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Essentialism, Metaphysical Realism, and the Errors of Conceptualism

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Résumé : Le réalisme métaphysique est la conception suivant laquelle la plupart des objets qui peuplent le monde existent indépendamment de notre pensée et possèdent une nature indépendante de la manière dont nous pouvons éventuellement la concevoir. À mon sens cette position engage à admettre une forme robuste d'essentialisme. Beaucoup des formes modernes de l'anti-réalisme tirent leurs origines d'une forme de conceptualisme, suivant laquelle toutes les vérités que nous puissions connaître au sujet des essences sont en dernière analyse fondées sur nos concepts, plutôt que dans les choses « en elles-mêmes ». Mon but est de montrer que l'anti-réalisme conceptualiste est une doctrine incohérente, et comment nous pouvons soutenir le réalisme métaphysique et l'essentialisme robuste, tout en reconnaissant clairement le rôle cognitif des concepts en tant qu'intermédiaires dans notre appréhension de la nature de la réalité indépendante de l'esprit.

Abstract: *Metaphysical realism* is the view that most of the objects that populate the world exist independently of our thought and have their natures independently of how, if at all, we conceive of them. It is committed, in my opinion, to a robust form of *essentialism*. Many modern forms of anti-realism have their roots in a form of *conceptualism*, according to which all truths about essence knowable by us are ultimately grounded in *our concepts*, rather than in things 'in themselves'. My aim is to show that conceptualist anti-realism is an incoherent doctrine and how we can support metaphysical realism and robust essentialism, while still properly acknowledging the cognitive role of concepts in mediating our grasp of the nature of mind-independent reality.

1 Metaphysical Realism versus Conceptualist Anti-Realism

Metaphysical realism is the view that most of the objects that populate the world exist independently of our thought and have their natures independently of how, if at all, we conceive of them. Metaphysical realism

is committed, in my opinion, to a robust form of *essentialism*, that is, to the doctrine that there are mind-independent facts about the *identities* of most objects. ‘Identity’ in this sense means *individual essence*, which John Locke aptly characterized as ‘the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is’. Many modern forms of anti-realism have their basis in a form of *conceptualism*, according to which all truths about essence knowable by us are ultimately grounded in *our concepts* — that is, in our ways of thinking about things — rather than in things ‘in themselves’. This view has its historical roots in Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy, so that contemporary conceptualist anti-realism may, without undue distortion, be described as ‘neo-Kantian’ in spirit. This is despite the fact that one important way in which its adherents differ from the historical Kant is in their emphasis upon *language* as the medium of thought, as a result of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy that occurred in the early-to-mid twentieth century.

My aim in the present paper is to show that and why conceptualist anti-realism is an incoherent doctrine and why and how we can and must support metaphysical realism and robust essentialism, while still properly acknowledging the cognitive role of concepts in mediating our grasp of the nature of mind-independent reality. I shall begin with a sketch of the version of essentialism that I favour — a version that I call *serious essentialism* — and in the course of doing so I shall identify its three key principles. Then I shall try to explain why I think that conceptualism can provide no adequate substitute for this form of essentialism and inevitably collapses into an incoherent variety of global anti-realism.

2 Serious Essentialism

It is vital for my purposes in this paper that the doctrine of *essentialism* be suitably understood. I say this because many contemporary *possible-worlds theorists* readily describe themselves as essentialists and propose and defend what *they* call essentialist claims, formulated in terms of the language of possible worlds. They will say, for instance, that an essential property of an object is one that the object possesses in every possible world in which it exists. And they will typically claim that some, but not all, of an object’s actual properties are essential to it in this sense. But a doctrine of this sort is not serious essentialism in my sense, because it attempts to characterize essence in terms of antecedently assumed notions of possibility and necessity and thus — in my view — puts the cart before the horse. It is at best *ersatz* essentialism. So what is

serious essentialism? To pursue this query, one might seek to ask *what essences are*. However, this question is already potentially misleading, for it invites the reply that essences are *entities* of some special sort. And, as we shall see, I want to deny that essences are entities. According to serious essentialism, as I understand it, all entities *have* essences, but their essences are certainly not further entities related to them in some special way.

So, what do we or, rather, what *should* we mean by the ‘essence’ of a thing — where by ‘thing’, in this context, I just mean any sort of entity whatever? We can, I suggest, do no better than to recall John Locke’s perceptive words on the subject, which go right to its heart. Essence, Locke said, in the ‘proper original signification’ of the word, is ‘the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is’ [Locke 1975, III, III, 15]. In short, the essence of something, *X*, is *what X is*, or *what it is to be X*¹. In another locution, *X*’s essence is the very identity of *X* — a locution that I am happy to adopt, provided that it is clearly understood that to speak of something’s ‘identity’ in this sense is quite different from speaking of the identity *relation* in which it necessarily stands to itself and to no other thing. However, in order to avoid potential confusion about the meaning of locutions such as these, I think that it is important to draw, from the very start, a distinction between *general and individual essence*². The key point to be emphasized in this connection is that any individual thing, *X*, must be a thing of *some general kind* — because, at the very least, it must belong to some *ontological category*. Remember that by ‘thing’ here I just mean ‘entity’. So, for example, *X* might be a material object, or a person, or a property, or a set, or a number, or a proposition, or whatnot — the list goes on, in a manner that depends on what one takes to be a full enumeration of the ontological categories to be included in it³. This point being accepted, if *X* is something of kind *K*, then we may say that *X*’s *general essence* is *what it is to be a K*, while *X*’s *individual essence* is *what it is to be the individual of kind*

¹The historical source of this view lies, of course, with Aristotle, whose phrase *το τι ην ειναι* (‘to ti en einai’) is standardly translated as ‘essence’: see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z, 4. Its more literal meaning is ‘the what it is to be’ or ‘the what it would be to be’.

²I do not attempt to offer here a *semantic analysis* of expressions such as ‘what *X* is’, ‘what it is to be *X*’ or ‘the identity of *X*’, though that is no doubt an exercise that should be undertaken at some stage in a full account of what I am calling *serious essentialism*. I assume that our practical grasp of the meaning of such expressions is adequate for a preliminary presentation of the approach of the sort that I am now engaged in.

³For my own account of what ontological categories we should recognize and which we should regard as fundamental, see [Lowe 2006], especially Part I.

K that *X* is, as opposed to any other individual of that kind.

Before I proceed, however, an important complication must be dealt with. It should be evident that we cannot simply assume that there is only ever a *single* appropriate answer to the question ‘What kind of thing is *X*?’. For instance, if ‘a cat’ is an appropriate answer to this question, then so will be the answers ‘an animal’ and ‘a living organism’. So too, of course, might be the answer ‘a Siamese cat’. It is important to recognize, however, that some, but not all, of these answers plausibly announce the fact that *X* belongs to a certain ontological category. In my own view, ‘*X* is a living organism’, *does* announce such a fact, but ‘*X* is a cat’ does not. I take it that the substantive noun ‘cat’ denotes a certain *natural kind* and consider that such kinds are a species of *universal*. Thus, as I see it, natural kinds, such as the kind *cat*, are themselves things belonging to a certain ontological category — the category of universals — but such a kind is not *itself* an ontological category, because ontological categories are not *things* at all, to be included in a complete inventory of what there is (see [Lowe 1998, ch. 8] and [Lowe 2006, ch. 2]). One upshot of all this is that I want to maintain that a certain sort of ambiguity may attach to questions concerning a thing’s general essence, as I shall now try to explain.

An implication of what I have said so far is that if ‘a cat’ is an appropriate answer to the question ‘What *kind* of thing is *X*?’, then we may say that *X*’s general essence is *what it is to be a cat*. But, while I don’t want to retreat from this claim, I do want to qualify it. I should like to say that if *X* is a cat, then *X*’s *fundamental* general essence is *what it is to be a living organism*, because that — in my view — is the most narrow (or ‘lowest’) ontological category to which *X* may be assigned. The reason for this is that it is part of the *individual* essence of the natural kind *cat* — of which *X* is *ex hypothesi* a member — that it is a kind of living organisms. Now, there are, I believe, certain essential truths concerning *X* which do not issue from its fundamental general essence but only from the fact that it belongs to this particular natural kind. These are essential truths concerning *X* which are determined solely by the individual essence of that natural kind⁴. Accordingly, I

⁴I want to maintain that *X*’s fundamental general essence determines what is *absolutely* metaphysically necessary for *X*, whereas the individual essence of the natural kind *cat* determines only what is metaphysically necessary for *X* *qua* member of that kind. Thus, in my view, *being a cat* is not an absolute metaphysical necessity for any individual living organism that is, in fact, a cat. To put it another way: I believe that it is *metaphysically* possible — even if not *biologically* or *physically* possible — for any individual cat to survive ‘radical’ metamorphosis, by becoming a member of *another* natural kind of living organism. See further [Lowe 1998, 54–6].

want to say that *what it is to be a cat*, while it is not *X*'s fundamental general essence, is nonetheless what we might appropriately call *X*'s *specific* general essence, on the grounds that the kind *cat* is the most specific (or 'lowest') natural kind to which *X* may be assigned⁵. However, I readily acknowledge that the distinction that I am now trying to draw between 'fundamental' and 'specific' general essence in the case of individual members of natural kinds is a controversial one that needs much fuller justification than I am able to give it here. Hence, in what follows, I shall try as far as possible to prescind from this distinction, hoping that the simplification involved in doing so will cause no damage to the overall thrust of my arguments⁶.

3 Why are Essences Needed?

I have just urged that all individual things — all entities — have both general and individual essences, a thing's general essence being *what it is to be a thing of its kind* and its individual essence being *what it is to be the individual of that kind that it is*, as opposed to any other individual of that kind. But why suppose that things must *have* 'essences' in this sense and that we can, at least in some cases, know those essences? First of all, because otherwise it makes no sense — or so I believe — to say that we can talk or think comprehendingly about things at all. For if we do not at least know *what a thing is*, how can we talk or think comprehendingly about it? ⁷ How, for instance, can I talk or think comprehendingly about *Tom*, a particular cat, if I simply don't know what cats are and which cat, in particular, *Tom* is? Of course, I'm not saying that I must know *everything* about cats or about *Tom* in order to be able to talk

⁵I take it here, at least for the sake of argument, that there are 'higher' natural kinds to which *X* may be assigned, such as the kinds *mammal* and *vertebrate*, but that Siamese cats — for example — do not constitute a distinct natural kind of their own.

⁶One consequence of this simplification is that I shall often continue to speak of 'the' kind to which a thing belongs, without discriminating between 'kind' in the sense of *ontological category* and 'kind' in the sense of *natural kind*, and without explicit acknowledgement of the fact that the question 'What kind of thing is *X*?' may be capable of receiving more than one appropriate answer.

⁷Note that I ask only how we can *talk* or *think* comprehendingly about a thing if we do not know what it is — not how we can *perceive* a thing if we do not know what it is. I am happy to allow that a subject *S* may, for example, *see* an object *O* even though *S* does not know what *O* is. Seeing, however, is not a purely intellectual act. Indeed, of course, even lower animals that cannot at all plausibly be said to understand *what* objects exist in their environment, may nonetheless be said to *see* or *feel* or *smell* some of those objects.

or think comprehendingly about that particular animal⁸. But I must surely know enough to distinguish the kind of thing that Tom is from other kinds of thing, and enough to distinguish Tom in particular from other individual things of Tom's kind. Otherwise, it seems that my talk and thought cannot really fasten upon *Tom*, as opposed to something else⁹. However, denying the reality of essences doesn't only create an epistemological problem: it also creates an ontological problem. Unless Tom has an 'identity' — whether or not anyone is acquainted with it — there is nothing to make Tom the particular thing that he is, as opposed to any other thing. Anti-essentialism commits us to anti-realism, and indeed to an anti-realism so global that it is surely incoherent. It will not do, for instance, to try to restrict one's anti-essentialism to 'the external world', somehow privileging us and our language and thought. How could it be that there is a fact of the matter as to *our* identities, and the identities of *our words and thoughts*, but not as to the identities of the mind-independent entities that we try to capture in language and thought? On the other hand, how could there not be any fact of the matter as to our identities and the identities of our words and thoughts? Everything is, in Joseph Butler's memorable phrase, *what it is and not another thing*. That has sounded to many philosophers like a mere truism without significant content, as though it were just an affirmation of the

⁸Perhaps, indeed, all I need to know about cats is that they are *animals* or *living organisms* and perhaps, likewise, all I need to know about Tom is which animal or living organism he is.

⁹Of course, it is fashionable at present to suppose that our talk and thought have, in general, their referents in the 'external' world secured through the existence of appropriate *causal* links between certain constituents of our talk and thought — certain of our linguistic and mental 'representations' — and various extra-linguistic and extra-mental entities belonging to that world: links that can, and mostly do, obtain without our needing to have any knowledge of them. On this sort of view, it may be supposed, my talk and thought can fasten upon Tom because there is an appropriate causal link between the name 'Tom', as I have learnt to use it, and *Tom* — and an analogous causal link between a certain 'mental representation' of mine (perhaps a certain 'symbol' in the putative 'language of thought' supposedly utilized by my brain) and *Tom*. I will only say here that I cannot begin to understand how it might seriously be supposed that a linkage of this sort could genuinely suffice to enable me to *talk and think comprehendingly about Tom*, even if it is conceded that there is a (relatively anodyne) notion of 'reference' that could perhaps be satisfactorily accounted for by a causal theory of the foregoing sort. I should emphasize, then, that I am not presently concerned to challenge the so-called causal theory of reference, much less to defend in opposition to it some sort of neo-Fregean theory of reference as being mediated by 'sense'. Rather, I am simply not interested, at present, in semantic questions or rival semantic theories, but rather in the purely metaphysical question of *how it is possible to be acquainted with an object of thought*: my answer being that it is so through, and only through, a grasp of that object's *essence* — that is, through knowing *what it is*.

reflexivity of the identity relation. But, in fact, Butler's dictum does not merely concern the identity relation but also identity in the sense of *essence*. It implies that there is a fact of the matter as to what any particular thing is — that is, as to its 'very being', in Locke's phrase. Its very being — its identity — is what makes it the thing that it is and thereby distinct from any other thing.

Essences are apt to seem very elusive and mysterious, especially if talked about in a highly generalized fashion, as I have been doing so far. Really, I suggest, they are quite familiar to us. Above all, we need to appreciate that in very many cases a thing's essence involves *other things*, to which it stands in relations of *essential dependence*. Consider the following thing, for instance: the set of planets whose orbits lie within that of Jupiter. What kind of thing is that? Well, of course, it is a set, and as such an abstract entity that depends essentially for its existence and identity on the things that are its members — namely, Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars. Part of *what it is to be a set* is to be something that depends in these ways upon certain other things — the things that are its members. Someone who did not grasp that fact would not understand *what a set is*. Furthermore, someone who did not know *which things* are this set's members, or at least what determined which things are its members, would not know *which particular set* this set is. So, someone who knew that its members are the planets just mentioned would know which set it is, as would someone who knew what it is to be a planet whose orbit lies within that of Jupiter¹⁰. This is a simple example, but it serves to illustrate a general point. In many cases, we know what a thing is — both what kind of thing it is and which particular thing of that kind it is — only by knowing that it is related in certain ways to other things. In such cases, the thing in question depends essentially on these other things for its existence or its identity. To say that *X* depends essentially on *Y* for its existence and identity is just to say that it is *part of the essence* of *X* that *X* exists only if *Y* exists and *part of the essence* of *X* that *X* stands in some unique relation to *Y* (see [Lowe 1998, ch. 6], or [Lowe 2005a]). Knowing a thing's essence, in many cases, is accordingly simply a matter of understanding the relations of essential dependence in which it stands to other things whose essences we in turn

¹⁰There are, broadly speaking, two different views of what a set is: one which takes a set simply to be the result of — as David Lewis [1991, vii] puts it — 'collecting many into one', and another which takes a set to be the extension of a property or of a concept. I see no compelling reason why, in principle, our ontology should not accommodate sets in *both* of these understandings of what they are. But since I am using the example of sets only for illustrative purposes, this is a matter on which I can afford to remain agnostic here.

know.

4 Essences are not Entities

I said earlier that it is wrong to think of essences as themselves being entities of any kind to which the things having them stand in some special kind of relation. Locke himself unfortunately made this mistake, holding as he did that the ‘real essence’ of a material substance just is its ‘particular internal constitution’ — or, as we would now describe it, its atomic or molecular structure¹¹. This is a mistake that has been perpetuated in the modern doctrine, made popular by the work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, that the essence of water *consists* in its molecular make-up, H_2O , and that the essence of a living organism *consists* in its DNA — the suggestion being that we *discover* these ‘essences’ simply by careful scientific investigation of the things in question (see, especially, [Kripke 1980] and [Putnam 1975]). Now, as we saw earlier, it may well be part of the essence of a thing *that it stands in a certain relation to some other thing*, or kind of things. But *the essence itself* — the very being of a thing, whereby it is, what it is — is not and could not be some further entity. So, for instance, it might perhaps be acceptable to say that it is part of the essence of water *that it is composed of H_2O molecules* (an issue that I shall return to shortly). But the essence of water could not simply *be* H_2O — *molecules* of that very kind — nor yet the *property* of being composed of H_2O molecules. For one thing, if the essence of an entity *were* just some further entity, then *it in turn* would have to have an essence of its own and we would be faced with an infinite regress that, at worst, would be vicious and, at best, would appear to make all knowledge of essence impossible for finite minds like ours. To know something’s essence is not to be acquainted with some *further thing* of a special kind, but simply to understand *what exactly that thing is*. This, indeed, is why knowledge of essence is possible, for it is a product simply of *understanding* — not of empirical observation, much less of some mysterious kind of quasi-perceptual acquaintance with esoteric entities of any sort. And, on pain of incoherence, we cannot deny that we understand what at least some things are, and thereby know their essences.

¹¹Thus, at one point Locke remarks: ‘[W]e come to have the *Ideas of particular sorts of Substances*, by collecting such Combinations of simple *Ideas*, as are by Experience ... taken notice of to exist together, and are therefore supposed to flow from the particular internal Constitution, or unknown Essence of that Substance’ [Locke 1975, II, XXIII, 3].

Here it may be objected that it is inconsistent of me to deny that essences are entities and yet go on, as I apparently do, to *refer to* and even *quantify over* essences. Someone who voices this objection probably has in mind W. V. Quine's notorious *criterion of ontological commitment*, encapsulated in his slogan 'to be is to be the value of a variable' [see, for example, Quine 1969]. I reply, in the first place, that I could probably say all that I want to about my version of essentialism while avoiding all locutions involving the appearance of reference to and quantification over essences, by paraphrasing them in terms of locutions involving only sentential operators of the form 'it is part of the essence of X that' — where 'the essence of X ' is not taken to make an independent contribution to the meaning of the operator, which might be represented symbolically by, say, ' E_X ' in a sentential formula of the form ' $E_X(p)$ '. The latter is a kind of locution that I certainly do want to use and find very useful. However, I think that effort spent on working out such paraphrases in all cases would be effort wasted. If a paraphrase *means the same* as what it is supposed to paraphrase — as it had better do, if it is to be any good — then it carries the same 'ontological commitments' as whatever it is supposed to paraphrase, so that constructing paraphrases cannot be a way of relieving ourselves of ontological commitments. We cannot discover those commitments simply by examining the syntax and semantics of our language, for syntax and semantics are very uncertain guides to ontology. In other words, I see no reason to place any confidence in Quine's famous criterion.

5 Essence Precedes Existence

Another crucial point about essence is this: in general, *essence precedes existence*. And by this I mean that the former precedes the latter both *ontologically* and *epistemically*. That is to say, on the one hand, I mean that it is a precondition of something's existing that its essence — along with the essences of other existing things — does not preclude its existence. And, on the other hand — and this is what I want to concentrate on now — I mean that we can in general *know* the essence of something X antecedently to knowing whether or not X exists. Otherwise, it seems to me, we could never find out *that* something exists. For how could we find out *that* something, X , exists before knowing *what* X is — before knowing, that is, *what it is* whose existence we have supposedly discov-

ered?¹² Consequently, we know the essences of many things which, as it turns out, *do not* exist. For we know what these things *would be*, if they existed, and we retain this knowledge when we discover that, in fact, they do not exist. Conceivably, there are exceptions. Perhaps it really is true in the case of God, for instance, that essence does not precede existence. But this could not quite generally be the case. However, saying this is perfectly consistent with acknowledging that, sometimes, we may only come to know the essence of something after we have discovered the existence of certain *other* kinds of things. This is what goes on in many fields of theoretical science. Scientists trying to discover the transuranic elements knew before they found them *what it was* that they were trying to find, but only because they knew that what they were trying to find were elements whose atomic nuclei were composed of protons and neutrons in certain hitherto undiscovered combinations. They could hardly have known what they were trying to find, however, prior to the discovery of the existence of protons and neutrons — for only after these sub-atomic particles were discovered and investigated did the structure of atomic nuclei become sufficiently well-understood for scientists to be able to anticipate which combinations of nucleons would give rise to reasonably stable nuclei.

Here it may be objected that Kripke and Putnam have taught us that the essences of many familiar natural kinds — such as the kind *cat* and the kind *water* — have been revealed to us only *a posteriori* and consequently that in cases such as these, at least, it cannot be true to say that ‘essence precedes existence’, whatever may be said in the case of the transuranic elements¹³. The presupposition here, of course, is

¹²Notoriously, Descartes is supposed to have claimed, in the *Second Meditation*, to know *that* he existed before he knew *what* he was — that is, before he grasped his own essence. But it seems to me that any such claim must be construed as being either disingenuous or else intended non-literally, if it is not to be dismissed as being simply incomprehensible. It might, for instance, be taken to imply merely that Descartes was certain that the word ‘I’ *had a reference*, before knowing what that reference was. To be accurate, though, what Descartes actually says is ‘But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this “I” is, that now necessarily exists’: see Descartes 1986, 17. That is consistent with saying that Descartes *does* already grasp his own essence, but needs to clear his mind of confused thoughts concerning it. Query: might we not come to know what *X* is *neither before nor after* discovering that *X* exists, but *simultaneously* with that discovery? Well, I see no reason to deny this possibility in some cases. But that concession need not be taken to undermine the claim that, in general, we can know the essence of something *X* before knowing whether or not *X* exists.

¹³The extent to which the Kripke-Putnam doctrine has become a commonplace of contemporary analytic philosophy is illustrated by the following remark of Frank Jackson’s, which he makes simply in passing and without acknowledging any need to

that Kripke and Putnam are *correct* in identifying the essence of water, for example, with its molecular make-up, H_2O . Now, I have already explained why I think that such identifications are mistaken, to the extent that they can be supposed to involve the illicit *reification* of essences. But it may still be urged against me that even if, more cautiously, we say only that it is part of the essence of water *that it is composed of H_2O molecules*, it still follows that the essence of water has only been revealed to us — or, at least, has only been *fully* revealed to us — *a posteriori*.

In point of fact, however, the Kripke-Putnam doctrine is even more obscure and questionable than I have so far represented it as being. Very often, it is characterized in terms of the supposed modal and epistemic status of identity-statements involving natural kind terms, such as ‘Water is H_2O ’, which are said to express truths that are at once necessary and *a posteriori*. In such a statement, however, the term ‘ H_2O ’ is plainly not functioning in exactly the same way as it does in the expression ‘ H_2O molecule’. The latter expression, it seems clear, means ‘molecule composed of two hydrogen ions and one oxygen ion’. But in ‘Water is H_2O ’, understood as an identity-statement concerning kinds, we must either take ‘ H_2O ’ to be elliptical for the *definite description* ‘the stuff composed of H_2O molecules’ or else simply as being a *proper name* of a kind of stuff, in which case we cannot read into it any significant semantic structure. On the latter interpretation, ‘Water is H_2O ’

justify it: ‘[W]e rarely know the essence of the things our words denote (indeed, if Kripke is right about the necessity of origin, we do not know our own essences)’: see Jackson 1998, 50. Yet, I would urge, it should strike one as being odd to the point of paradoxicality to maintain that we can talk or think comprehendingly about things without knowing *what it is* that we are talking or thinking about — that is, without grasping their essences. The charitable conclusion to draw would be that philosophers like Jackson do not use the term ‘essence’ in what Locke called its ‘proper original signification’. Now, of course, Locke himself says that the ‘real’ essences of material substances are *unknown* to us — and the Kripke-Putnam doctrine is recognizably a descendent of Locke’s view, to the extent that it identifies the ‘real essences’ of material substances with their ‘internal constitutions’, many of which are certainly still unknown to us and may forever continue to be so. But Locke, at least, concluded — unlike modern adherents of the Kripke-Putnam doctrine — that ‘the *supposition of Essences, that cannot be known*; and the making them nevertheless to be that, which distinguishes the Species of Things, *is so wholly useless*... [as] to make us lay it by’ [Locke 1975, III, III, 17] and he accordingly appeals instead to what he calls *nominal* essences. The correct position, I suggest, is neither Locke’s nor that of the Kripke-Putnam doctrine, but rather (what I take to be) Aristotle’s: that the real essences of material substances *are* known to those who talk or think comprehendingly about such substances — and consequently that such essences are not to be identified with anything that is *not* generally known to such speakers and thinkers, such as the ‘particular internal constitution’ of a material substance, or a human being’s (or other living creature’s) ‘origin’ in the Kripkean sense.

is exactly analogous to ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ and its necessary truth reveals nothing of substance to us concerning the composition of water. If we are inclined to think otherwise, this is because we slide illicitly from construing ‘ H_2O ’ as a proper name to construing it as elliptical for the definite description ‘the stuff composed of H_2O molecules’. Now, when ‘Water is H_2O ’ is understood on the model of ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’, its necessary *a posteriori* truth may in principle be established in a like manner — namely, by appeal to the familiar logical proof of the necessity of identity¹⁴, together with the *a posteriori* discovery of the co-reference of the proper names involved — but not so when it is construed as meaning ‘Water is the stuff composed of H_2O molecules’, for the latter involves a definite description and the logical proof in question notoriously fails to apply where identity-statements involving definite descriptions are concerned. Thus far, then, we have been given no reason to suppose that ‘Water is H_2O ’ expresses an *a posteriori* necessary truth that reveals to us something concerning the essence of water. The appearance that we have been given such a reason is the result of mere sleight of hand¹⁵.

There is, in any case, another important consideration that we should bear in mind when reflecting on the frequently-invoked analogy between ‘Water is H_2O ’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’. It is all very well to point out that the discovery that Hesperus is Phosphorus was an empirical one. But it was not *purely* empirical, for the following reason. The identity was established because astronomers discovered that Hesperus and Phosphorus *coincide in their orbits*: wherever Hesperus is located at any given time, there too is Phosphorus located. However, spatiotemporal coincidence only implies identity for things of appropriate kinds. It is only because Hesperus and Phosphorus are taken to be *planets* and thereby *material objects of the same kind* that their spatiotemporal coincidence can be taken to imply their identity. But the principle that distinct material objects of the same kind cannot coincide spatiotemporally is not an empirical one: it is an *a priori* one implied by *what it is* to be a material object of any kind — in other words, it is a truth grounded

¹⁴See [Kripke 1971]. I express doubts about the cogency of this proof in [Lowe 2005b]. However, for present purposes I set aside these doubts.

¹⁵Here I note that it might be thought that ‘Water is the stuff composed of H_2O molecules’ follows unproblematically from the supposed empirical truth ‘Water is H_2O ’ (construed as an identity-statement involving two proper names) and the seemingly trivial, because analytic, truth ‘ H_2O is the stuff composed of H_2O molecules’. But the latter, when the first occurrence of ‘ H_2O ’ in it is interpreted as a proper name, is no more trivial than ‘*Water* is the stuff composed of H_2O molecules’ — and this is how it must be interpreted for the inference to go through.

in *essence*. It is only because we know that it is *part of the essence* of a planet not to coincide spatiotemporally with another planet, that we can infer the identity of Hesperus with Phosphorus from the fact that they coincide in their orbits. Thus, one must already know *what a planet is* — know its essence — in order to be able to establish by *a posteriori* means that one planet is identical with another¹⁶. By the same token, then, one must already know *what a kind of stuff is* — know its essence — in order to be able to establish by *a posteriori* means that one kind of stuff is identical with another. It can hardly be the case, then, that we can *discover* the essence of a kind of stuff simply by establishing *a posteriori* the truth of an identity-statement concerning kinds of stuff — any more than we can be supposed to have discovered the essence of a particular planet by establishing *a posteriori* the truth of an identity-statement concerning that planet. So, even granting that ‘Water is H₂O’ is a true identity-statement that is both necessarily true and known *a posteriori*, it does not at all follow that it can be taken to reveal to us the essence of the kind of stuff that we call ‘water’.

Be all this as it may, however, we still have to address the question of whether, in fact, we ought to say that it is part of the essence of water that it is composed of H₂O molecules. So far, we have at best seen only

¹⁶Here it may be asked: did astronomers know *which* planet Hesperus is — that is, know its *individual* essence — before knowing that it is identical with Phosphorus? It might seem that the answer must be ‘No’: for if they did, it may be wondered, how could they have been in any doubt as to its identity with Phosphorus? However, here we need to bear in mind that it is clearly not part of the essence of any planet that it has the particular orbit that it does: a planet can certainly change its orbit, and indeed could have had a quite different one. But what led to the discovery that Hesperus is the same planet as Phosphorus was simply that their orbits were plotted and found to coincide. And since one can know which planet a planet is without knowing what its orbit is, it is therefore perfectly explicable that astronomers should — and did — know which planet Hesperus is and which planet Phosphorus is without knowing that Hesperus is the same planet as Phosphorus. So how, in general, *does* one know which material object of kind *K* a certain material object, *O*, is? Well, one way in which one can know this, it seems clear, is through *perceptual acquaintance* with *O* that is informed by knowledge of the *general* essence of objects of kind *K*. (Recall, here, that perception of an object *O* does not *in itself* presuppose knowledge of what *O* is, so that the foregoing claim does not beg the very question at issue.) That is to say, it very often happens that one perceives an object *O* in circumstances that enable one to know *that what* one is perceiving, *O*, is a particular object of kind *K*. In such circumstances, one is thus in a position to know *which* object of this kind *O* is — namely, *that* one (the one that one is perceiving). And one can retain this knowledge by *remembering* which object it was that one perceived. I should emphasize, however, that this does not at all imply that it is part of *O*’s individual essence that it is the object of kind *K* that one perceived on a particular occasion — for, of course, it will in general be an entirely contingent matter that one happened to perceive it then, or indeed at all.

that the Kripke-Putnam semantics for natural kind terms have given us no reason to suppose that we ought to. I am inclined to answer as follows. If we are using the term ‘water’ to talk about a certain chemical compound whose nature is understood by theoretical chemists, then indeed we should say that it is part of the essence of this compound that it consists of H_2O molecules. But, at the same time, it should be acknowledged that the existence of this compound is a relatively recent discovery, which could not have been made before the nature of hydrogen and oxygen atoms and their ability to form molecules were understood. Consequently, when we use the term ‘water’ in everyday conversation and when our forebears used it before the advent of modern chemistry, we are and they were *not* using it to talk about a chemical compound whose nature is now understood by theoretical chemists. We are and they were using it to talk about a certain *kind of liquid*, distinguishable from other kinds of liquid by certain fairly easily detectable macroscopic features, such as its transparency, colourlessness, and tastelessness. We are right, I assume, in thinking that a liquid of this kind actually exists, but *not* that it is part of its essence that it is composed of H_2O molecules. At the same time, however, we should certainly acknowledge that empirical scientific inquiry reveals that, indeed, the chemical compound H_2O is very largely what bodies of this liquid are made up of. In fact, the natural laws governing this and other chemical compounds make it overwhelmingly unlikely that this kind of liquid could have a different chemical composition in different parts of our universe. But the ‘could’ here is expressive of mere physical or natural possibility, not *metaphysical* possibility¹⁷. Only an illicit conflation of these two species of possibility could reinstate the claim that water is *essentially* composed of H_2O molecules.

But, it may be asked, what about our supposed ‘intuitions’ in so-called ‘Twin-Earth’ cases — for example, the supposed intuition that if, on a distant planet, a watery stuff was discovered that was not composed of H_2O molecules, then it would not be *water*? In answer to this question, I would remark only that these supposed intuitions need to be interpreted in the light of the fact, just mentioned, that the natural laws governing chemical compounds in our universe almost certainly render such scenarios physically impossible. The supposedly ‘watery’ stuff on Twin Earth would be like fool’s gold (copper pyrites): it would at best be *casually* mistakable for water and *that* is why it would not be water. The *chemical* explanation for this would be that it is not composed of

¹⁷For extended discussion of the need to distinguish between these two species of possibility, see [Lowe 2006, ch. 9 & ch. 10].

H₂O molecules. But we cannot turn this perfectly legitimate chemical explanation into a logico-cum-metaphysical argument that genuine water is of *metaphysical* necessity composed of H₂O molecules — unless, once again, we conflate physical with metaphysical necessity.

6 Essence is the Ground of All Modal Truth

So far, I have urged that the following two principles must be endorsed by the serious essentialist: that *essences are not entities* and that, in general, *essence precedes existence*. But by far the most important principle to recognize concerning essences, for the purposes of the present paper, is that *essences are the ground of all metaphysical necessity and possibility* (compare [Fine 1994]). One reason, thus, why it can be the case that *X* is *necessarily F* is that it is part of the essence of *X* that *X* is *F*. For example, any material object is necessarily spatially extended because it is part of the essence of a material object that it is spatially extended — in other words, part of *what it is to be a material object* is to be something that is spatially extended. But this is not the only possible reason why something may be necessarily *F*. *X* may be necessarily *F* on account of the essence of *something else* to which *X* is suitably related. For example, Socrates is necessarily the subject of the following event — *the death of Socrates* — because it is part of the essence of that event that Socrates is its subject, even though it is not part of Socrates's essence that he is the subject of that event. It is not on account of *what Socrates is* that he is necessarily the subject of that event but, rather, on account of *what that event is*¹⁸. This is not to say that Socrates could not have died a different death, only that no one but Socrates could have died the death that he in fact died. And what goes for necessity goes likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for possibility. I venture to affirm that all facts about what is necessary or possible, in the metaphysical sense, are grounded in facts concerning the essences of things — not only of existing things, but also of non-existing things. But, I repeat, facts concerning the essences of things are not facts concerning entities of a special kind, they are just facts concerning *what things are* — their very beings or identities. And these are facts that we can therefore grasp simply in virtue of understanding what things are, which we must in at least some cases be able to do, on pain of being incapable of thought

¹⁸Note that analogously, then, it could be conceded that H₂O molecules necessarily compose water without it being conceded that it is part of the essence of *water* to be composed of H₂O molecules — for the necessity may be explained instead as arising from the essence of H₂O molecules.

altogether. Consequently, all knowledge of metaphysical necessity and possibility is ultimately a product of the understanding, not of any sort of quasi-perceptual acquaintance, much less of ordinary empirical observation.

How, for example, do we know that two distinct things of suitably *different* kinds, such as a bronze statue and the lump of bronze composing it at any given time, can — unlike two *planets* — exist in the same place at the same time? Certainly not by *looking very hard* at what there is in that place at that time. Just by looking, we shall not see that two distinct things occupy that place. We know this, rather, because we know *what a bronze statue is* and *what a lump of bronze is*. We thereby know that these are *different* things and that a thing of the first sort must, at any given time, be composed by a thing of the second sort, since it is part of the essence of a bronze statue to be composed of bronze. We know that they are different things because, in knowing what they are, we know their *identity conditions*, and thereby know that one of them can persist through changes through which the other cannot persist — that, for instance, a lump of bronze can persist through a radical change in its shape whereas a bronze statue cannot. These facts about their identity conditions are not matters that we can discover purely empirically, by examining bronze statues and lumps of bronze very closely, as we might in order to discover whether, say, they conduct electricity or dissolve in sulphuric acid (see further [Lowe 2003] and [Lowe 2002], the latter being a reply to [Olson 2001]). Rather, they are facts about them that we must grasp *antecedently* to being able to embark upon any such empirical inquiry concerning them, for we can only inquire empirically into something's properties if we already know *what it is* that we are examining..

7 Essentialism and Conceptualism

At this point I need to counter a rival view of essence that is attractive to many philosophers but is, I think, ultimately incoherent. I call this view *conceptualism*¹⁹. It is the view that what I have been calling facts about

¹⁹Who, it might be asked, is really a conceptualist in the sense that I am about to articulate? That is difficult to say with any assurance, since most conceptualists are understandably rather coy about proclaiming their position too explicitly. However, amongst major analytic philosophers of the twentieth century, Michael Dummett very plausibly counts as one, in virtue of his apparent endorsement of the view that reality is an 'amorphous lump' that can be 'sliced up' in indefinitely many different but equally legitimate ways, depending on what conceptual scheme we or other thinkers

essences are really, in the end, just facts about certain of *our concepts* — for example, *our concept* of a bronze statue and *our concept* of a lump of bronze. This would reduce all modal truths to conceptual truths or, if the old-fashioned term is preferred, *analytic* truths. Now, I have no objection to the notion of conceptual truth as such. Perhaps, as is often alleged, ‘Bachelors are unmarried’ indeed expresses such a truth. Let us concede that it is true in virtue of our concept of a bachelor, or in virtue of what we take the word ‘bachelor’ to mean. But notice that ‘Bachelors are unmarried’ very plausibly has a quite different modal status from an *essential* truth such as, for example, ‘Cats are composed of matter’. In calling the former a ‘necessary’ truth, we cannot mean to imply that bachelors cannot marry, only that they cannot marry *and go on rightly being called ‘bachelors’*. The impossibility in question is only one concerning the proper application of a word. But in calling ‘Cats are composed of matter’ a necessary truth, we certainly can’t be taken to mean merely that cats cannot cease to be composed of matter *and go on rightly being called ‘cats’* — as though *the very same thing* that, when composed of matter, was properly called a ‘cat’ might continue to exist as something immaterial. No: we must be taken to mean that cats cannot fail to be composed of matter *simpliciter*, that is, without qualification. Cats are things such that, *if they exist at all*, they *must* be composed of matter. The impossibility of there being an immaterial cat is not one that merely concerns the proper application of a word: it is, rather, a genuinely *de re* impossibility. That, I contend, is because it is one grounded in the essence of cats, inasmuch as it is *part of the essence* of a cat, as a living organism, to be composed of matter. In contrast, it is not part of the essence of any bachelor to be unmarried, for a bachelor is just an adult male human being who happens to be unmarried — and any such human being undoubtedly *can* marry. So, it seems clear, ‘Cats are composed of matter’ is certainly not a mere conceptual truth, and the same goes for other truths that are genuinely essential truths — truths concerning or grounded in the essences of things. They have, in general, nothing to do with our concepts or our words, but rather with the natures of the things in question. Of course, since concepts and words are *themselves* things of certain sorts, there can be truths concerning *their* essences. Indeed, what we could say about ‘Bachelors

happen to deploy: see [Dummett 1981, 563, 577]. So might David Wiggins, who calls his position ‘conceptualist realism’ and acknowledges, as the only admissible notion of individuation, a cognitive one which takes this to be a *singling out of objects by thinkers*: see [Wiggins 2001, 6]. And so, indeed, might Hilary Putnam, on the evidence of such papers as Putnam 1983, whose flavour seems distinctly different from that of earlier work of his cited previously.

are unmarried' is that it is, or is grounded in, a truth concerning the essence of the concept bachelor, or of the word 'bachelor'. We could say, thus, that it is part of the essence of the concept *bachelor* that only unmarried males fall under it, and part of the essence of the word 'bachelor' that it applies only to unmarried males.

At this point, I anticipate the following possible response from the conceptualist, challenging my attempt to distinguish between the modal status of the statements 'Bachelors are unmarried' and 'Cats are composed of matter'. Both statements, the conceptualist may say, express conceptual truths, and the difference between them lies only in the fact that, while the term 'cat' is a so-called *substance sortal*, the term 'bachelor' is only a *phase sortal* (for this distinction, see [Wiggins 2001, 28-30]). This, he may say, adequately explains why it makes no sense to suppose that something, by ceasing to be composed of matter, could cease to qualify as a *cat* and yet *go on existing* — for a substance sortal is precisely a term that, by definition, applies to something, if it applies to it all, *throughout* that thing's existence. To this I respond as follows. We need to ask, crucially, what determines whether or not a given general term should be deemed to be a substance sortal. If this is taken *simply* to be a matter of what concept it expresses for speakers of the language in question, rather than a matter of what manner of thing it applies to, then deeply anti-realist consequences immediately ensue. To see this, suppose that there is a community of speakers who speak a language very like English in most ways, except that in place of the term 'bachelor' they deploy the term 'sbachelor', where 'sbachelor' in their language is (supposedly) a *substance sortal* rather than a phase sortal, so that *they* would deem 'Sbachelors are unmarried' to be on a par, modally, with 'Cats are composed of matter' — the implication being that, for these speakers, a sbachelor *ceases to exist* if he undergoes a marriage ceremony and is replaced by a numerically different being, called (let us say) a 'shusband'. So, where ordinary English speakers would describe a certain situation as being one in which a certain *man* survives the transition from being a bachelor to being a husband, speakers of our imaginary community would instead describe *the very same situation* as being one in which a certain sbachelor ceases to exist and is replaced by a shusband. As far as I can see, the conceptualist cannot say that we ordinary English speakers describe this situation *rightly* and that the imagined speakers describe it *wrongly*: for the only standard of correctness to which the conceptualist can appeal is that provided by the *actual conceptual repertoire* of the speakers of any given language. That being so, since the two speech communities clearly *differ* over the question as

to whether or not, in the envisaged situation, *something has ceased to exist*, the conceptualist seems committed to the conclusion that there is *no mind-independent fact of the matter* concerning such existential questions — and this position is blatantly anti-realist²⁰.

But I said that conceptualism is ultimately *incoherent*. Indeed, I think it is. For one thing, as we have just seen, the proper thing to say about ‘conceptual’ truths is, very plausibly, that *they are grounded in the essences of concepts*. That being so, the conceptualist cannot maintain, as he does, that *all* putative facts about essence are really just facts concerning concepts. For this is to imply that putative facts about *the essences of concepts* are really just facts concerning *concepts of concepts* — and we have set out on a vicious infinite regress. No doubt the conceptualist will object that this complaint is question-begging. However, even setting it aside, we can surely see that conceptualism is untenable. For the conceptualist is at least committed to affirming that *concepts* — or, in another version, *words* — exist and indeed that concept-users do, to wit, *ourselves*. *These*, at least, are things that the conceptualist must acknowledge to have *identities*, independently of how we conceive of them, on pain of incoherence in his position. The conceptualist must at least purport to understand *what a concept or a word is*, and indeed *what he or she is*, and thus grasp the essences of at least some things. And if of *these* things, why not of *other* kinds of things? Once knowledge of essences is conceded, the game is up for the conceptualist. And it must be conceded, even by the conceptualist, on pain of denying that he or she knows what *anything* is, including the very concepts that lie at the heart of his account. For, recall, all that I mean by the essence of something is *what it is*.

I recognize, however, that conceptualism is deeply entrenched in some philosophical quarters and that conceptualists are consequently unlikely to relinquish their views very readily in the light of objections of the sort that I have just raised. Hence, in the remaining two sections of this paper, I shall endeavour to undermine conceptualism in two further ways: first, by exposing the unholy alliance between conceptualism and scepticism and, second, by developing a more general argument to show how conceptualism leads to global anti-realism and why it is ultimately incoherent.

²⁰In any case, it is relatively easy to think of other examples of necessary truths which, even less controversially, cannot sensibly be taken to be merely conceptual truths — for example, ‘Socrates is not divisible by 3’.

8 Conceptualism and Scepticism

Why is anyone ever even tempted by conceptualism, if it has such deep flaws as I maintain? My own view is that this temptation is the legacy of *scepticism*, particularly scepticism concerning ‘the external world’. The sceptic feels at home with himself and with his words and concepts, but expresses doubt that we can ever really know whether those words and concepts properly or adequately characterize things in the external world. He thinks that we can know nothing about how or what those things are ‘in themselves’, or indeed even whether they are *many or one*. According to the sceptic, all that we can really know is how we *conceive* of the world, or *describe* it in language, not how *it is*. But by what special dispensation does the sceptic exclude *our concepts* and *our words* from the scope of his doubt? For are they not, too, things that exist? There is, in truth, no intelligible division that can be drawn between *the external world*, on the one hand, and *us and our concepts and our language* on the other. Here it may be protested: But how, then, *can* we advance to a knowledge of what and how things are ‘in themselves’, even granted that the sceptic is mistaken in claiming a special dispensation with regard to the epistemic status of our concepts and our words? However, the fundamental mistake is to suppose, with the sceptic, that such an ‘advance’ would have to proceed *from* a basis in our knowledge of our concepts and words — that is, *from* a knowledge of how we conceive of and describe the world — *to* a knowledge of that world ‘as it is in itself’, independently of our conceptual schemes and languages. This ‘inside-out’ account of how knowledge of mind-independent reality is to be acquired already makes such knowledge impossible and must therefore be rejected as incoherent.

But what alternative is there, barring a retreat to some form of anti-realism? Again, *knowledge of essence* comes to the rescue. Because, in general, essence precedes existence, we can at least sometimes know *what it is* to be a *K* — for example, *what it is* to be a material object of a certain kind — and thereby know, at least in part, what is or is not *possible* with regard to *K*s, in advance of knowing whether, or even having good reason to believe that, any such thing as a *K* actually *exists*. Knowing already, however, *what it is* whose existence is in question and that its existence is at least *possible*, we can intelligibly and justifiably appeal to empirical evidence to confirm or cast doubt upon existence claims concerning such things. By ‘empirical evidence’ here, be it noted, I emphatically do *not* mean evidence constituted purely by the contents of our own perceptual states at any given time, as though

all that we had to go on is how the world in our vicinity *looks* or otherwise *appears* to be. That, certainly, is not the conception of ‘empirical evidence’ that is operative in scientific practice, which appeals rather to the results of controlled experiments and observations, all of which are reported in terms of properties and relations of mind-independent objects, such as scientific instruments and laboratory specimens. The growth of objective knowledge consists, then, in a constant interplay between an *a priori* element — knowledge of essence — and an *a posteriori* element, the empirical testing of existential hypotheses whose possibility has already been anticipated *a priori*. This process does not have a foundational ‘starting point’ and it is constantly subject to critical reappraisal, both with regard to its *a priori* ingredients and with regard to its empirical contributions. Here we do not have a hopeless ‘inside-out’ account of objective knowledge, since our own subjective states as objective inquirers — our perceptions and our conceptions — are accorded no special role in the genesis of such knowledge. Those subjective states are merely some amongst the many possible objects of knowledge, rather than objects of a special kind of knowledge which supposedly grounds the knowledge of all other things. But, to repeat, it is crucial to this account that knowledge of *essences* is not itself knowledge of *objects or entities* of any kind, nor grounded in any such knowledge — such as knowledge of our own concepts.

9 Conceptualism and Anti-Realism

Recall that ‘conceptualism’, as I am using this term, is the view that, to that extent that talk about essences is legitimate at all, essences are purely *conceptual* in character. On this view, the essence of a kind of entities *K* is simply *constituted* by ‘our’ concept of a *K* — or, if not by ‘our’ concept, then at least by *some* thinking being’s concept. But what exactly is a ‘concept’? Well, ‘concept’ in the current context is a philosophical term of art, so it is partly up to us as philosophers to stipulate how we propose to use it. As I have already indicated, I myself regard a concept as being *a way of thinking of some thing or things*, and I take it that conceptualists can agree with me about this. However, as a metaphysical realist, I also want to say that not all of our ways of thinking of things — not all of our *conceptions* of things — are equally good. Because I am a metaphysical realist, I believe that our conceptions of things may be more or less *adequate*, in the sense that they may more or less accurately reflect or represent the natures — that is, the *essences*

— of the things of which we are thinking, or at least *attempting* to think. Thus it is open to me to stipulate further that, in *my* usage, a ‘concept’ is precisely an *adequate* conception of some thing or things, which accurately reflects the nature or essence of the things in question. For example, I can say that a child who conceives of a triangle merely as being a three-sided shape does not yet fully grasp the *concept* of a triangle, as a *planar* figure with three *rectilinear* sides. Clearly, however, it is not then open to *me* to say that the essence of *K*s is constituted by our *concept* of a *K*, because this would leave no room for me to say, non-vacuously, that the concept of a *K* is a conception of *K*s that *accurately reflects* the essence of *K*s. Essences, on my account, must be *mind-independent*, if the question can sensibly be put as to whether or not a conception of *K*s adequately reflects the essence of *K*s. But what can be said on behalf of the rival view — conceptualism as I call it — that essences are always *constituted* by concepts? First, it should be clear, if it isn’t clear already, that conceptualism is a strongly *anti-realist* view. Second, I want to press home my complaint that conceptualism is a view that is ultimately *incoherent*. Let us deal with the first point first.

The following question, it seems to me, must be a deeply embarrassing one for the conceptualist: *in virtue of what*, according to conceptualism, can it truly be said that *there exist* entities that fall under, or satisfy, our concepts — including, most centrally, our *sortal* or *individuating* concepts? That is to say, what does it take for there to *be* *K*s, on this view? This is simple enough, it may be replied: there must be entities that possess whatever features they are that we have built into our concept of a *K*. So, for example, if *K* is *lump of bronze*, conceived, let us say, as a maximal connected aggregate of bronze particles, then there must be just such things. This will be the case if, sometimes, some bronze particles adhere to one another so as to form a maximal connected whole. Well and good: but remember that conceptualism is the doctrine that *all* essences are constituted by concepts. So, in particular, the doctrine must be taken to extend to the essence of *bronze particles* — *what it is* to be a bronze particle. (It must also extend to the essence of the relation of *adherence*, but I won’t dwell on that equally important fact for the moment, for the concept of adherence is not an individuating concept.) Bronze particles, on this view, exist just in case there are some things that possess whatever features we have built into our concept of a bronze particle. However, either the concept of a bronze particle is relevantly similar to that of a lump of bronze, in that it characterizes the nature of such an entity in terms of properties and relations of entities

of other kinds, or it is not. If it is, then the next question is just pushed back one stage. If it is not — and this is the next question — then what *does* it take for the world to contain entities falling under the concept? What, in this case, must *the world* contribute to the fact that entities of this putative kind exist? Since, according to conceptualism, all essences are *constituted* by concepts — where concepts are understood to be ‘ways of conceiving’ deployed by thinkers — the conceptualist cannot suppose that *how the world is*, in respect of *what kinds of entities it contains*, is something that is the case independently of what concepts thinkers deploy. On this view, *what it is* for the world to contain entities of a kind *K* just is for the concept of a *K* to have application, or be applicable. Consequently, an adherent of this view cannot cash out what it is for such a concept *to have application* in terms of there being in the world entities answering to the concept. For, as I say, on this view, there *being in the world* such entities just is a matter of the concept’s ‘having application’. So a quite different understanding of ‘having application’ must at least implicitly be in play.

What is this alternative understanding? I think that it can only be something like this: the concept of a *K* ‘has application’ just in case thinkers find it *useful*, or *convenient*, to conceive of the world as containing *K*s. This may require the concept in question to be logically consistent — thus ruling out, for example, the applicability of such concepts as ‘round square cupola’ — but otherwise the constraints would seem to be purely pragmatic. This, it seems clear, is a deeply anti-realist view. It is a view according to which, in Hilary Putnam’s well-known words, there isn’t a ‘ready-made world’ [Putnam 1983] — or, if you like, there isn’t any truth about ‘what is there *anyway*’, to use Bernard Williams’s equally familiar phrase [Williams 1978, 64]. Or, yet again, it is a view according to which, to employ Michael Dummett’s somewhat less felicitous metaphor, reality is an ‘amorphous lump’ — one that can be ‘sliced up’ in indefinitely many different but equally legitimate ways, depending on what ‘conceptual scheme’ we or other thinkers happen to deploy [Dummett 1981, 563]. It *may* also be the view to which David Wiggins is committed, willy-nilly, by the doctrine that he calls ‘conceptualist realism’ — committed in virtue of the fact that the only notion of *individuation* that he admits is a cognitive one, whereby individuation is a *singling out of objects by thinkers* [Wiggins 2001, 6]. Not only is this view deeply anti-realist: it is also, as I have said, doubtfully coherent. For those who philosophize in these terms rarely stop to think about how their doctrine is supposed to accommodate *thinkers*, their *thoughts*, and the *concepts* that they deploy. For these, too, are putative kinds

of entities, whose essences, according to the conceptualist doctrine, must like all others be constituted by ‘our’ concepts of them. It is at this point that the conceptualist manifestly paints himself into a corner from which there is no escape. There simply is no coherent position to be adopted according to which *all* essences are constituted by concepts, because concepts themselves are either *something or else nothing* — they either exist or they do not. If they don’t, then conceptualism is out of business. But if they do, then they themselves have an essence — *what it is* to be a concept. The conceptualist, to be consistent, must say that the essence of *concepts* is constituted our *concept* of a concept. But what could this *mean*? And what could it mean, according to conceptualism, to say that the concept of a concept ‘has application’ — that *there are* concepts? I don’t believe that conceptualism has any intelligible answer to such questions. The lesson, I take it, is that at least *some* essences must be mind-independent, in a way that conceptualism denies. Serious essentialism, as I call it, is my attempt to provide such an account of essence.

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