proper essences of objects.

Firstly, the knowability and existence of non-material essences of physical, non-human objects may be put into question. For one, it seems unclear what the non-material essence of the Ship of Theseus is. Although many do have the intuition that the Ship of Theseus can survive its changes, the reason for this does not seem to be that people continue celebrating or recognising the Ship of Theseus as the Ship of Theseus. Imagine if, after Theseus' return from war, Ship of Theseus is never celebrated or paraded, and instead that all of humanity was wiped out of existence and there was no one to recognise the Ship of Theseus as the Ship of Theseus. The Ship of Theseus would not have had its planks changed, and would remain the same. It seems intuitive that the Ship of Theseus still exists, even though its supposed immaterial essence of being celebrated as the Ship of Theseus is gone. Rather, any intuition we might have of the Ship of Theseus surviving (though I should note that not everyone shares this intuition) can be explained by the fact that the changing of the parts on the Ship of Theseus is gradual. Contrast another ship, the Cutty Sark, that was struck by lightning, burned to a crisp, and completely destroyed. However, almost immediately, it was replaced by a brand new ship bearing the same name. We would say, in the case of the Cutty Sark, that though the two ships bear the same name, they are not one and the same ship. However, the Ship of Theseus in the original story seems to remain the Ship of Theseus as the process of replacement is gradual. If we compare the Ship of Theseus with the Cutty Sark, is no difference in how many properties have changed between the old ship and the new ship. The difference is only that in one, the process of change is gradual, but in the other, the process of change was immediate, not that the Ship of Theseus preserved its essential properties but the Cutty Sark lost its essential properties. Thus, essential properties, as a construct, seems to have lost its usefulness in explaining the preservation of identity.

Secondly, the knowability and existence of non-material essences of people are put into question. The idea that human beings have essential souls is a deeply problematic one, and much of modern philosophy of mind is trying to come up with alternatives for such a soul-body dualism. This is because the postulation of a soul that is distinct from the body raises the question of interaction. It seems intuitive that our soul in some way affects our body, and our body may in some circumstances affect our soul. For example, Plato may argue that qualities in our soul such as virtue or morality guides the actions of our body, such that we use our bodies to perform virtuous acts and stray away from vices. This seems to imply

some kind of causation between the soul and the body, such that the soul can affect the body and vice versa. However, for this to happen, there must be some kind of nexus between the immaterial soul and the material body through which such interaction occurs. The question is then, is this nexus itself material, nor non material? If the nexus is material, then the question remains - how can the immaterial soul interact with the material nexus? If the nexus is immaterial, a different question remains - how can the immaterial nexus interact with the material body? If in answering either of these questions, a third nexus is required, then the line of argument can be continued further, leading to an infinite regress. As there seems to be no viable explanation for how the immaterial soul, the supposed essence of human beings can interact with the material body, the existence of the immaterial soul ought to be doubted. Furthermore, even if immaterial souls exist, there is still a question of knowability. While we might have direct access to our own consciousness and hence elements in our own soul, we cannot directly experience the mental events of others, and hence have no direct access to the souls of others. Thus, much of the essences of other people, such as the essence of Aristotle, remain unknowable, putting into doubt the author's claim that philosophy tries to bring the soul to know the proper essence of existing objects.

Thirdly, the knowability and existence of non-material essences of classes of objects, that is Platonic Forms, can also be seriously doubted. If a Platonic Form is, as Plato claims, non spatial-temporal in nature, then how can we come to know of a Platonic Form? After all, we neither seem to be able to perceive nor conceive of Platonic Forms. Since platonic forms are non-spatial temporal, and since we can only perceive things that are spatial-temporal in nature, we cannot perceive Platonic Forms. We also usually seem to fail at conceiving Platonic Forms, since we can only conceive of particular objects that exemplify a Form. For example, try to conceive of the Form of a triangle. You may, at this point, imagine a particular triangle. However, that particular triangle cannot be the Form of a triangle, as it does not represent what is common in all triangles. This is because the triangle you would have imagined must exemplify characteristics that are applicable to only some but not all triangles. If you imagined an isosceles triangle, your conception would not be able to represent equilateral triangles and hence cannot be the Form of the triangle, and so on. Even if you somehow imagine all possible triangles, you still would not be conceiving of the Form of the triangle, but only many individual triangles. Since here seems to be no way to either

perceive nor conceive of Forms, Forms seem to be unknowable, making them deeply mysterious and casting their existence into doubt. After all, if Forms define what makes a dog a dog, but Forms are unknowable, how is it that we still can tell dogs apart from non-dogs?

Plato might object, along with many other early Rationalists such as Descartes, that Forms are imprinted into our minds before birth, perhaps by God, as medieval scholars would argue, allowing us to have some knowledge of the Forms. This is once again deeply mysterious, for how could a non-spatiotemporal object like a Form be in any meaningful sense imprinted onto a spatial temporal object like us? And surely it is not the case that if I possess a Form, and the Form is somehow imprinted in me, that the Form now resides in my mind and nowhere else - hence at most we only have an image of a Form, much like the shadows in Plato's allegory of the cave.

Furthermore, knowledge of all of these immaterial essences are increasingly doubted with the advent of analytic philosophy. Early analytic philosophers would argue that any statement that claims anything about these immaterial essences are necessarily nonsensical. This is due to the verificationist principle, which states that a statement is meaningful if and only if it can either be empirically verified, or is analytically true. A statement can be empirically verified if it is possible to know the statement through sense experience. A statement is analytically true if the definitions of its terms imply that the statement is necessarily true, such as when the meaning of the predicate is contained within the meaning of the subject, for example, in "All bachelors are unmarried men".

The statement "The Form of the dog exists" does not seem to be analytically true, as nothing about the definitions of the "Form of the dog" or existence necessarily implies that the statement is true. Furthermore, since the Form of the dog is non-spatial temporal, the statement cannot be empirically verified either. Thus, according to verificationism, any claim about these immaterial essences, including the Metaphysical Claim, should be deemed meaningless.

Thus, in light of these arguments, the existence of essences as Classical philosophers construe it should be put into serious doubt. And even if essences do exist as they construe it, the

inability to know or even speak meaningfully about essences suggests that it cannot be the case that philosophy seeks to bring us to know the reality of objects in accordance with their proper essences. Having brought up verificationism however, I will now transition to discuss how analytic philosophers may construe the proper essence of objects, and discuss if analytic philosophy can bring us to know about them.

Section 2: Analytic Philosophy

Firstly, it will be too quick to argue that the verificationist principle implies that analytic philosophers do not have a conception of the essence. For one, the verificationist principle ought to be rejected as self-refuting. After all, the verificationist principle, being a statement about what kinds of statements are meaningful, does not seem to be empirically verifiable. But at the same time, it is not analytically true. Thus, if the verificationist principle is true, then following the verificationist principle itself, the verificationist principle would be meaningless. Thus, the verificationist principle is self refuting and ought to be rejected.

Furthermore, the theories of analytic philosophers with regards to our linguistic constructions such as names, rigid designators seem to require individual objects to have an essence. Concepts and natural kind terms also seem to require an understanding of the essences of groups of objects. Rather, analytic philosophers treat the idea of an essence in a different way.

Firstly, the concept of rigid designators seem to suggest that individual objects have proper essences. Rigid designators are names that refer to the same object in all of the possible worlds where it refers to an object. For example, the name “Aristotle” refers to the same object, Aristotle, in all the possible worlds where Aristotle exists. On the other hand, the description “the 45th President of the United States” would refer to different people in different possible worlds, and hence not designate rigidly. In one possible world, such as the actual world, it will refer to Donald Trump. But in another possible world where Clinton won the elections, it will refer to Hilary Clinton. However, if a name refers to the same object in different possible worlds, then it follows that there is a sense in which an object in one

possible world is the same object as another object in another possible world, even if these two objects have differences. For example, in another possible world, I could have not attended the IPO. However, the me in this world is still the same person as the me in that other possible world, and my name would rigidly designate me in both of these possible worlds. However, on what ground is me in this world the same person as me in another possible world, even though we possess different properties? The only viable explanation seems to be that there are properties such that I possess in all possible worlds where I exist, and that if, in any possible world, an object does not possess this property, then that object is not me. Thus, the concept of trans-world identity seems to necessitate the existence of essential properties that are necessarily possessed and only possessed by objects that exist in multiple possible worlds. Thus, it does seem to be the case, even in analytic philosophy, that there are certain proper essences of objects.

Secondly, conceptual analysis of abstract concepts such as “knowledge” or “truth” seems to be done with the aim of capturing the essence of abstract concepts, that all and only all objects which exemplify the concept must possess. Consider, for example a conceptual analysis of the word “dog”. In identifying the essence of dogginess, philosophers may seek to find out what exactly is it that makes a dog a dog. This can be pursued by identifying the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a dog to be a dog. In this way, if any object lacks any one of the conditions, then that object is not a dog. Conversely, if any object has all of the conditions, then it is a dog. This thus identifies the qualities that all and only all dogs have, capturing the essence of the concept of a dog.

We might write this logically as:

x is a dog if and only if:

(a) Px

(b) Qx

Where P and Q are properties that may be ascribed to x, and form the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a dog. In philosophy, such conceptual analysis is often undertaken for more abstract concepts such as knowledge, thus trying to identify the proper

essence of knowledge. In doing so, philosophers will try to come up with counterexamples, cases where an object seems to fulfil all the sufficient condition, but still does not exemplify the concept, or cases where an object seems to lack a necessary condition, but still exemplifies the concept. Such a method is especially popular in the analysis of knowledge. Originally, philosophers have identified the essence of knowledge to be the necessary and sufficient conditions of justified true belief. However, the Gettier cases have shown that even if one has a justified true belief, one may not have knowledge. Hence, justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge, spurring further attempts to analyse knowledge by adding other necessary conditions to justified true belief. Thus, analytic philosophers do seem to be committed to the idea that there are essences to abstract concepts, in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, which all objects that instantiate the abstract concept share in fulfilling. This seems to parallel the classical philosophers' idea of essences of classes of objects. However, unlike the classical philosopher, this essence is not identified as an immaterial and non-spatiotemporal Platonic Form, but instead are necessary and sufficient conditions which are fulfilled.

I will now turn to examining if the essences of objects as construed by analytic philosophers are similar unknowable as that of the Classical philosophers.

Firstly, we might consider the prompt given by the author, that knowledge of such essences be arrived at through proofs grasped by the mind. Here, I take proof to mean a deductively valid argument through which we can gain a priori knowledge of what properties are true of me in all possible worlds, or gain a priori knowledge of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a certain concept.

At first sight, proofs may indeed be useful. After all, the traditional conception of philosophy is that it is an a priori affair. However, I argue that if knowledge of the essences of objects are to be meaningful at all, it cannot be simply gained through proof.

Consider for one the necessary and sufficient conditions that form the essence of a concept such as knowledge. Can we gain such knowledge through proof alone? One might argue that a statement which provides the necessary and sufficient conditions of a concept must be

analytically true. This is because the statement will be essentially providing a definition for the concept in question. In order for this definition to be correct, the meaning of the necessary and sufficient conditions, the definiens, must have the same meaning as the concept being analysed, the definiendum. Thus, statements of necessary and sufficient conditions of the following form:

x is A if and only if x is B

Must be true by definition, and hence are analytically true. Hence, if an analysis of a concept is to be correct, and the statement stating the necessary and sufficient conditions is a statement that is analytically true, then we can know by reason and proof alone that it is true. Thus, for any given correct analysis of a concept, we should be able to know it by reason and proof alone. However, the further problem is that if an analysis which states the necessary and sufficient criterion for a concept is analytically true, then we are getting no new information by analysing the concept into its necessary and sufficient criterion. This is because the necessary and sufficient criterion would have the same meaning as the concept, and hence, if we do not already know the meaning of the concept, we would not be able to know the meaning of the necessary and sufficient criterion, and thereby, would not be able to gain any new knowledge about what the analysis, or essence, of the concept really is.

This can be further seen in the problem of the criterion. Consider how analytic philosophers try to come to an analysis of knowledge - they try to refine existing analyses with counter-examples, for example coming up with cases which are considered as knowledge but do not fulfil all of the necessary conditions, or cases which are not considered as knowledge, but still fulfil all the sufficient conditions. However in order to do this, we must be able to know that in some particular cases, we have or we do not have knowledge. However, in order for us to know that in some particular cases we have or do not have knowledge, we must be able to know what knowledge is. Thus, the method for trying to analyse a concept presupposes that we have some knowledge of the concept. The only possible conclusion, as many analytic philosophers have argued, is that we intuitively know the meaning of certain concepts, and can intuitively apply it to particular cases. Yet, just like how Platonic Forms are somehow impressed upon us since birth, it is highly mysterious how we can have intuitive

knowledge of a concept without being able to analyse it. Thus, it seems as if even the conception of the essence of classes objects in analytic philosophy as necessary and sufficient conditions cannot provide a satisfactory account of how philosophy gives us knowledge of such essences of objects either.

Conclusion

Having examined both Classical and Analytic philosophy, and concluded that neither are able to satisfy the metaphilosophical claim that philosophy gives us knowledge of the proper essences of objects, I reject the claim in the quotation.