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## I. The New Essentialism

Essentialism is the belief in essences. An essence is a property of an object that defines the object as part of a particular class. In other words it is the property which makes the thing what it is; without this property it is something else entirely. Contrast this with a nonessential (or accidental) property which if removed will not change what the object is. The question I will be discussing is whether or not each human being shares a property which defines their humanity or whether our definition of humanity is based upon arbitrary accidental properties. Whether all things (not just human beings) share a kind of essence will not be addressed directly, but it does have bearing on the results of this paper. This paper is focused on the question of how to show a human essence is possible and what it would consist of.

Whether or not there is such a thing as a human essence is an important question largely (but not exclusively) because of the effect it has on ethics. Ethically speaking questioning what a man ought to do requires that we must first know what a man is. Essences (or lack thereof) allow us to answer what a man is and from there to answer what a man must do. For example: existentialism's rejection of essences allows a man to do whatever he wants. This is because existentialism rejects the idea that there is any property that determines how a man is. If there is nothing that it is to be man (other than perhaps will) then there is no reason to say that a man should act in one way or another. Without an essence man is not constrained by any innate property or tendency and is free to define himself and his actions. If there were such a thing as a human essence then there would be something that it was like to be a human being which could (possibly) answer the ethical question: "what ought a man to do."

Essentialism has not been a popular theory in mainstream philosophy for quite some time. There are a number of good reasons for this, but I think that given the work of Donald Davidson there is a good argument to be made in their favor. When Davidson's work in the area of conceptual schemes is analyzed essentialism seems not only probable but necessary. Before exploring this though we must

first have a criterion for what a human essence would look like. What something would have to be in order to be differentiated from an accidental property.

Firstly an essence must be non-physical. This is a tricky statement to make because non-physical can easily be made to sound like something akin to Platonic forms. By a non-physical essence I do not mean to imply some kind of secondary ethereal world; nor have I proven that there *is* something non-physical. The reason it cannot be a strictly physical entity is because of the role an essence would play. Consider this: Biologists teach us that everything in the body replaces itself after a long period of time. It teaches us that even my body is not the same as it was 10 years ago and will not be the same in the next instant. It will simply be made up of different versions of stuff. Moreover the fact that there are literally thousands of physical differences between myself and anyone else makes the idea of a strictly physical essence seemingly impossible. An essence cannot be something made up of material parts because material parts are always in flux; in other words there would never be a time we could point at a bit of matter and say: “hah! there is the essence.” This is not to say that it cannot arise from the correct arrangements of physical parts or that it cannot be related to or manifested by material simply that it itself cannot be material.

An essence must also be unchanging. If it could change then what use to us is it? I am looking for that thing that stays the same through the myriad of varying properties that makes us the individuals that we recognize ourselves as. It is easy to find any number of reasons why myself and the man sitting next to me are different, but I am looking for the one property we both share with everyone else. It cannot be an accidental property; it has to be a universal property and it has to be the same universal property that we have always shared throughout time.

Finally it must do something that we consider essentially and specifically human. This may seem a bit obvious but it is worth pointing out that whatever this property is it cannot itself be something that a human being and various other beings might share. For instance one could in theory claim that only beings with two legs are human beings. That is anyone without them is not a human

being. This would be false because many animals have two legs as well. Two legs do not set human beings apart from certain other animals; so two legs could not be considered something essential to man. Moreover having two legs is not something we consider an importantly human characteristic; that is a characteristic that every human being should have.

I believe that language is a good candidate for the human essence because it is the driving force behind many things that we consider important to being human. Language is the reason we develop a sense of self, and it is, as Davidson puts it, : "the way of coping with sensory experience".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, thought itself is linguistic; a point which Davidson shows in his essay *Thought and Talk*.

We have the idea of belief only from the role of belief in the interpretation of language, for as a private attitude it is not intelligible except as an adjustment to the public norm provided by language. It follows that a creature must be a member of a speech community if it is to have the concept of belief. And given the dependence of other attitudes on belief, we can say more generally that only creatures that can interpret speech can have the concept of thought.<sup>2</sup>

If we accept this then language takes on a new importance. If we were to remove language than special human qualities such as thought and sense of self would disappear. Thus, language fulfills two requirements for essences; it is non-physical<sup>3</sup> and it provides something that we consider essential to being human.

The first problem with crowning language as the essence is the idea of conceptual schemes.

Conceptual schemes as defined by Davidson are:

Ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form too the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes, and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme.<sup>4</sup>

Conceptual schemes are the culmination of nominalism. From Occam's declaration that predicates are nothing more than the terms we choose to apply to them; we are eventually lead to the

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<sup>1</sup> *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* 193

<sup>2</sup> *Thought and Talk* 170

<sup>3</sup> I consider language to be non-physical because it has not "made of material" despite the fact that it manifests physically. There is no thing in the material world that I can point to and say: "there is language."

<sup>4</sup> *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* 183

conclusion that it is through language that we construct our entire world. The emergence of nominalism has had a direct impact on the idea of conceptual schemes, and it is my belief that their fates are largely intertwined. Conceptual schemes prevent essences by trapping us within our own social and linguistic framework for categorizing things. Thus while I might want to say that language is essential to a human being; I am trapped in my own conceptual scheme. I cannot make a judgement about anyone else's language because I view their interactions through the lens of my own conceptual scheme. To say that an Arab speaks a language called Arabic says only something about the way I judge things as language; not whether there is anything like Arabic which I can classify alongside English as a language. It is the source of relativism as it makes any value judgement depend on one's cultural trappings. To say that someone from another culture is doing something wrong is simply to say that according to my value system he is wrong. I cannot make a positive claim about his conceptual scheme though. Thus for me to say that language is essential is me imposing my view of what a language is, and what thought is onto people who might see language and thought as completely different things.

Davidson successfully (in my opinion) undoes the idea of conceptual schemes in his essay: *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*. In it Davidson comes to several conclusions about language and conceptual schemes which I believe leads to essentialism.

First Davidson equates a given language with a given conceptual scheme: "we may accept the doctrine that associates having a language with having a conceptual scheme."<sup>5</sup> More importantly Davidson suggests that: "Speakers of different languages may share a conceptual scheme provided there is a way of translating one language into the other."<sup>6</sup> This in itself is a huge statement because it means that any language I can understand and translate I can claim as part of my own conceptual scheme. Whereas before the idea of a language was something that inhabited my conceptual scheme Davidson shows how translating a language shows a shared conceptual scheme. More interesting

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<sup>5</sup> On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme 184

<sup>6</sup> On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme 184

though is that Davidson shows how a conceptual scheme is incoherent and how any language seems in principle to be translatable.

The rejection of conceptual schemes as incoherent relies on what a conceptual scheme actually is. While one may be tempted to say that there is only one conceptual scheme that all translatable languages inhabit; Davidson shows why this cannot be. After positing the rather uninteresting thesis that we occupy the same world;<sup>7</sup> he moves on to a discussion of what that means for conceptual schemes. Occupying the same world yet differing in conceptual schemes would mean that we are working within the scheme/content distinction. Davidson calls this “content” the "neutral underpinning" through which conceptual schemes are based but not reducible to.<sup>8</sup> It seems that in order to make any sense of conceptual schemes we must first admit an ability to view the world with some sense of this "neutral underpinning" we must be able to get to the content before we can even talk about varying schemes. Davidson views this as an impossibility<sup>9</sup> and for the sake of this paper we will take him at his word. Davidson must reject the idea of conceptual schemes largely because he rejects the structures that give it meaning; that is he rejects the idea that we can even talk about a scheme/content distinction. This rejection of conceptual schemes allows us to focus on languages without needing to worry about talking about violating some rule of conceptual schemes.

As noted above Davidson points out that a language that can be translated into other languages shares a conceptual scheme. Davidson goes even farther and shows that the idea of an untranslatable language is incoherent. This is done through a variety of means by Davidson, but for the purpose of this essay an untranslatable language is impossible because our conception of it is impossible. It should be noted here that Davidson is not making a statement about the nature of any possible language that we could not recognize or any other positive claims about all languages. What he is saying is that anything we recognize as a language is in principle translatable. The reason for this is because once we have

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<sup>7</sup> *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* 187

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 190

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 197

recognized it as a language we have begun translation. Recognition as a language means that the language must be translatable.

Davidson is careful to point out that this does not mean that every human language is in principle translatable, but I do not see how he can escape this idea. While it may be true that there are languages that I cannot recognize as a language; any *human* language would be in principle translatable. The reason for this is simply by virtue of my ability to recognize it as a language. Recognition of something as a language is the first step toward translating it. Moreover, empirically speaking we must say that languages are always translatable. Any objection that states that there could exist a *human* language that could not be translated would be faced with several problems. Any objection would have to provide an example of such a language either naturally occurring or fabricated. Furthermore there is the matter of historical translation to consider. As a speaker of English I have access to every known human language. I can (in theory of course) understand every known language that a human being has spoken as it is a parent to English as well as any language in the future. I can understand future languages because to not be able to would represent a break with English and would render whatever that language was as unrecognizable as a language. Thus it would be a completely different conceptual scheme.

One may object that while I may be able to translate any language that is known it is conceivable that there was (or is) a group of human beings that do speak a "language" I cannot understand. This is a difficult claim to make though for several reasons.

In the first place no one (outside of the language speakers themselves) will be able to recognize this as a language. Furthermore these "language" speakers cannot possibly understand us in any way. Davidson shows that the idea of a complete and total failure of language translation is impossible meaning that whatever this "language" that these speakers use is it cannot even be recognized as a language. It would not be a failure of translation rather it would be a failure of awareness that a language existed.

In the second place any such "language" would constitute an entirely alternative conceptual scheme. While Davidson rightly does not discount the possibility that one could exist one should realize that just like the untranslatable "language" it could never be recognized as such. Furthermore Davidson points out that a conceptual scheme and so by extension an untranslatable language requires some version of the scheme/content distinction. This distinction Davidson rightly points out is problematic. Here it seems that Davidson is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Conceptual schemes, and thus untranslatable languages, are difficult to justify and Davidson seems to want to say that the concept of them is ridiculous, but he cannot positively state from his method that they do not exist. Simply that the idea of them is inconsistent. It seems though that what we must say is that while we cannot say with certainty that untranslatable languages do not exist it is highly doubtful both from Davidson's argument and from the empirical evidence that they exist at least when applied to human beings.

Davidson correctly points out that this rejection of conceptual schemes successfully reconnects us with the world but it is the ultimate translatability of language that brings out the essence. Let us recap. Language is a requirement for everything mental (including thought, self-definition, and memory). We can hold language as responsible for all of these very important traits. If all languages are inter-translatable then we are faced with an interesting question. Why? Why on earth are we able to translate each others languages (and by extension each other's thoughts)? It seems that we could logically allow for a culture to develop a language we could not understand, but as I have shown above this is an incoherent thought. Translatability of language means that two things must be the same. Firstly that we all inhabit the same world. Davidson grants this and I think it seems fairly innocent to grant it without too much debate. The second thought is that we all experience the world the same way. If we all developed a language that could be translated then we all form language the same way. What I am getting at is that if we all can understand each other in theory, then we all speak the same "language." Variant languages are simply variations of a common theme that all languages share which

allows them to be translated. Remember that this “common thread” whatever it is the one responsible for our ability to think and define ourselves. This “common thread” which is shared allows the language of thought and self-expression to be translated too. This “common thread” of language is manifested through all the different languages of the world; it is the cause of language and self-consciousness.

This “common thread” fits all the requirements. It is non-physical (this should not be too controversial) and it is essential as it is a requirement for those valued human properties such as thought and self-consciousness. The last requirement is that it cannot change. This too is true of the basic "language." If this common theme were to change then there would exist a language that we could not understand. Above we have shown how the idea of a non-translatable language is incoherent not only because we cannot come up with a possible example of it but because it would represent a completely different conceptual scheme which Davidson shows to be incoherent as well. This means that as long as human beings exist and have existed we will be able to understand them because of this common thread. This common thread of humanity which allows us to all talk and all think in a way we can all understand.<sup>10</sup>

There is another problem with declaring language (of any form) the human essence. Language is a category that encompasses a myriad of differing sounds and symbols. To say that language is essential would be to utter a seemingly meaningless phrase. We would have to come up with a definition of language that would encompass all sorts of varieties of communication which differ not only in sound but also in the way the syntax of the language works. It is true to say that without language it would be difficult to truly call anything human, but this leads to a potentially dangerous ethical grey area which I will discuss a bit later. I think that the key to the human essence is not

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<sup>10</sup> It is of course possible that someday there will exist a being that will not have this common thread but a completely different one that we will not be able to recognize as being linguistic. If that were to happen the thing would not be human because we could not talk to it. It would represent the epitome of a completely different paradigm and regrettably we would never even notice it.

language itself but the structure that causes us to form language. The essence of humanity is the structure that causes language. More specifically it is the similar structure which is manifested linguistically. One can easily utter a series of English words which may or may not have meaning, but it is the meaning that is conveyed when a language is properly arranged. In this way language itself cannot be an essence; it is what is being conveyed by users of language. Not the meaning of the words themselves nor that they even have meaning but what it means about us that we all can understand each other. The essence is then that shared fact about the way we deal with the world and our existence that manifests itself through language.

If the essence is not language though then what is it? I have shown that language is indeed essential in some ways to a human being but as I have said above “language” is not a term that really describes any one thing. The essence for humanity then is the thing that “pulls languages' strings” if you will. Language is the actualization of the human essence. All of the qualities that languages share; this “common thread” is the manifestation or expression of the human essence. The answer to the “common thread” question is intimately linked with the answer to the question of what the human essence is; that is what is being manifested? Before I tentatively try to answer this question I wish to discuss some ethical issues dealing with language and essences. There are two categories of beings we largely consider human whom do not speak. The first is pre-linguistic children, and the second some groups of the mentally ill including feral children.

Pre-linguistic children (by definition) lack language and so it would seem that we could discount them from being human. It would seem that if they lack language then they lack the essence (which is the manifestation of language). This is a relatively simple objection because while it is true that they lack language they will eventually acquire it. To put it another way it takes time for pre-linguistic children to learn to manifest the essence in this way. The child learns through his exposure to language how to manifest the essence in the world. He cannot then be said to not be human because he still has the essence of humanity it just has not become obvious to us.

The second example is the non linguistic mentally ill and feral children. These two groups share the distinction of being damaged in such a way that they cannot communicate. In feral children it is the failure to be exposed to human language and in the mentally ill it is damage to the brain. Despite being unable to speak there are several signs that show them to still be human despite this obvious deficiency. First they are unable to participate in the human community fully. What I mean by this is that they are unable to interact completely with other human beings.<sup>11</sup> This inability to communicate shows a failure of manifestation of the essence. If they were some sub-group of humanity (or some other type of animal entirely) then they would be able to survive in their own community that is they would (like any other animal) form their own behavior and survival mechanisms, but because they seem to be unable to do this they cannot be counted as something less than human but rather a human that has been damaged. It is as if to say that a human being born with a nub for an arm or with a broken arm was somehow armless. They should have a working arm but something intervened and damaged whatever would have brought about a normal arm. It should be noted that I am not begging the question by assuming a human essence and then proceeding to say that participation in human society is an indicator of the human essence. This is because I have already proven a human essence using Davidson so I am free to apply the results to the outlier situations where the humanity of someone is in question.

Rationality is what I think the “common thread” or the human essence is. Rationality is what is expressed through every language that exists. By rationality I mean to say that all languages share: Judgement, prediction, inference, generalization, comparison,<sup>12</sup> and coherence. All of these are what make any human language translatable with any other language, because language is the manifestation of this rationality. All languages are spoken with the purpose of: judging, predicting, inferring, generalizing...etc. This is the reflection of a rational human essence. Man is a rational animal in that he

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that I am not discounting those who use sign language or other non-regular forms of communication because while they are unable to speak they can interact with society using language.

<sup>12</sup> I got this list from a Wikipedia page. I am not sure whether to cite it or not but I will if you think it is important.

is constantly dealing with his world using reason<sup>13</sup> through language. When the rational animal deals with the world he does it linguistically. This use of language is a manifestation of the rational animal's attempt to deal with the world rationally (again that is using judgement, prediction, inference, generalization, comparison, and coherence). While it is logically possible that rationality could be manifested in some non-linguistic way we as humans cannot conceptualize it. The reason we can translate all other human languages is because they all use reason to deal with the world and themselves. Hence our ability to translate is based on the assumption that one person's language is attempting to do the same thing that our language is; the “common thread” for all of them is the underlying fact that all languages are mentally trying to do the same thing in different physical manifestation.

Unfortunately for me this paper has posed more questions than I intended it to answer. I have shown that an essence is a viable and essential part of the rejection of conceptual schemes. Rationality manifested through language provides the essential characteristics that make us human. It is unchanging, non-physical, and essential. Should this criticism be successful I would like to explore the idea that the rejection of conceptual schemes represents a rejection of nominalism in many of its forms. This rejection paves the way for a wider essentialism.

#### Works Cited

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<sup>13</sup> What I mean by rationality is the list of adjectives noted earlier in the paragraph. The reader should refrain from adding embellished terms to the list. I include this to avoid any type of Enlightenment entanglements.