

## 7 Philosophical implications

### 7.1 The nature of metaphysics

- Criteria for comparing metaphysical schemes:
  - The total world-picture must be considered, and the metaphysical system as a whole.
  - It must be assessed for its range, simplicity and overall coherence in contrast with competing systems, and its capacity for resolving their difficulties.
- The new essentialism develops a pre-modern<sup>6</sup> Aristotelian paradigm.

Many changes arise from the view that the world consists of intrinsically active, rather than inherently passive things. Contrasting the 'logical analysis' of Humeanism (below), essentialism embodies a different programme of analysis ('realistic analysis'), with different views on

- The aim and structure of physical theory.
- The concepts of causation and laws of nature.
- The necessary and the possible.
- The nature of logic.

### 7.2 Logical analysis

**Logical analysis** seeks to resolve philosophical disputes through the clarification of language, restating a philosophical problem in precise logical terminology, in the effort to uncover its solution.

Humeanism supports this approach to philosophical problems by encouraging philosophers to view the world as 'a totality of self-contained logically independent facts':

- i. **The passivity of nature**, ie. nature is intrinsically powerless.
- ii. **Local supervenience**, ie. what exists at any one place or time must be independent of what exists at any other place or time.

The logical analyst must specify the realistic truth conditions for many different kinds of propositions held to be true or false, including statements of laws and causal connections, subject to the constraints of **extensionality** and the **requirement of realism**:

- i. Analysts must develop a **non-modal (extensional) language** fit for describing the world.
  - The terms of an extensional language refer to things in a specific domain; its predicates refer to sets of things in this domain.
  - Reference to natural kinds or natural properties is precluded. Such languages are non-extensional.
- ii. Analysts should formulate a **correspondence theory** of truth to explain what *makes* any true statement that can be expressed in this language true.
  - The truth-makers should inhabit a domain of things we believe in.

#### ▪ Possible worlds analysis

Possible-worlds analysis is commonly employed, but can only be ultimately satisfactory to modal realists. Otherwise, propositions about possible worlds must also be analysed. The primary

---

<sup>6</sup> More specifically, before the scientific revolution.

motivation for modal realism is to give truth conditions for modals and conditionals, because otherwise (for the Humean) there 'would not be enough reality to go around'.

The essentialist has reason to be suspicious of this programme. It is both Humean and nominalistic: properties, relations and kinds of substances are identified with their extensions, as if the world consisted just of sets of individuals *a la* Quine.

#### ▪ **Realistic analysis**

The essentialist must construct an alternate programme of 'realistic analysis' (see 7.5 below), using an ontology that includes

- natural kinds of objects and processes,
- dispositional properties.

### **7.3 Necessities and possibilities**

#### ▪ Essentialists are **modal realists**:

- What is *possible* is what is compatible with the *natures* of things in this world.
- Real necessities and possibilities are grounded in the actual world, not in relationships between this world and an ensemble of other worlds.

Essentialist modal semantics do not require the 'elaborate paraphernalia' of possible worlds, counterparts in possible worlds, similarity relationships with possible worlds, ....

#### ▪ The high price of realism

The essentialist, unlike the Humean, may not allow his imagination 'free reign in the construction of metaphysically possible worlds'.

- The methodology of testing philosophical positions using imaginatively constructed but scientifically implausible scenarios is unacceptable.
- In the essential world, things can no longer be treated as 'loose and separate', and imagination cannot be considered a reliable source of information about real possibilities.

For the essentialist, it is harder to evaluate conditions and counterfactuals.

- We must distinguish between **real** and **epistemic possibility**.
- If we have no reason to think its antecedent impossible, the conditional describes an *epistemic* possibility. *Real* possibility, however, may often be much harder to determine.

This generates a problem of knowledge: how can we know that a given counter-factual is not just vacuously true? Suppose many commonplace counterfactuals should turn out to be vacuous...

Ellis suggests the important question concerning counterfactuals and some conditionals may be whether or not they are *assertable*: it may not be possible to fulfil the conditional, but it may nonetheless convey relevant information about the dispositional properties of its subject.

- Eg. 'If there were a beer in front of me, then I should drink it'. Perhaps the antecedent is not possible, but it conveys certain information clearly and precisely.

### **7.4 The problem of induction**

For the Humean, since events are 'loose and separate', it is difficult to justify (scientific) inferences from observations made locally to what is true universally.

For essentialists, the **problem of induction** reduces to a matter of discovering the essential natures of things, which determine how they are disposed to behave. Essentialism favours uniformity.

- A transmuted scepticism

The question of how natural kinds are to be identified and their essential natures determined belong to the category of 'doubts and concerns that scientists are accustomed to, and know how to handle', rather than the 'irresolvable sceptical doubts' of the Humean.

- No new problem of induction

There is no 'grue' problem for essentialists. The date-dependent properties posited by Nelson Goodman do not qualify as essential properties, from which the laws of nature arise.

## 7.5 The programme of realistic analysis

Ellis suggests that the new essentialism will compel contemporary philosophy of change direction.

- 'It must focus on reality, rather than on language or the visual image'.
- The important modalities are real possibilities and necessities, not counterpart epistemic concepts.
- Philosophers must carefully distinguish semantic, epistemic and ontological issues: there are many truths that are synthetic (not analytic), necessary and *a posteriori* (established empirically).
- Analyses must keep track of fundamental *distinctions* running throughout reality between (1) *kinds* of objects, properties, and processes, (2) their instantiations, and (3) their metaphysical interconnections.

Philosophers must distinguish:

- ✓ Properties and predicates.
- ✓ Natural kinds and arbitrary classes.
- ✓ Species and instances.
- ✓ Causal processes and mere sequences of events.
- ✓ Essential and accidental properties.

## 7.6 The philosophy of mind

Wilfrid Sellars distinguished two pictures of reality:

- i. The **manifest image**, deriving from common experience and critical reflection on that experience.
- ii. The **scientific image**, the view of reality derived from the sciences, when construed realistically.

The two images contrast strikingly in their representation of humanity.

- **The dualist solution**

17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers compartmentalised the world into mental and physical components. The object of science was the physical world rather than the world of our experience.

It proved difficult to relate the two worlds, precipitating a problem of interaction (how mental events can produce physical events, and vice versa).

Dualism is widely regarded as unacceptable.

## ▪ **Rebooting the scientific image**

However, the scientific image is also unacceptable: it is Humean and has no place for the human qualities and capacities that inform the manifest image.

- eg. capacities pertaining to rational agency
- eg. consciousness.

For the essentialist, the scientific image needs rebuilding: what is often called the scientific image is really stuck in the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries and portrays and impoverished picture of passive nature.

New essentialism aims to reshape the scientific image and bring the manifest and scientific images closer together.

## ▪ **Causal powers vs. regularities**

For the Humean, a case of causation is an instance of a universal generalisation, and the agent is cast as a spectator.

For the essentialist, all effects are displays of causal powers, and everything is an agent of some kind with causal powers.

- Simple things have fixed causal powers.
- More complex things have *variable* causal powers (variable natural kinds), gaining or losing causal powers according to circumstance (eg. a piece of iron can become magnetised).
- Some complex things have the power to change the dispositional properties of other things (eg. a bar magnet can magnetise a piece of iron).
- Some complex things have meta-powers to change their own causal powers (perhaps humans and members of other advanced species).

Human deliberation and action may be explicable in terms of such meta-powers.

## **8 Wider implications**

Ellis traces out some of the broader implications of essentialism for philosophy and the social sciences. We shall not discuss them in this outline.