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Who, What, and Other Essential Questions

by DANIEL COHEN

In one form or another, the philosophical problem of essences has been the vehicle for many of the recent efforts to transcend the fragmentation that has characterized the philosophical community in this century. Generally, these attempts have taken the form of seeking a common ground in the various critiques of that notion. For the most part, the efforts have been far from successful: the only real change has been that “essentialist” is regaining favor as an epithet for Post-Modernists to hurl at Modernists and with which Continental philosophers stigmatize the Analytic tradition. (“Logocentric” is still very much au courant; “obscurantist” remains the pejorative term of choice in the other direction.) Even so, abuse can be counted a kind of dialogue, so perhaps this is an advance over the silence of mutual nonrecognition.

There is more to this than just the disparaging transformation of a venerable philosophical tradition. It is remarkable that this should be occurring right now because recent and exciting work in the area promises permanently and radically to transform discussions of essentialism. There is, to begin, the rigorous application of the semantics of modal logics to the language of essentialism. The essential is that which needs to be known in order to understand the thing as it truly is. The essential, then, is simultaneously the knowable, the unchanging, the necessary, and the important. What the progress in formal semantics has provided is the means for identifying and isolating the seminal concept of necessity. However separable it may be, it should be kept in mind that necessity is but one of the component strands in the welter of concepts that have accumulated around the notion of essence.

Its logical elegance and creativity notwithstanding, the work in formal semantics becomes appreciably relevant only after interpretation and application. The language of “rigid designators” and “transworld identities” may well provide a means of coherent expression for and interpretation of ascriptions of essential properties, but it does so at a cost. It radically separates the purely logical and the value-theoretic dimensions of the problems. In short, the logico-conceptual analysis of necessity as applied to the notion of identity in order to render the discourse of essentialism intelligible ironically undermines that discourse. What it is that makes the concept of identity philosophically important is disengaged from the framework of necessity within which essentialism operates. The result is a coherent, but unimportant, theory. The principal motivation for essentialism is completely obviated!

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§1. Historical Context. The concept of essence has had a long and variegated career as part of the philosophical discussion, beginning with Aristotle’s arguments for immanent rather than transcendent forms. Since the present concept has been formed and transformed by its history, some comments on that history are in order. Above all else, and despite the fact that it has meant different things to different philosophers, there has always been a certain unifying thread, a commonality of purpose, to essentialisms. Whenever essences have been invoked, and no matter how they have been characterized, it has been part of the effort to identify what is really important about something.

Virtually all of the essential ingredients for philosophical speculation on essences are already present in Aristotelian thought, the locus classicus for the concept. The essence is variously described as the proper object of scientific investigation, the necessary condition for a thing’s being what it is, the ultimate truth about an object, and that which survives all change. That is, Aristotle locates the concept at the critical juncture of metaphysical, epistemological, logical, and ethical avenues of enquiry.

The lines of thought leading to essences are not entirely independent of one another. Metaphysical ultimacy, for example, can be used to define or ground what must be, what ought to be, and what can be known. Similarly, one might attempt, in either an empiricist or a Kantian Idealist manner, to determine what is from what can be known. By and large, the history of philosophy is a history of first philosophy, a history of different starting points, and this is at least as true of the essentialist conversation. Each thread in the tapestry takes its turn at the center of the warp.

Aristotle anoints metaphysics as first philosophy, but care needs to be taken in the sort of priority that it is accorded. Certainly the science of being qua being is inclusive of the special sciences. It is also propaedeutic for them, however, so there is a sense in which science is the final cause, so to speak, of metaphysics. Aristotle’s characteristic appreciation of knowledge for its own sake does not discriminate between metaphysics and physics. This is also suggested by Aristotle’s offering a criterion for identifying the essence, that is, for using the notion in science. The essence is the constant that survives all change, i.e., it is that which cannot change without a change in what the substance is. Or, what amounts to the same thing, any “change” that involves the essence is more accurately described as a case of annihilation (of what was) and creation (of something entirely new in its stead). Essential properties, therefore, are the necessary and defining characteristics of an object.

In Aristotelian thought the correlative concept to essence is accident. Accidental properties can change over time without changing the essential identity of the thing in question. A leaf may change its color without thereby becoming a different leaf, or else a different thing altogether. It is still the same leaf; it is still the same thing. If it somehow becomes a dog, it would not really be “it” that

1. Aristotle’s ousia and to it on einai have both been translated as “essence” at times. Some relevant accounts of the concept in question can be found in Posterior Analytics (I,4), Physics (II, 3 and V, 1), and Metaphysics (V, 30).
became the dog. The implicit message is that essence is a concept that is actually doing scientific duty.

Thomas Aquinas made two appreciable contributions to thinking about essences. First, there is a sense in which his discussions were more purely metaphysical. Eventual "scientific" application, for example, does not enter the picture. Significantly, the correlative concept to essence is not accident but rather the very act of being, a wholly metaphysical dichotomy. Metaphysics remains "first philosophy" insofar as it is the general framework for all philosophical discussion. Further, what metaphysics has to offer is the highest product of unaided human reason: natural theology. On the other hand, natural theology is necessarily incomplete. Revelation, the basis for theology proper, is higher still. The final cause of metaphysical speculation is theology, knowledge of the divine essence—which is Being itself. Thus, there is a second notable shift: Aquinas proposes a devaluation of essence. Existence is prior to essence. The fact that something is takes precedence over what it is. If existence is not yet somehow more important than essence, the groundwork is at least in place for the eventual existential devaluation of essence.

The change from essence as a central notion of a metaphysics that provides the framework for scientific knowledge to essence as a central notion of a metaphysics that culminates in natural theological knowledge was eclipsed by the change wrought by Descartes. Metaphysics is dethroned altogether from its position as "first philosophy" and epistemology assumes that role in the modern era. The priority of epistemology in Cartesian thought is manifest, although he does not go so far as to assert that the capacities and limitations of human knowledge ultimately determine what really is (others have been decidedly less hesitant). Epistemological considerations determine Descartes' philosophical methodology, which in turn sets the rest of the philosophical agenda. The criterion for identifying the essence, for example, is transformed. Aristotle's notion of the essence as that which remains constant through change is set aside in favor of the more epistemological characterization as that by which something is known. This is the point of the wax example in the second Meditation. The fact that is being emphasized about the reality that survives all changes is that, above all else, it is something knowable—even though all the information that our senses give us may be irrelevant. The correlative concept to essence, therefore, would properly be "appearance" or, perhaps, "falsity."

In some ways, then, the Cartesian revolution in philosophy was more of a counterrevolution, a return to a more Aristotelian essentialism. Essences are restored to their position of priority as the ultimate truth—and the important truth—about an object. Consider, for example, the Cartesian definition of the self

2. Aristotle's famous dictum opening his Metaphysics is, "All men by nature desire to know" (Metaphysics, Book I). Aquinas' echo reveals the shift: "The natural desire to know cannot be stifled until we know the first cause, not in any sort of way, but in its essence. Now the first cause is God. Therefore the final end of the rational creature is the vision of the divine essence" (Compendium theologiae, 104).

3. Descartes often reverts to the Aristotelian and Thomistic conceptions of essence. E.g., in the first part of the Reply to the Fourth Set of Objections, he characterizes the essence, using the philosophical idioms of the objectors, as that without which a thing cannot still exist, Philosophical Works of Descartes, Vol. II, ed. Haldane and Ross, (Cambridge: Dover, 1955), 97.
as *res cogitans*—which echoes Aristotle’s own definition of humanity as rational animality. The difference is that the Cartesian framework reifies the human essence as a *separate* substance, and it is precisely this that is identified as the source of human dignity. The essence of a thinking thing is understood as being quite literally not part of the mundane world of matter.

For all that it is a noble and praiseworthy enterprise, it is probably a mistake to read Descartes as proposing a dualistic metaphysics in order to establish a place for human dignity in a world otherwise without value. That was undoubtedly often the goal of later Cartesians, but the reverse provides a better reading of Descartes himself: the bifurcation of being was an attempt to secure an area of investigation unencumbered with the effects of an active, effective, and free will, i.e., a world whose purely physical phenomena are subject to purely physical explanations. And even in this, epistemological considerations provide the foundations. The essence of the physical world is first and foremost knowable, and what is important about the world is that it can be known. Knowing defines the world and our place in it. Essences remain at the center of philosophy, and philosophy remains at the center of human existence.

§2. Contemporary Alternatives—I: Logic. The Cartesian tradition of epistemological foundationalism that defined the philosophical agenda for the next several centuries is characterized by assumptions on two levels: first, it is epistemology that properly fills the role of “first philosophy” by providing the foundations for the rest, and, second, within epistemology, knowledge itself must have foundations. So, for examples, both Descartes, with his notion of clear and distinct thoughts, as well as the entire empiricist distributary, with its notion of an indubitably given content of sensation, fall within this tradition. But also both Kant’s removal of the essential (now *qua* noumenal) from the realm of the epistemically accessible, and Husserl’s phenomenological attempt at recovering it, can be counted as variations on the same general theme.

The past century and a half has witnessed any number of attempts at dislodging epistemology from the “center” of all intellectual endeavor. We have been told that the key to all knowledge and understanding is to be found in the principles of human psychology. Or in the economic class conditions that determine all social consciousness. Or through the sociology of knowledge. Or as a product of evolutionary biology. Almost every discipline has staked its claim. Separately and together, three claimants in particular—Logic, Ethics, and, after a fashion, Literary Criticism—have had profound impact on the evolving concept of essence, its role in philosophical speculation, and on the role and nature of philosophy itself.

The profoundest exposition of the “logocentric” vision is certainly Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In it conclusions are drawn about the necessary and categorical structure of reality from just the bare possibility of truthful assertion. There is an underlying structure to language. The development of an artificial, rigorous, formal language is part of the project of discovering and revealing the internal logic that defines language’s essence. The
assumption is that there is such an essence, and, not surprisingly, one is found: the truth-functional logic of propositions. The “linguistic turn” is more than the simple methodological choice of analysis for philosophy; it also manifests an understanding of philosophical problems as essentially logico-linguistic phenomena.

The Tractatus, because of its methodology, its conclusions, and its ethereal abstractness (and maybe some of its circular orbits), represents the quintessentially essentialist philosophy. There is an essence to language, an essence to the world, and they are essentially the same. Two pieces are missing, however, that have always preoccupied the classical tradition of essentialism: change and the soul.

The deep logical structures of language and of the world are presented as necessary and permanent fixtures. Without an identity between them it would be impossible to provide the kind of correspondence that grounds the truth of a sentence. But this structural identity presupposes more than simply a static structure: there must also be a permanent and unchanging supply of elements to actualize the real from among the structure’s inherent possibilities. Variation involves the relations among objects, not the objects themselves. “Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and stable.”

Change is simply a permutation of constant elements.

Does this mean, in less abstract application, that there must be such things as a well-defined human essence, immutable essences to being-female and being-male, or a distinct and definable concept of what it is to be rational or moral, black or white, gay or straight, Christian, Moslem, or Jewish, or French, German, American, African, or Asian? In theory, no, although most of the relevant philosophical discussion seems to have assumed as much. Aristotle, for example, thought of the essence as the real definition of the thing. On the one hand, there is one and only one real and correct answer to the question “What is it?” Although “human,” “American,” “Mainer,” “parent,” and “philosopher,” as well as “mammal,” “animal,” and “physical object” might all apply to one and the same individual, the Aristotelian view would single one out as the real answer. On the other, even when the question is changed to “What is x?” where x can be human or American or male, there is still only one real answer.

The analytic-linguistic concept of essence need not make this assumption. Locke noted that properly speaking it is words, not objects, that have definitions.

Modern philosophers can concentrate on the more manageable problems surrounding the “nominal” essences of words, leaving the “real” essences of things to Scholastics and Phenomenologists. Nevertheless, the immutability of definitions managed to survive the shift from nominal to real essences. In general, essentialists with respect to the underlying logic seem simply to have assumed fixed meanings for words. It was no accident that Wittgenstein’s later conversion to a more dynamic account of (word) meaning was presented within the context of

5. In Quine’s famous dictum from “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”: “Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word” (reprinted, inter alia, in From a Logical Point of View, 1953).
a wider retreat from the idea of a fixed framework for all possible representation. (Indeed, the very idea that representation is the essential business of language, or that language even has an essential business, is also jettisoned.)

What about the soul, the real essence of the individual? Following Wittgenstein’s counsel (but not his practice), analytic philosophy has largely shied away from such talk—but not for Wittgensteinian reasons. Talk of the soul is not subject to precise formalization in a first-order formal theory. Apparently, it can be approached only through narrative and metaphor. On the Tractarian account of language, however, metaphor is a second-class citizen. At best, it is a poor alternative to legitimate, “scientific” expression. At worst, it is entirely excluded from the realm of sensible discourse. If there is something really being said at all, it can be said precisely and literally.

[Wittgenstein’s own reasons for declaring talk of the soul out-of-bounds have more to do with his sense of the limitations of scientific discourse than with hostility to other modes. His is the awed silence of the mystic before the ineffable, not the impatience of the positivist towards “soft-headed” philosophizing. The soul provides the necessary referent point for the projection of symbols onto states of affairs. That is, it is no less necessary than logic itself as a precondition for any representation and, therefore, truth. It is presupposed by any talk about the world. It is something that is neither part of the world nor represented in the language that is used to describe the world, being prior to both.]

The effect of all this was a separation of the notions of necessity and importance, which in turn became an integral part of the “Ideal Language Program” in philosophy—the project of defining the conditions for sensible discourse with the implicit assumption that this will provide a framework within which genuine, solvable philosophical problems might arise. Questions about the soul are manifestly unsolvable; questions about the logic of necessity are not—especially if the only kind of necessity that is recognized is logical necessity.

This is explicit in Saul Kripke’s revival of essentialism in the rigorously formal context of modal logics. “Important properties of an object need not be essential” (his emphasis). The reverse is also the case. Essential features, i.e., those necessary for the object’s being what it is, are not always all that important. Could this desk have been made of oak instead of pine? Could I have had a different maternal grandfather? No, in both cases. Certainly there could have been an oak desk here, even one that looked for all the world like this pine one, but it would not have been this desk. Even if there could have been someone else just like me, but with a different ancestry, he would have been just that: someone else. It is, surprisingly, a necessary truth (but not an a priori one!) that this desk is made of pine, provided only that it is in fact made of pine. Necessity is everywhere.

6. See Wittgenstein’s (in-)famous remarks about “the Mystical” at Tractatus, 6.4–7.
8. Kripke’s examples of necessary properties concern the substance of an object and its origins. If it were not made of wood, it would not have been this very desk; with a different set of parents, I would not have been me. The most explicit discussion of this is in the extended footnotes beginning on p. 114.
Kripke’s point is that proper names, natural kinds, and even definite descriptions all have, at times, a purely referential use. And, when they are used that way, the thing referred to is not being identified by any of its properties. In the Fregean vocabulary, sense still determines reference, but reference does not presuppose that there be a definite set (or even indefinite “cluster”) of properties constituting an accompanying sense. Kripke’s revival of essentialism, then, is a move away from nominal essences and a return to real essences (including, not incidentally, an affirmation of the soul, a.k.a. the mind). This is a move that becomes possible only after abandoning the idea that the essential business of language is describing the world. Language refers, as well as describes, and reference is one way of getting at the essence. Substance and origins are, on this view, “really” essential insofar as they are necessary, and insofar as the thing itself is referred to and not merely described. The concept that is correlative to the essential, then, is the contingent. Importance is an altogether separate question.

§3. Contemporary Alternatives—II: Post-Modern Anti-Essentialism. If Kripke represents the culmination of analytic and essentialist philosophy of language, then perhaps Jacques Derrida can be regarded as the champion of the opposite extreme. Where Kripke sees real subjects, Derrida sees differences. Where Kripke sees unrecognized necessity, Derrida sees radical contingency.

Deconstructionism presents itself not as a philosophical theory as such but as an anti-theory, a new approach to the interpretation of texts. No “first philosophy” is proposed to succeed metaphysics, epistemology, and logic at the center of the philosophical enterprise. Instead, the absence of foundations is, as it were, central to the methodology: Derrida’s approach “makes the philosophical or epistemological requirement of a center appear as mythological, that is to say, as a historical illusion.”9 Deconstructionism, then, would like to be characterized as a “rupture” in the Western tradition, an anti-metaphysics to parallel death-of-God theology or physics without absolutes. Specifically, metaphysical realism, the metaphysics of “presence,” is cast aside. The phenomenal manifold is approached as a text to interpret, not a world to describe. This does mark a significant, albeit not unprecedented, change: texts are subject to multiple interpretations; a world suggests a single true description.

In effect, what this signifies is the emergence of literary criticism as the successor “first philosophy.” If everything is a text, physics and philosophy alike, then it is the tools of textual criticism that we should grasp. The old formula was that nothing can be known until the nature of knowing is known. Its Post-Modern guise can be read as substituting “interpreted” and “interpretation” for “known” and “knowing.”10 The difference, again, is the acknowledged pluralism of interpretation.

The liberation of philosophy from positivistic constraints on “sensible discourse” endorses, even celebrates, the free play of metaphor. Rather than being

10. As a preface to the essay entitled “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida offers Montaigne’s epigram, “We need to interpret interpretation more than to interpret things,” op. cit., p. 278.
regarded as a derivative mode of discourse to be used only when all else fails or until more exact technical vocabularies and locutions appear, metaphor assumes for philosophy the pride of place it has always had in more literary contexts. Metaphor is even seen as prior, in a sense, to literal discourse and neither derivative, dependent, nor deviant. It is ineliminably part of human language, and that is desirable.

What metaphors lack (better: “The absence they affirm . . .” since “lack” might be taken as implicating the entire logos-centric theologic-metaphysics of presence) is a pre-existent essence. At any rate, the essence of all language that is demanded by realist semantics—the correspondence theory of truth—certainly does not apply. The use and interpretation of metaphors is an art, not an exact science.11

What metaphors provide is a vehicle for exploring the deepest notions of the self. It is a mistake to label metaphors as true or false. Instead, they can be better or worse, or more or less insightful and appropriate, but not simply true or false. This befits the proper study of philosophers which, following both Socratic and Alexander Pope’s dicta, is ourselves. The “possibility that one among endless true descriptions of me tells me who I am”12 is consequent to semantic realism, but this is a pipe dream, given the vast range of equally true descriptions. The quest, instead, is an open-ended one, forever seeking new, more vital metaphorical accounts of what it is to be human.

§4. Neo-Pragmatism as “Liberation Philosophy.” There are obvious difficulties inherent in trying to argue with anyone who refuses to acknowledge the validity of argumentation. Logical reasons get no hearing in the court of the anti-rational.13 Still, there are viable strategies that have been used in order to engage Post-Modernist thinkers in “serious” dialogue (i.e., discourse that is not merely ungrounded “play” among free-floating “signifiers”). Even if there are no ultimates, neither transcendental nor immanent truth, there remains the need to live in the world (even if there is no such thing as “the world”). Once again, “Nature confutes the sceptics.”14

The heart of one criticism of radical anti-essentialism is that it has unacceptable social and political consequences. Neither the internal logic nor any empirical claims are challenged. Instead, it is argued that the effect of such a thoroughgoing nihilism which refuses to “privilege” anything is reactionary. On the one hand, once Western capitalist and democratic society is no longer seen as the unique product of the Enlightenment, a healthy cultural pluralism ought to appear.

11. Perhaps this is why Derrida explicitly excludes mathematical discourse from some of the things he has to say about language. Apparently, everything is a text except “purely formal” ones, which need no interpretation. See, for example, comments in Margins of Philosophy, tr. A. Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 227.
12. Richard Rorty, quoting Stanley Cavell, uses this line of thinking to advocate the view that philosophy is indeed a “literary genre” and ought to be understood as such, “The Fate of Philosophy,” Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982).
14. The quotation is from Pascal. It continues “... and reason confutes the dogmatists,” Pensées, #434.
However, it is equally true that if no reasons can be given defending the status quo, neither can there be any compelling reasons to change things. Oppression and exploitation, inequality and injustice, enter our lives without waiting for grounded permission to label them as such. The demands of praxis are not lessened by theoreticians’ ineffectual attempts at justifying them. Post-Modernism stands accused of bourgeois complacency wearing what is really only a thin veil of radicalism.

Rorty’s own version of Neo-Pragmatism, with its pronounced affinities with Post-Modernism, may be particularly susceptible to this sort of response, but the attack is neither unprecedented nor unqualified. Classical Pragmatism elicited a similar response half a century earlier: the Harlem Renaissance critic Alain Locke took John Dewey to task for focusing too narrowly on the “Scientific Method” as the methodology of Pragmatic verification, for “making truth too exclusively a matter of the correct anticipation of experience, of the confirmation of fact. Yet truth may also sometimes be the sustaining of an attitude, the corroboration of a value.” It is not that value judgments can be counted among the truths as much as it is that we need to recognize that truth itself is a “functional value.” Value theory must come first.

Locke’s criticism presages a solution offered by West using resources already internal to the pragmatist tradition:

Despite the limitations, Rorty’s neo-pragmatism can serve as a useful springboard for a more engaged, even subversive, philosophical perspective. This is so primarily because it encourages the cultivation of critical attitudes toward all philosophical traditions. This crucial shift in the subject matter of philosophers from the grounding of beliefs to the scrutiny of groundless traditions—from epistemology to ethics, truth to practices, foundations to consequences—can lend itself to emancipatory ends in that it proposes . . . past and present social orders as central objects of criticism.

The pragmatic evaluation of truths by their consequences should be amended to an evaluation first and foremost by their social consequences.

Although these critiques presuppose a body of ethical judgments, they do not require a complete or articulated framework of ethical theory. It is difficult to imagine how ethics could be a theoretical foundational discipline in the way that epistemology, theology, psychology, sociology or logic were, but it does not have to be. It can serve as either the primary springboard for action or the court of final appeal, and once action replaces theory as the goal, this becomes the “first philosophy.”

§5. Revolution and Resolution. The task for Neo-Pragmatists is to embrace the deconstructionist rejection of early Analytic (i.e., Tractarian and Positivistic) essentialism without thereby embracing a thoroughgoing nihilism or relativism.

15. This line of reasoning forms the gist of Cornel West’s critique of Rorty, “The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism,” Post-Analytic Philosophy, ed. West and Rajchman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985). See also West’s The American Evasion of Philosophy, p. 206. A similar conclusion might be reached by noting that attempts to extract a political philosophy from the imperatives to enable continued discourse will inevitably agree with such Enlightenment values as toleration and free speech.


And indeed this should be possible since neither Locke’s nor West’s analyses involved any overt reference to essences. It is, however, a contribution of late Analytic philosophy that finally makes this possible, viz., the careful separation of necessity and importance in the concept of essence.

One of the striking (and baffling) features of the Tractatus is Wittgenstein’s emphatic, mystical identification of the necessary and the important. Contingent value would not be real value. Logic and ethics are both “transcendental” and ineffable because they are both prerequisites implicit in all representation and judgment. Ultimately, they are one and the same. Wittgenstein’s volte-face, in the Investigations, on logic as the essence of language was not accompanied by a similar rejection of the legitimacy of ethical discourse. Just the contrary, the Investigations is more accommodating, at least insofar as a plurality of self-legitimating language games is recognized. The anti-essentialist broadsides of Wittgenstein’s later writing are directed at the concept of logical necessity, not the question of importance. Only a transcendental valuation—the value that could be identified with transcendental logic—would give pause. Grounded ethics is problematic, if groundness is understood as conferring some sort of ahistorical, universal, or ultimate necessity.

Transcendental values and necessity were not the only things excluded from sensible discourse in the Tractatus. The soul itself was also declared out-of-bounds, and for reasons paralleling those for ethics. Ethical discourse may be a proper subject for psychological, sociological, anthropological, or historical investigation, but insofar as it is characteristically philosophical, it is ineffable. Similarly, insofar as an empirical subject is suitable fare for psychological or sociological enquiry, it is of no philosophical significance. The problem, then, is to reintroduce both subject and value into philosophical discourse without unqualified subjectivity and without recourse to logical necessity. If no selves can be found, then it is our task to construct them. And we do seem to have managed just that. Moreover, the social constructions that are our selves are themselves the ultimate source of value, albeit not a source of ultimate value.

In a recent article Anthony Appiah has offered some insights and helpful perspectives that can be used to weave together many of the issues that have been considered here. Beginning with the question “Could I [Anthony Appiah] have been a woman?” he isolates different concepts of personal identity and the factors that create it. Yes, his parents might have had a girl instead of a boy when he was born. But, no, that girl would not have been him, one and the same metaphysical person—just as Kripke’s desk would not have been the same desk had it been oak instead of pine. In this case, however, there may be a way we can

20. C. L. Stevenson’s “emotivist” account of ethical discourse is positivistically acceptable, being merely empirical descriptions of linguistic practice. It is also an example of the kind of ethics that is philosophically irrelevant by Tractarian lights.
still say yes: a catastrophically botched circumcision might have led to a complete sex-change operation, hormone treatment to effect a semblance of female puberty, and all the socialization that would be given a young girl. In that case, the very same individual who is now Anthony Appiah would have been a woman. That at least would have been her gender, if not her genetic sex.

Appiah’s use of this discussion is, first, to expose a common, unstated analogy between sex and gender, on the one hand, and race and ethnicity, on the other, and, second, to discredit the assumptions made on both sides of the equation. The vehicle for doing so is a distinction between our “metaphysical” and our “ethical” identities. The former may well be ontogenetic, substantial, and necessary, as Kripke proposes, while the latter are merely social constructs that are to some degree contingent, acquired, and mutable. But none of this is to the point when the point is axiological: the ethical identities are the important ones. When the surgically created female Anthony asks herself who and what she is, how should she answer? The “merely” constructed properties now appear as the proper sources of value and the justification for action. These are the properties that are truly essential to who we are—essential in the only sense that is relevant to a pragmatic, action-oriented philosophy. And that, if Locke and Rorty and West can be believed, is the only sort of philosophy that is really relevant to our lives.

23. Unfortunately there has been precedent for this. It is not merely an academic possibility.