

## Essence and existence

We have seen that Aquinas, unlike Plato, does not regard the forms of things as existing independently of the individual substances they are the forms of, but also that he is nevertheless a realist about universals and that he thinks it possible for some forms to exist without matter. To understand these doctrines, we need now to look at Aquinas's famous theory of essence and its relationship to existence.

The essence of a thing is just that which makes it the sort of thing it is, "that through which something is a certain kind of being" (DEE 1). It is also that through which a thing is intelligible or capable of being grasped intellectually. Hence to grasp *humanity* is to grasp the essence of human beings – that which makes them human – and thus to understand what a human being is; to grasp *triangularity* is to grasp the essence of triangles – that which makes them triangles – and thus to understand what a triangle is; and so forth. (A thing's essence is also sometimes called its "nature," "quiddity," or "form" (though as we shall see, "form" sometimes has a narrower sense in which it refers to only a part of a thing's essence). The doctrine that (at least some) things have real (as opposed to merely conventional) essences is called *essentialism*.)

It is part of the essence of a triangle that it have three straight sides, but not part of the essence that it be drawn with blue, red, or any other particular color of ink. That is why a triangle remains a triangle whatever color it is, but cannot continue to exist if it loses one of its sides. This sort of consideration has led some contemporary analytic philosophers to think of the essence of a thing as definable in terms of whatever features it would exhibit in every possible world, where a "possible world" is a complete and logically consistent description of how things might have been. Triangles would have three sides in every possible world in which they exist at all, but would not be blue

in every possible world in which they exist; and this (the theory in question says) is what it amounts to to say that three-sidedness is part of the essence of triangles and blueness is not.

It is important to emphasize that this contemporary form of essentialism, associated with philosophers like Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, is (as contemporary Thomists like David Oderberg and Gyula Klima have pointed out) very different from the Aristotelian form of essentialism adopted and developed by Aquinas. From an Aristotelian-Thomistic point of view, (the possible worlds analysis of essence has things backwards: we need to know what the essence of a thing is first, before we can know what it would be like in various possible worlds;) talk of possible worlds, if legitimate at all, must get explained in terms of essence, not essence in terms of possible worlds. (Furthermore, the possible worlds analysis obliterates an important distinction much emphasized in Aristotelian essentialism.) Consider Socrates' rationality and his ability to learn languages (to borrow an example from Christopher Shields). Socrates has these in every possible world in which he exists at all, and thus, the contemporary essentialist concludes, both features are essential to him. But from the Aristotelian point of view, Socrates' ability to learn languages, though one of his necessary features – for him to lose it would entail that he ceases to exist – is nevertheless not as basic to him as his rationality is. The reason is that his ability to learn languages *derives from* his rationality; its necessity, though real, is therefore a derived necessity. It is only those features of a thing that are not derived in this way that can, from the Aristotelian point of view, count as part of the essence of a thing. (Those features deriving from the essence, such as Socrates' ability to learn languages, are instead referred to as "properties,") since they are proper or necessary to a thing in a way that its purely contingent features (like Socrates' being in Athens or having been a soldier) are not. ("Property" thus has a different connotation in Aristotelian metaphysics than

ence is "whatness", & the belief in  
ences is "essentialism."

An Aristotelian essence is more specific than  
a Kripke-Putnam essence, which includes  
Aristotelian properties (sort of secondary essences).