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## Book Review: Real Essentialism

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The prolife position, according to the Devines, is that all members of the human community, including the unborn, have inestimable and equal worth and dignity and thus are entitled to the fundamental protection of the laws. "Reducing the number of abortions" could occur in a regime of law in which this principle of justice is denied, and that is the regime that Jaggar and Tooley want to preserve and extend. It is a regime in which the continued existence of the unborn is always at the absolute discretion of others who happen to possess the power to decide to kill them or let them live. Reducing the number of these discretionary acts of killing simply by trying to pacify and/or accommodate the needs of those who want to procure or encourage abortions only reinforces the idea that the unborn are subhuman creatures whose value depends exclusively on someone else's wanting them or deciding that they are worthy of being permitted to live. So, in theory at least, there could be fewer abortions while the culture drifts further away from the prolife perspective and the law becomes increasingly unjust.

There are, of course, other objections one can raise about the arguments and stances presented by these authors. But, in general, this is a well balanced and carefully argued work. Each author defends his or her position with clarity and philosophical rigor. These are four very good philosophers, each of whom has contributed to contemporary philosophy in varied and important ways. Anyone who is interested in applied ethics in general, and how philosophers debate the issue of abortion in particular, should have this book in his or her library.

*Real Essentialism*, by David S. Oderberg. Routledge, 2007. Pp. xiii + 314. \$115.00 (cloth), \$39.95 (paper)

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Recent years have seen a renewed interest in themes from Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics, though for the most part philosophers have skirted around the edges, exploring possible contemporary applications only of certain (seemingly) isolable doctrines—Aristotle's conception of the soul as the form of the body, say, or Aquinas's philosophical theology. David Oderberg's compelling new book *Real Essentialism* goes well beyond such piecemeal retrieval and argues for a wholesale reconsideration of the Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) system. His aim is to lay bare the interconnections between the key A-T concepts—hylomorphism, act and potency, substantial form, prime matter, essence and existence, substance and accident, genus and species, and so forth—to defend them against common misunderstandings and serious criticisms alike, to relate them to current controversies in analytic metaphysics, to apply them to issues in various other areas of philosophy, and to demonstrate their continuing

worthiness of serious consideration. In all of this he succeeds admirably, and even contemporary philosophers skeptical about the very idea of an A-T revival will find that such a sophisticated defense of a metaphysical position so different from those currently on offer repays careful study.

Chapter 1 of the book situates A-T metaphysics within the current debate over essentialism initiated by the work of philosophers like Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam. Essentialism is the very heart of the A-T system, but it is a very different kind of essentialism from the sorts with which most contemporary philosophers are familiar. The A-T essentialist rejects any attempt to define essences in terms of possible worlds, rigid designators, internal structure, and the like. All such contemporary approaches suffer in Oderberg's view from various fatal defects; for instance, their analyses of essence are circular, or implicitly change the subject. But if the A-T position is not that of contemporary "scientific essentialism," neither is it that of Platonic essentialism, removing essences entirely from the natural world. The former view is reductionist, the latter hyper-realist. The A-T middle ground position thus constitutes "real essentialism." It is realist about essences rather than reductionist, but it nevertheless situates essences within the natural order. It regards essences as knowable, but does not claim that this knowledge is in general either complete or achievable *a priori*. It holds that things fall as a matter of objective fact (rather than mere human convention) under classes and that their essences can be captured in what the Scholastics called "real definitions" — definitions, that is to say, not of words but of objects themselves.

In chapter 2, Oderberg rebuts various arguments against essentialism, specifically those deriving from classical empiricism, from Quine's skepticism about *de re* necessity, from Popper's fallibilism, and from Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances. Such arguments, Oderberg holds, tend both to be directed at caricatures of essentialism and to fail even on their own terms. Chapter 3 makes a preliminary positive case for real essentialism, arguing that there is no way to make sense of the unity possessed by things and kinds unless we recognize that they have essences. Along the way Oderberg criticizes conventionalist theories of essence and explains the roles played in our knowledge of essences by both *a priori* and *a posteriori* considerations, as well as by what Putnam calls "stereotypes" or paradigm cases.

Chapter 4 is an extended exposition and defense of the famous A-T doctrine of hylemorphism, which on Oderberg's account provides the "structure of essence." Material things are composites of act and potency (or actuality and potentiality, to use slightly less technical language); more specifically, they are composites of substantial form and prime matter. These notions are defended — unapologetically, in detail, and with reference to the contemporary literature on mereology — against the sorts of objections that have become standard since the time of Descartes, Locke, and the other early modern philosophers. The reality of substance is defended against such alternative positions as trope theory, and the crucial

differences between A-T essentialism and Platonism are developed at greater length.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the relationship between essence, identity, and real definition in terms of genus and specific difference. To the latter, natural science is certainly relevant (though not quite in the way contemporary “internal structure” essentialism supposes) and Twin Earth speculations are not. The traditional approach to taxonomy enshrined in the Porphyrian Tree is upheld and the notion that essence is tied to historical origin (as is suggested by contemporary biological classification informed by evolutionary theory) is rejected. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Oderberg argues vigorously for a return to the traditional idea that metaphysics, though it must always be informed by natural science, is prior to natural science and draws “boundaries beyond which the latter must not stray” (p. 102). The well-known A-T position that matter is the principle of individuation is defended, but it is emphasized that understanding what this claim amounts to is more complicated than is sometimes supposed. For one thing, properly understood, it is fully compatible with the idea that it is form that ultimately determines identity. In general, the A-T approach rejects any account of identity (such as the currently popular four-dimensionalist approach) which supposes that identity can be analyzed in terms that do not presuppose it. We can analyze identity, but only holistically, not reductionistically.

Oderberg begins chapter 6 with a defense of the famous Thomistic doctrine of the real distinction between essence and existence. The implications of this doctrine for our understanding of modality are then explored, its seemingly Platonistic implications are argued to be illusory, and an Aristotelian rather than Platonist approach to mathematical truth in particular is defended. The theory of act and potency is brought to bear on the debate over powers and dispositions within contemporary metaphysics, and it is argued that the richer A-T conceptual apparatus allows it to solve certain problems over which recent writers remain deeply divided. Finally, the idea of laws of nature is examined, and it is argued that they are really laws of the *natures* of concrete objects, and that they hold of metaphysical necessity.

Chapter 7 develops a theme already touched on in earlier chapters, viz. the difference between the contemporary versus the A-T conception of properties. In current philosophical usage, the term “property” tends to be applied indiscriminately to any of a substance’s accidents. For A-T essentialism, by contrast, a thing’s properties are only those accidents which are essential to it. At the same time, its properties do not *constitute* its essence but rather *flow from* its essence, and it is possible for the manifestation of a property or essential accident to be impeded. This allows us to understand the difference between normal and defective instances of a kind. For example, it is true to say that all mammals by nature lactate even though the occasional mutant mammal may fail to do so: lactation flows from the essence of mammality, but its manifestation can be impeded due

to genetic defect, bodily damage, and the like. Similarly, a severely brain damaged human being remains essentially a rational animal even though the manifestation of his rational powers has been impeded. "The implications for ethics," Oderberg notes, "are manifest" (p. 162). The chapter also deals with artifacts—which are not genuine substances from an A-T point of view—and with questions about origin, constitution, and vagueness.

Chapters 8 and 9, which apply real essentialism to issues of biology, may be the most potentially controversial parts of the book. Chapter 8 deals with the essence of life, and finds it in the distinction between immanent and transient causation. Living things are those in which immanent causation is operative, i.e., "causation that begins *with* the agent and terminates *in* the agent for the sake *of* the agent" (p. 180). Living things also exhibit transient causation—causation in which the effect terminates outside the cause itself—but unlike non-living things are not restricted to this sort of causation. Building on this conception, Oderberg criticizes all attempts to explain life mechanistically or to show that life might emerge physico-chemically from non-living phenomena, while also rejecting vitalism as that term is usually understood (the idea of *élan vital*, as a kind of immaterial substance added to matter so as to bring it to life, being a grotesque caricature of the Aristotelian position). He also argues that something like the traditional Aristotelian distinction between vegetative and sentient life is still defensible today, and does so via a fairly extensive consideration of the existing biological data.

Chapter 9 argues that biological essentialism is no less plausible than is essentialism in physics and chemistry (*pace* contemporary scientific essentialists who endorse the latter but shun the former), and defends it against arguments which appeal to a cladistic species concept or to the purported vagueness of species, as well as against various caricatures of the Aristotelian position (e.g., the assumption that it requires constancy of species across time). Real essentialism is not inconsistent with evolution, in Oderberg's view, but it does put metaphysical constraints on what sorts of evolution might have occurred.

Finally, chapter 10 applies the concepts of the preceding chapters to the topic of what it is to be a person. Personal identity is analyzed in hylemorphic terms, with the soul understood as the substantial form of the living human body. Following Aristotle, Oderberg argues that our intellectual powers operate independently of matter; and following Aquinas, he takes this to show that the soul is capable of continuing in existence beyond the death of the body. The resulting position is not Cartesian dualism but what Oderberg calls "hylemorphic dualism."

As this indicates, there is much in *Real Essentialism* that should be of particular interest to philosophers of religion. For example, in the course of the book Oderberg offers brief but substantive treatments of the possibility of arguing from the necessity of mathematical truth to the existence of God; of the compatibility of miracles with the metaphysical necessity of laws of nature; of the consistency of the doctrine of transubstantiation

with an Aristotelian conception of substance and accidents; and of the crucial differences between an Aristotelian approach to biology and the approach associated with “Intelligent Design” theory.

Oderberg’s knowledge of the literature both of contemporary analytic metaphysics and of the A-T tradition is impressive, as is his engagement with the relevant scientific issues. Of course, so extensive a revision of prevailing metaphysical assumptions is bound to be a tough sell; many readers will want especially to hear more about how the A-T view relates to modern Darwinian theory. But there can be no doubt that this learned and rigorous work deserves a wide readership. The recently released (and more reasonably priced) paperback should make that more likely.