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Author(s): JOHN HOOKER

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# Why Essentialism Is True

JOHN HOOKER

*Memphis State University*

If essentialism is taken simply to be the doctrine that some things have some essential properties, then essentialism is true, and trivially so. Socrates, for example, has essentially the property *being bald or non-bald*, under most anybody's account of what an essential property is. But the opponents of essentialism are not straw men; they readily concede that such trivial essential properties as this abound and reserve their skepticism to meatier varieties of essentialism. But even so they are wrong. To prove it, I will consider a number of successively stronger varieties of essentialism and demonstrate the truth of each in turn. By the time I reach the last and strongest variety, I will have purged essentialism of all traces of triviality.

Though many skeptics deny not only the truth but the very intelligibility of essentialism, I will in this paper beg the difficult question of intelligibility. But for the sake of argument I must adopt at least a rudimentary definition of essentiality, one that I will assume to be intelligible. Let me say that an object has a property *essentially* just in case the object would cease to exist were it to lose the property. This definition is obviously inadequate for such time-spanning properties as *having sneezed on October 31, 1976*, since I, having sneezed on that day, would be counted as having this property essentially, even though I clearly do not. Yet the properties I consider herein are not time-spanning this way.<sup>1</sup> The definition may have other weaknesses as well, but I will suppose it is close enough to the truth so that, even if the correct analysis differs, the demonstrations to follow will retain enough validity to establish an interesting and nontrivial essentialism.

As Ruth Marcus has insisted, a doctrine that provides merely that some things have some essential properties is not worthy of the name 'essentialism.'<sup>2</sup> Rather, genuine essentialism *individuates* individuals to some extent. That is, it provides that some things have essentially some properties that are not essential to everything; this Marcus calls *weak* essentialism. Even better is *strong* essentialism, wherein some things have essential properties that are *accidentally* had by some other things. Yet both weak and strong essentialism are as uninteresting as they are easy to verify, if we allow that essential properties include those

attributed by what Marcus calls “referential” predicates; that is, predicates like ‘being identical with *x*’, where ‘*x*’ is a proper name that can denote nothing but *x*. This is because *being identical with x* is obviously essential to *x* and is not essential to everything, thus proving weak essentialism. Strong essentialism is only slightly better off, since one can always cook up artificial properties like *being identical with x* or *being mentioned in a newspaper*, which is easily seen to be essential to *x* and accidental to the Atlantic Ocean.

A more worthwhile version of weak essentialism, one Terry Parsons has called weak “grade 3” essentialism, entails that there are properties that are essential to something and not to everything and that do not rely for their essentiality on the occurrence of proper names in their expressions.<sup>3</sup> Though a precise account of what this reliance amounts to evidently requires an ingenious and complex definition like the one Parsons has offered,<sup>4</sup> a rough, intuitive understanding will allow us to demonstrate grade 3 essentialism. For it is intuitively clear that the property *being prime* is not referential the way *being identical with x* is, and that *being prime* is moreover essential to something (e.g., the number seven) but not to everything (e.g., not to the Atlantic Ocean). This of course is enough to make weak grade 3 essentialism true. Strong grade 3 essentialism, which asserts the existence of nonreferential properties essential to some things and accidental to others, is just as easily proved. The nonreferential property *being prime* or *being mentioned in a newspaper* is essential to the number seven and accidental to the Atlantic Ocean.

Still, grade 3 essentialism is disappointing. Essentialists like to speak of Socrates being essentially rational, or at least of mind being essentially unextended, and grade 3 essentialism guarantees nothing so interesting. On the contrary, merely the traditional bifurcation of things into things eternal (such as the number seven) and things ephemeral (such as the Atlantic Ocean) is enough to establish weak grade 3 essentialism. And the same bifurcation, plus the contrivance of odd disjunctive properties, is sufficient to make strong grade 3 essentialism true. A heftier and more satisfying essentialism, one more characteristic of essentialists, would be one that individuates ephemerals even among other ephemerals, that is, one wherein there are properties essential to some ephemerals but not to all ephemerals. Let us call such a doctrine *ephemeral essentialism*, which is understood to be a subspecies of grade 3 essentialism and which again comes in weak and strong varieties.

I would say that there are innumerable properties that are essential to some ephemerals but not to all. Solidity, for example, strikes me as a property essential to any ice cube and obviously inessential to other

particulars (such as rivers). For if an ice cube were to lose its solidity—if it were to liquefy or vaporize—then it would surely cease to exist in the process. And I can think of other examples: probably a cloud is essentially airborne, a cow essentially organic, an ocean essentially an ocean, an audience essentially containing at least some of its present members, the New Jersey Turnpike essentially deviating no more than five hundred miles from its present route, the Gulf Stream essentially flowing, a grain of salt essentially undissolved, a drop of water essentially in one piece, and so on. But one of these examples should be defended in detail, and I choose the ice-cube example. If I can establish with reasonable certainty only that an ice cube is essentially solid, then since solidity is clearly not a property essential to every ephemeral object, I will have established weak ephemeral essentialism.

The ice cube in the glass before me is essentially solid if and only if the object that is presently the ice cube cannot survive melting (or, strictly, if and only if it cannot survive liquefaction or vaporization, but I take it for granted that, if melting into water destroys an ice cube, then *a fortiori* liquefaction and vaporization do). But clearly, if the cube were now to melt and its waters to mingle with my drink, then it would pass out of existence—probably just as the last speck of ice disappeared. Furthermore, it did not begin to exist when I filled the ice tray yesterday, but rather at some time while the water in the tray was freezing. Now we must be careful not to be misled by ordinary language. If my ice cube melts in the glass, and I am asked what happened to it, I might say, “Why, it is all mixed in with my drink” (so as to suggest that it can exist in a melted state). But I think this is only a figurative way of speaking, as when we say a house goes up in smoke. Or I might say of the contents of the ice tray, “The ice cubes are not frozen yet.” But I do not mean to suggest that my future ice cube is lying in that tray waiting to be frozen; but instead I speak as a cook, sifting his cookie flour, might speak to an impatient child when he says, “No, the cookies are not done yet.”

But the example can be made more difficult. Suppose my ice cube is wrapped tightly in a cellophane bag and allowed to melt. Is the remaining bagful of water identical with the ice cube whose melting supplied the water? Again, we might be prone to talk as though it were. If asked what happened to the ice cube, I might reply that it is there, in that bag, all melted. But by ‘it’ I could just as well mean the parcel, globule, chunk, or whatever of water in the bag. The parcel of water is no doubt the same parcel of water whether frozen or not. But I contend that the *ice cube* that was wrapped in the cellophane when the water was in a frozen state ceased to exist when the water melted. Now this looks

paradoxical, I admit. It appears that the ice cube that forms when the water freezes just *is* that parcel of water in a frozen state; so, since this parcel of water obviously survives melting, so ought the thing that is the ice cube to survive melting. Clearly, then, I can plausibly maintain that the object that is the ice cube cannot withstand losing its solidity, only if I can show cause why the ice cube should be distinguished from the frozen parcel of water that makes it up.

To begin with, if the parcel of water can be identified with the collection of molecules that comprise it, then my task is easy. Now by “collection of molecules” I do not mean an abstract set or class of molecules, but a concrete assemblage or amassment of molecules existing in space and time; this notwithstanding, I mean for two collections to be numerically identical just in case they are collections of the same things. Thus, if the parcel of water in question indeed is but the collection of its molecules, then a classical Lockean argument easily shows it to be distinct from the ice cube. A tiny bit of ice can be chipped off the cube, and what remains is the same ice cube as before; however, what remains is not the same parcel of water as before, since some of its molecules have been removed. It follows that the parcel of water and the ice cube are distinct.

However, I admit that a good case can be made that the parcel of water is *not* just the collection of its molecules. It is plausible that a parcel, globule, chunk, or whatever of water can lose a little of its water and still be the same parcel, globule, or chunk. In other words, maybe a parcels of water, I can argue independently that the ice cube ought to be and still be the same sandpile. Yet even if this is the way it is with parcels of water, I can argue independently that the ice cube ought to be distinguished from the frozen parcel of water that comprises it. For suppose the water is refrozen after melting once. Clearly the original cube is identical with the frozen parcel of water only if it is identical with the new ice cube, since the two (?) ice cubes are frozen from the same parcel of water. I think the following story will demonstrate that the two ice cubes are in fact *not* identical (I do not mean to suggest by this story that *no* object can survive melting, or that no object can be reconstituted after destruction; I claim only that an ice cube cannot survive melting and cannot be reconstituted after destruction). Imagine that an ice-cube bag like mine (though not of cellophane) is unearthed in an Inca tomb, still containing the original water and identified as the property of the great emperor Pachacuti, who presumably used it to chill his drink without diluting it. The Chilean Museum of Natural History in Santiago acquires the bag, freezes the water inside, and puts it on refrigerated display. Every day a guide points to the bag and tells

visitors that there, inside that bag, is the very ice cube that chilled Pachacuti's drink five centuries ago. But surely the guide is fibbing; any ice cube that chilled the ninth Inca's drink has long since melted and no longer exists. We see, then, that, whereas the parcel of water survives melting and refreezing, the refrozen parcel constitutes an ice cube distinct from the original ice cube, and from this it follows that either cube is distinct from the frozen parcel of water of which it consists.

Now some will complain of a multiplication of entities here. But these complainants can prevail only by offering an *argument* (not merely a preference) for using the razor in this case, since if *my* arguments are correct, these entities exist whether we dislike their profusion or not. In the meantime, inasmuch as I have warranted the distinction of an ice cube from its constituent water parcel, surely any suggestion that an ice cube can exist even after it is melted is preposterous. Let it be conceded, then, that ice cubes are essentially solid. The truth of weak ephemeral essentialism follows.

As for strong ephemeral essentialism, which is the last doctrine I will consider, it clearly must assert more than that there are properties essentially had by some ephemerals and accidentally by other ephemerals. Otherwise, strong ephemeral essentialism would in fact be *equivalent* to the weak variety, if we assume only that every ephemeral has at least one accidental property. For weak ephemeral essentialism guarantees us a property *P* that is essential to some ephemeral *x* and not essential to some other ephemeral *y*. But by our assumption *y* accidentally has some property *Q*, and it follows that the cooked-up property *P or Q* is essentially had by *x* and accidentally by *y*.<sup>5</sup> Hence weak ephemeral essentialism, on the above very plausible assumption, entails the strong variety, unless the latter is somehow strengthened with additional provisions.

The additional provision needed, I suggest, is simply that there be a property *R* that is essentially had by something and accidentally had by something, where *R* is not equivalent to any disjunctive property that behaves like *P or Q* above. That is, there must be an *x* essentially having *R* and a *y* accidentally having *R*, such that *R* is equivalent to no disjunctive property *P or Q*, where *x* has *P* essentially but does not have *Q* essentially, and *y* has *Q* accidentally but does not have *P* accidentally (actually, I need only say that *y* lacks *P* period, since *y* has *R* accidentally and therefore cannot have *P* essentially).

This definition may be too narrow, however, because *any* *R* can be broken down into such a disjunction, provided only that there is for the given *x* and *y* a property *S* had essentially by *x* and contingently *lacked* by *y*. For *R* can then be put into the requisite form *P or Q* by expressing *R* as (*R and S*) or (*R and not-S*). But notice that in any such case *x*

essentially lacks  $R$  and  $not-S$ , and so we need only require in addition that  $x$  not essentially lack  $Q$ . So I can define strong ephemeral essentialism as the doctrine that there is a property  $R$  essentially had by some ephemeral  $x$  and accidentally had by some ephemeral  $y$ , such that  $R$  is equivalent to no disjunctive property  $P$  or  $Q$ , where  $x$  has  $P$  essentially but neither  $Q$  nor  $not-Q$  essentially, and  $y$  has  $Q$  accidentally but lacks  $P$ .

Under this definition it is *not* sufficient for the truth of strong ephemeral essentialism that the artificial property *being solid or being mentioned in a newspaper* be had essentially by ice cubes and accidentally by the Atlantic Ocean. For this property is already in the form of a forbidden disjunction. Just check it out: an ice cube is essentially solid but neither essentially mentioned nor essentially unmentioned in a newspaper, and the Atlantic Ocean is accidentally mentioned in a newspaper but is not solid.

Nevertheless, a property that *will* verify strong ephemeral essentialism is at hand: namely, solidity. Solidity is essentially had by ice cubes and accidentally by an arctic pond that is frozen through and through, since such a pond could obviously melt without ceasing to exist. It remains to show that solidity is equivalent to no disjunctive property  $P$  or  $Q$ , where an ice cube has  $P$  essentially but neither  $Q$  nor  $not-Q$  essentially, and a frozen pond has  $Q$  accidentally but lacks  $P$ . But if  $P$  or  $Q$  is equivalent to solidity, then  $P$  entails solidity. Thus it is sufficient to show that every property  $P$  entailing solidity that is essential to an ice cube is *had* by a pond frozen solid. To begin with, there are lots of properties entailing solidity that are rather uninteresting essential properties of ice cubes, such as *being solid and not being divisible by two*; but these are clearly *had* by frozen ponds. And there are some relatively interesting properties entailing solidity that are essential to ice cubes, such as *being solid and being in one piece* and perhaps even *being solid and being made of water*; but these properties, too, are had by frozen ponds. The closest thing to a counterexample I can imagine is something like *being solid and weighing less than one hundred pounds*, which *may* be essential to an ice cube. But even if it is, I can switch my example from a frozen pond to a frozen puddle, and strong essentialism is saved.

Since the defense of strong essentialism is my principal goal, I have been content to defend both weak and strong essentialism with the one property of solidity, even though weak essentialism is perhaps better defended with examples less clearly supportive of strong essentialism. It is difficult to deny, for example, that a tree is essentially a nonhaystack, whereas a haystack is not a nonhaystack. But it may also be that,

for some, my defense of *strong* essentialism would be more congenial to the intuitions if I were to carry out my arguments, *mutatis mutandis*, with the ice-cube example replaced by one of the others I mentioned. For instance, perhaps some sympathizers would have me argue instead that a cloud is essentially airborne, while an airplane in flight is only accidentally so. Or that, whereas an audience essentially contains at least some of its present members, a club could completely change its membership. Similarly, I might argue that the New Jersey Turnpike essentially deviates no more than five hundred miles from its present route, while the Gulf Stream does so accidentally, or that the Gulf Stream essentially flows, while the Tennessee River flows accidentally.

I have learned in conversation that my appeal to intuitions here is thought by some to be an unsatisfactory method of proof, since there is allegedly no rational way to resolve differing intuitions. But my “appeal to intuitions” is meant merely to be an appeal to the proper analysis of the concepts involved. To “intuit” that an ice cube cannot survive melting is, for me, to determine that the concepts of identity over time and an ice cube are such that it is *analytic* that an ice cube cannot survive melting. Now by this I do not mean to say that it is analytic that an ice cube would cease to be an ice cube were it to melt (though this is certainly true). Rather I mean to say that it is analytic that an object that is or ever has been an ice cube is solid, in much the way it is analytic that an object that is or ever has been a boy is a person. The intuitions to which I appeal, then, are our intuitions about how the concept of identity over time interrelates with certain other concepts. The problem of how the analyst ultimately justifies one analysis over another is a genuine one, but it is ubiquitous in analytic philosophy and is hardly peculiar to my methodology here.

Some of these conversants have suggested that my methodology, as I have just described it, commits me to saying that, if we had only conceived of identity over time differently, then ephemeral essentialism might well have been false—so that the truth or falsehood of essentialism is in some sense arbitrary. But it makes sense to affirm the truth of essentialism in the first place only in the context of a given conceptual scheme involving identity, and I have argued that our prevailing conceptual scheme is rather strongly essentialist.

#### NOTES

1. See my “Brody on Essentialism,” *Philosophical Studies* 29 (1976): 263–70, for a more nearly complete account of essentiality.
2. Ruth Barcan Marcus, “Essential Attribution,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 187–202.

3. See “Grades of Essentialism and Quantified Modal Logic,” *Nous* 1 (1967): 181–91.

4. What Parsons does in “Grades of Essentialism and Quantified Modal Logic,” as well as in “Essentialism and Quantified Modal Logic,” *Philosophical Review* 78 (1969): 35–52, is to define the notion of a grade 3 essential formula. We can say that grade 3 essentialism is true if and only if there is some property *P* for which every formula strictly equivalent to ‘*x* has *P*’ is grade 3 essential. I discuss Parsons’ work more fully in my dissertation, “Essentialism and Trans-World Identity” (Vanderbilt University, 1974), pp. 265–95.

5. This argument is used by Alvin Plantinga, “World and Essence,” *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 465, and by others, albeit not in reference to ephemeral essentialism in particular.