

effect must have a cause. But for any particular *event*, we have no reason to believe it has followed necessarily from some cause. Medieval Islamic philosopher al-Ghazali (1058–1111) advanced a similar line (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ‘On Natural Science’, Question 1ff.).

Of course, Spinoza seems to claim that he has grasped the truth of his axioms through a special form of intuition (*scientia intuitiva*), and many philosophers have held that there are ‘basic’ and ‘self-evident’ truths that may serve as axioms in our reasoning. (See 7.1.) But why should we believe them?

In many contexts of rationality, therefore, axioms seem to be a useful device, and axiomatic systems of rationality often serve us well. But the notion that those axioms can be so secure that no rational person could in any context deny them seems to be rather dubious.

SEE ALSO

- 1.1 Arguments, premises and conclusions
- 1.10 Definitions
- 1.12 Tautologies, self-contradictions and the law of non-contradiction
- 7.8 Self-evident truths

READING

- ★ Euclid, *Elements*
- Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*
- Benedictus Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677)

1.10 Definitions

If, somewhere, there lie written on tablets of stone the ten philosophical commandments, you can be sure that numbered among them is the injunction to ‘define your terms’. In fact, definitions are so important in philosophy that some have maintained that definitions are ultimately all there is to the subject.

Definitions are important because without them, it is very easy to argue at cross-purposes or to commit fallacies involving equivocation. As the

experience of attorneys who questioned former US president Bill Clinton show, if you are, for example, to interrogate someone about extramarital sex, you need to define what precisely you mean by 'sex'. Otherwise, much argument down the line, you can bet someone will turn around and say, 'Oh, well, I wasn't counting *that* as sex.' Much of our language is vague and ambiguous, but if we are to discuss matters in as precise a way as possible, as philosophy aims to do, we should remove as much vagueness and ambiguity as possible, and adequate definitions are the perfect tool for helping us do that.

Free trade example

For example, consider the justice of 'free trade'. In doing so, you may define free trade as 'trade that is not hindered by national or international law'. But note that with this rendering you have fixed the definition of free trade for the purposes of your discussion. Others may argue that they have a better, or alternative, definition of free trade. This may lead them to reach different conclusions about its justice. You might respond by adopting the new definition, defending your original definition, or proposing yet another definition. And so it goes. That's why setting out definitions for difficult concepts and reflecting on their implications comprises a great deal of philosophical work.

Again, the reason why it is important to lay out clear definitions for difficult or contentious concepts is that any conclusions you reach properly apply only to those concepts (e.g. 'free trade') *as defined*. A clear definition of how you will use the term thereby both helps and constrains discussion. It helps discussion because it gives a determinate and non-ambiguous meaning to the term. It limits discussion because it means that whatever you conclude does not necessarily apply to other uses of the term. As it turns out, much disagreement in life results from the disagreeing parties, without their realizing it, meaning different things by their terms.

Too narrow or too broad?

That's why it's important to find a definition that does the right kind of work. If one's definition is *too narrow* or idiosyncratic, it may be that one's findings cannot be applied as broadly as could be hoped. For example, if one defines 'man' to mean bearded, human, male adult, one may reach some rather absurd conclusions – for example, that many Native American

males are not men. A tool for criticism results from understanding this problem. In order to show that a philosophical position's use of terms is inadequate because *too narrow*, point to a case that ought to be covered by the definitions it uses but clearly isn't.

If, on the other hand, a definition is *too broad*, it may lead to equally erroneous or misleading conclusions. For example, if you define wrongdoing as 'inflicting suffering or pain upon another person' you would have to count the administering of shots by physicians, the punishment of children and criminals, and the coaching of athletes as instances of wrongdoing. Another way, then, of criticizing someone's position on some philosophical topic is to indicate a case that fits the definition he or she is using but which should clearly not be included under it.

A definition is like a property line; it establishes the limits marking those instances to which it is proper to apply a term and those instances to which it is not. The ideal definition permits application of the term to just those cases to which it should apply – and to no others.

A rule of thumb

It is generally better if your definition corresponds as closely as possible to the way in which the term is ordinarily used in the kinds of debates to which your claims are pertinent. There will be, however, occasions where it is appropriate, even necessary, to coin special uses. This would be the case where the current lexicon is not able to make distinctions that you think are philosophically important. For example, we do not have a term in ordinary language that describes a memory that is not necessarily a memory of something the person having it has experienced. Such a thing would occur, for example, if I could somehow share your memories: I would have a memory-type experience, but this would not be of something that I had actually experienced. To call this a memory would be misleading. For this reason, philosophers have coined the special term 'quasi-memory' (or q-memory) to refer to these hypothetical memory-like experiences.

A long tradition

Historically many philosophical questions are, in effect, quests for adequate definitions. What is knowledge? What is beauty? What is the good? Here, it

is not enough just to say, ‘By knowledge I mean ...’ Rather, the search is for a definition that *best* articulates the concept in question. Much of the philosophical work along these lines has involved conceptual analysis or the attempt to unpack and clarify the meanings of important concepts. What is to count as the best articulation, however, requires a great deal of debate. Indeed, it is a viable philosophical question as to whether such concepts actually can be defined. For many ancient and medieval thinkers (like Plato and Aquinas), formulating adequate definitions meant giving verbal expression to the very ‘essences’ of things – essences that exist independently of us. Many more recent thinkers (like some pragmatists and post-structuralists) have held that definitions are nothing more than conceptual instruments that organize our interactions with each other and the world, but in no way reflect the nature of an independent reality.

Some thinkers have gone so far as to argue that all philosophical puzzles are essentially rooted in a failure to understand how ordinary language functions. While, to be accurate, this involves attending to more than just definitions, it does show just how deep the philosophical preoccupation with getting the language right runs.

SEE ALSO

- 1.9 Axioms
- 3.4 Category mistakes
- 3.9 Criteria

READING

- ★ Plato (c.428–347 BCE), *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, *Theaetetus*, *Symposium*
- J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962)
- Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966)

~~1.11 Certainty and probability~~

~~Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) is famous for claiming he had discovered the bedrock upon which to build a new science that could determine truths with absolute certainty. The bedrock~~

effectively does without the idea of bivalence. At the same time, one of the most lauded books in British philosophy in recent years has been *Vagueness* (1994) by Timothy Williamson, which argues that the principle of bivalence can be preserved, despite its apparently absurd consequences.

While the debate rolls on, one must be sensitive to both sides. In practice, where there is no vagueness in a concept the principle of bivalence is usually accepted by all. But when vague concepts are involved, things are far less clear and a careful path must be trodden.

SEE ALSO

- 1.6 Consistency
- 1.12 Tautologies, self-contradictions and the law of non-contradiction
- 3.9 Criteria

READING

- ★ Bart Kosko, *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* (1993)
- Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (1994)
- Rosanna Keefe, *Theories of Vagueness* (2007)

3.4 Category mistakes

Occasionally, a philosophical tool arrives fully formed, complete with vivid examples and explanations of its use and nature. Such is the case with the category mistake, advanced by Gilbert Ryle (1900–76) in his classic *The Concept of Mind* (1949) perhaps after having been influenced by German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Chapter 1 of that book is the first and often last word about what a category mistake is.

Ryle gives some colourful examples to illustrate the meaning of a category mistake. One is of a foreign tourist who is shown all the colleges, libraries and other buildings of Oxford University but then asks, ‘But where is the university?’ His mistake was to think that the university was itself a building, like the library and colleges, rather than the institution to which all these buildings belonged.

In another example, he talks about a cricket match, where all the players and their roles are described to another hapless foreigner. 'I do not see whose role it is to exercise *esprit de corps*', she says. Her mistake is to think that exercising team spirit is exercising a specific function in the game, rather than being a manner in which specific functions are exercised.

In both these examples, the foreigner has made the mistake of thinking of one kind of thing in the wrong terms. The university has been wrongly categorized by the foreigner as a building, whereas it is in fact an institution. Contributing to team spirit has been wrongly categorized as a specific kind of action, rather than a manner of performing a task or series of actions.

Mind and will examples

Ryle believed that a category mistake lies at the heart of a confusion over the nature of mind. On his view, the mistake made by Descartes, and countless others after him, was to think of mind as if it were a kind of object, rather like a brain, table or flower. Given that this object was clearly not material, in the way that brains, tables or flowers are, it was presumed that it had to be a special kind of object, a ghostly substance of some sort. This, Ryle believed, was a mistake. Mind is not an object at all. Rather, it is a set of capacities and dispositions, all of which can be described without any reference to ghostly substances.

Alleged category mistakes crop up elsewhere in philosophy. Ryle himself also talked about 'the will'. He argued that it was a mistake to think about the will as if it were a distinct part of ourselves, a kind of centre for decision-making where switches are flicked according to whether we choose something or not. The will is not a thing or even a faculty, but shorthand for the manner in which a course of action is undertaken. We act according to or against our will depending on whether we resist or accede to the act, not on whether some part of us comes down one way or another on a decision.

One thing to bear in mind here is that to call something a category *mistake* is to claim that the matter under discussion has been wrongly categorized. Of course, more often than not, it is unclear whether there has been a mistake of this sort or not. Then, we have category *disputes*. For example, is goodness something simple and indefinable, or can it be analysed in terms of other properties such as happiness, freedom from pain and so on? This is a question about whether the good should be categorized as a simple, indefinable property or as a complex, definable one. To say one side in the

dispute has made a category mistake is simply to say that they have wrongly categorized something. But to succeed in this you must, of course, show *how* the categorization is wrong, otherwise all you've done is indicate that you're on one side of a category dispute. You haven't demonstrated that a genuine category mistake has been made. From the fact that a stranger has mistaken the 'university' for a building it does not follow that mind is a set of dispositions.

SEE ALSO

- 1.10 Definitions
- 3.1 Alternative explanations
- 3.7 Conceptual incoherence

READING

- ★ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949)
- A. D. Carstairs, 'Ryle, Hillman and Harrison on Categories', *Mind* 80.319 (1971), 403-8
- Amie L. Thomasson, 'Phenomenology and the Development of Analytic Philosophy', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 40 (2002), Supplement, 115-42.

3.5 *Ceteris paribus*

These two little words can save you a lot of trouble. They mean nothing more technical than 'all other things being equal', but their importance is immense.

Take, for example, a simple thought experiment. Your brain is to be transplanted into another body, taking all your thoughts, memories, personality and so on. We'll call the resulting person 'Yourbrain'. Meanwhile your body will receive the brain of another, and we'll call that person 'Yourbody'. Before this operation takes place, you are asked to sign over all your bank accounts, property deeds and so on to Yourbody or Yourbrain. Assuming that you are acting out of self-interest, which person would you choose?

evidence for performance in the present or future. But why should we accept that principle? Well, because of past experience. But past experience can be considered evidence only if we already accept the principle....

Or, as Hume says, 'probability is founded on the presumption of a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those, of which we have had none; and therefore 'tis impossible this presumption can arise from probability. The same principle cannot be both the cause and effect of another' (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk 1, Pt 3, §6).

About the principle of induction, then, to avoid circularity it is best not to attempt to justify it inductively. The point to note here is that in any circular argument the 'a because b' step almost always needs to be unpacked. If this unpacking shows that the justification relies only on things the argument itself is trying to establish, then the circle is vicious; if it does not, then it's not a circle at all.

SEE ALSO

- 1.12 Tautologies, self-contradictions and the law of non-contradiction
- 3.19 Question-begging
- 3.22 Regresses

READING

- ★ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)
- ★ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40)
- Alan Gewirth, 'The Cartesian Circle', *Philosophical Review* 50 (1941), 368–95
- Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (1971)
- Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. E. LePore (1989), 307–19

3.7 Conceptual incoherence

A friend of ours who teaches English as a foreign language once reported a wonderful question a student put to her. He wanted to know which was the correct sentence: 'I will a banana' or 'I would a banana.' Obviously, the answer came as something of a surprise to the student.

Some questions cannot be answered, or puzzles solved, because they just don't make sense. One can only debate, discuss or investigate possibilities that are, in the first place, coherent. That's why a theory of four-sided triangles would not get very far. The concept of 'four-sided triangle' is incoherent, since it contains a self-contradiction. Once we realize this, we can see that many apparently sensible philosophical questions about four-sided triangles are really red herrings. (It doesn't quite mean that all such questions are ruled out. For example, you might want to think about the relationship of logically incoherent concepts to other abstractions or impossibilities. You might even consider whether incoherent 'concepts' can be concepts at all.)

Woman's true nature example

Not all instances of logical incoherence are as obvious as four-sided triangles. Janet Radcliffe Richards, in her *The Skeptical Feminist*, presents a fine example of a subtler form of incoherence. Her subject is the nature of women and she considers how the environment in which a woman grows up and lives affects her nature. What is clear is that the environment does have an effect on how women think and behave. But, she argues, it is a mistake to believe that in such circumstances, we see women as they are not, and that if we were to take away these influences, we would find women as they really are. Such a view rests on an assumption that something's true nature is how that thing is in its 'true' environment, or, even worse, in no environment at all.

Both these views suffer from conceptual incoherence. In the second case, it is obvious that all things have to be in some environment or another. Even a vacuum is an environment. So, to say that something's true nature is revealed only when it is examined in no environment at all is incoherent, because nothing could ever possibly be in such a situation.

It is also, according to Radcliffe Richards, incoherent to think that something's real nature is revealed when it is in its correct environment. First of all, the whole notion of a 'correct environment' is problematic. Isn't the notion of what is correct relative to various concerns? The correct environment for a salmon when cooking one is perhaps a heated oven. The correct environment for its spawning is something else again.

But more importantly, to know something's nature is to know how it is in a *variety* of environments. Iron's nature, for example, is most fully understood

if we know how it behaves when it is hot, cold, smashed, left in water and so on. Knowing how iron behaves when left in conditions optimal to its continued, unchanged existence only gives a partial view of its nature.

Radcliffe Richards's critique shows us that there is something incoherent in the concept of something's true nature being revealed by a lack of, or by a single, optimal environment. It is a concept that, once examined, just doesn't stand up. At first glance, it seems to make sense, but once we look more closely, we can see that it does not.

Incoherence vs. confusion

There remains, however, a question mark over whether instances such as this should be described as literally incoherent or just plain confused. Some might argue that only concepts that contain within them *contradictions* should be called incoherent. In Radcliffe Richards's example, we might argue that there are no formal contradictions: it is just that on any sensible understanding of what 'true', 'nature' and 'environment' mean, no gloss of 'true nature' in these terms is credible. We might then prefer to talk about 'conceptual confusion' rather than incoherence. Being careful with our words in this way has much to commend it. Nevertheless, in both cases, the force of the critique is very strong. Be the concepts incoherent or confused, they're still not of much use to the careful philosopher. A sewer by any other name smells just as bad.

SEE ALSO

- 1.12 Tautologies, self-contradictions and the law of non-contradiction
- 6.4 Feminist critique
- 7.5 Paradoxes

READING

- ★ Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Skeptical Feminist* (1980)
- ★ Robert J. Gula, *Nonsense: Red Herrings, Straw Men, and Sacred Cows: How We Abuse Logic in our Everyday Language* (2002)
- ★ D. Q. McInerny, *Being Logical: A Guide to Good Thinking* (2005)

Salamis in 480 BCE). Most of us would say that the statement was on that evening either true or false. But here's the rub: if that statement was either true or false before the battle occurred, then it seems that the future was (and is!) already necessary and determined. This seems an intolerable conclusion for many to draw. One way to preserve the contingency of the future, of course, is to hold that our claims about the future are neither true nor false until the events they predict actually occur, but such an option seems to many equally intolerable. Refusing to assert the truth or falsehood of statements about the future seems not only practically impossible (we wouldn't be able to say that it is true that someone will keep a promise or be there at an appointment); it also seems to violate one of the fundamental principles of rationality – the law of excluded middle – which holds that a statement must be either true or false, but not some third alternative (see 3.3).

You can see that even though things looked pretty simple at the outset, there's a lot going on with these concepts. Although the distinction between the necessary and the contingent has its roots in common sense, you can be sure that in the hands of philosophers it becomes something much more extraordinary.

SEE ALSO

- 4.1 *A priori/a posteriori*
- 4.3 Analytic/synthetic
- 4.4 Categorical/modal
- 4.13 Necessary/sufficient

READING

Aristotle, *On Interpretation* Ch. 9 (fourth century BCE)
Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (1974)
Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (1980)

4.13 Necessary/sufficient

What does it mean to be a person? When do you have knowledge, rather than mere opinion or belief? These are two major questions in philosophy.

Answers to them often set out what the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person or having knowledge are. Sufficient conditions are what is *enough* for something to be the case. Necessary conditions are what is *required* for something to be the case.

We can see the differences and relations between them by considering a few everyday examples.

Being a UK citizen is a necessary condition for becoming the prime minister, but it is not sufficient. It is required of the prime minister that he or she be a UK citizen, but if this condition is satisfied other conditions still need to be met to hold the office, among which are winning a number of elections.

Investing an enormous sum of money in the country and lacking a criminal record are sufficient conditions for gaining a US green card, but they are not necessary conditions. This is because there are other ways of gaining green cards, such as being the spouse of a US citizen, or having certain skills deemed important by the US government.

One or many, joint or separate

Conditions may be singular or plural, and some conditions may be both necessary and sufficient. Being composed of H_2O is a necessary *and* sufficient condition for something being water. Something must be H_2O to be water (*pace* Hilary Putnam, see 2.9), and if it is nothing but H_2O that is sufficient to make it water – no other conditions apply. But to be ice, a substance must both be H_2O *and* at less than $0^\circ C$ in normal atmospheric conditions, or the equivalent. These two conditions – of atomic structure and temperature – form the *set* of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be ice.

Application in definition

Specifying sets of necessary and sufficient conditions is a common philosophical method of defining a concept. For instance, it has been suggested that the necessary and sufficient conditions for ‘knowing that X’ are that (1) you believe that X, (2) you are justified in that belief and (3) X is true. To have knowledge you need all three components. Hence each condition *separately* is a *necessary* condition, though *together* they form the *sufficient* conditions for knowledge. This set of three, then, comprises both the necessary and sufficient conditions for ‘knowing that’ something is the case.

Concerning the issue of personal identity, there are several competing accounts of the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a person at one time to be the same person at another. Some claim that a form of psychological continuity is necessary and sufficient. On this view, just as long as enough memory, beliefs and character continue to exist, so a person continues to exist. Others argue that this is necessary, but not sufficient, since you also need to be physically continuous: unless your body (or at least your brain) continues to exist, no amount of psychological continuity is enough for you to survive. The set of necessary and sufficient conditions for personal identity includes, therefore, both physical and psychological continuity. Yet others claim physical continuity alone is necessary and sufficient.

But there are some philosophers who would reject the whole model of necessary and sufficient conditions, at least for some areas of inquiry. Wittgenstein thought it would be nonsense to seek necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be, for example, a game. Many things are games and what they have in common cannot be specified by a set of conditions but is, rather, a kind of 'family resemblance'. The rules that govern the correct application of the use of any word, including concepts like 'knowledge' or 'person', cannot be forced into the strait-jacket of necessary and sufficient conditions. The world and the concepts that we use to engage it are simply not that tidy. Instead, we have to rely on judgement and the observation of the complex way words are used to determine whether someone has genuine knowledge or is the same person over time.

SEE ALSO

- 1.10 Definitions
- 3.9 Criteria
- 4.9 Essence/accident

READING

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)

- ★ Patrick J. Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic*, 10th edn (2007)
- ★ Theodore Schick and Lewis Vaughn, *How to Think about Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age*, 6th edn (2010)

READING

- C. I. Lewis, 'The Calculus of Strict Implication', *Mind* n.s. 23.90 (1914), 240–7
- Alan R. Anderson and Nuel D. Belnap, Jr, *Entailment: The Logic of Relevance and Necessity* (1975; Vol. 2 1992)
- J. Michael Dunn, 'Relevance Logic and Entailment', in *Handbook of Philosophical Logic: Alternatives to Classical Logic*, ed. D. Gabbay and F. Guenther (1986), 117–24
- Stephen Read, *Relevant Logic* (1988)

4.9 Essence/accident

The singer and actress Madonna is well known for her continual self-reinvention. In her career she has changed image from hip Brooklyn girl, through dominatrix to sexual-religious icon, Hollywood starlet and sophisticate and cowgirl, to name but a few of her personae.

In Aristotle's terminology, all these changes have, however, been merely accidental. This does not mean that the changes have not been planned – indeed, Madonna's success is in all likelihood the result of very clever calculation. For Aristotelians, though, the concept of '*accident*' has a different meaning.

An *accident* in Aristotelian parlance is a property of something that is not essential to that thing – that, in other words, can be changed without utterly destroying what the thing is. (Later thinkers also called such properties 'attributes' and 'modes'.)

The *essence* of a thing, by contrast, is what makes something what it is; to formulate a thing's essence therefore is to define it.

An essence therefore remains in place just as long as the thing it defines remains in existence. Accidents, on the other hand, can come and go. This is why Aristotle related the essence of a thing to what he called its *substance* (*ousia* in Greek) – what literally substands (*hypokeimenon*) or stands under change. For Aristotle, following but modifying his teacher Plato, the substance of a thing is most basically its *form* (*eidos* or *morphos*). So, in these terms, Madonna's accidents include her clothing styles, her public personae, haircuts and colours, while her essence is that she is a human being. Throughout all those costume changes, she's remained a human; and if essence is particular, she has remained this human called 'Madonna Ciccone'.

(Note that most philosophers in the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions have thought that essence is not particular but universal.)

Historical modifications

The contrast appears in differing forms throughout the history of philosophy. Aristotelian natural science may be tersely described as the attempt to determine the essential features of natural entities. (Modern natural science, by contrast, centres less on determining essences than on formulating laws describing the way natural phenomena behave.) We also see this search in Descartes's famous *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where he reflects on a piece of wax in an effort to determine the essence of the material world. Like an Aristotelian, Descartes examines what changes and what does not in the wax as it melts. He concludes that the shape, smell, texture and hardness of wax are all accidental properties, whereas its essence is that it is an extended thing (*res extensa*). Descartes goes on to consider himself, and concludes that his entire body is not essential to what he is and that his essence is that of a thinking thing (*res cogitans*).

In Descartes we can see traces of a common variant on Aristotle's distinction. Descartes's view seems close to the view that essence defines the substance of which the thing is made. On the scholastic or Aristotelian model, accidents have no existence independent of substance, and in this sense they are not substances themselves. Colour, for example, is an accident, since it is not a substance but is a property of substances. (Colour can't exist independently but must always be the colour *of* something.)

Descartes's radical change in looking at these issues was to demand that what's of first importance in determining substances, essences and accidents is not what things are but how we must think about them. Hence for Descartes and Spinoza, as well as for a great deal of philosophy after them, what is substantial is what we must, when our thinking is clear and rational, *conceive* as existing independently. For example, in Meditation 6 of his famous *Meditations*, Descartes determines that the mind and the body are really distinct from one another simply because he can clearly and distinctly *conceive* of the one existing without the other.

Thinkers from Kant to Hegel to Wittgenstein to Husserl to Heidegger to Derrida have in various ways inherited this method but modified it in various ways – most recently by looking at the way *language*, rather than thought, structures the way we understand what things are.

Metaphysically speaking, most philosophers today reject the idea of essences – at least on the ancient model. Substance doctrines largely crashed upon the shoals of empiricist and linguistic critiques, which have argued that traditional theories of substance involve metaphysical posits that can't be observed, that are unnecessary to understanding reality and that in fundamental ways are meaningless (see 6.3).

Political uneasiness

Many recent thinkers have also rejected the notion of essences as artificial, confining and even oppressive. Existentialists are famous for the slogan 'Existence precedes essence.' By this they mean that we are whatever we choose to be and that neither God nor nature nor society determines what we are. Feminist philosophers have adroitly shown how various conceptions purporting to define what it essentially means to be a woman have been used to keep women in a limited and subordinate position, excluding them from all sorts of things supposedly not proper for them (such as voting, higher education and owning as well as managing property; 6.4). Some thinkers have gone so far as to suggest that all determinations of the human essence are to be rejected on these grounds (4.15).

A contextual approach

What is considered accidental and essential can also be thought of as context dependent. The colour of a metal may be accidental when the metal is an internal part of an automobile engine but essential in a sculpture. In technical terms, we can say that the metal's colour is accidental *qua* engine parts and essential *qua* sculpture. One can qualify the use of accident and essence in instances such as these and sidestep broader, metaphysical issues about whether the distinction is a fundamental one or merely a useful device. Linda Alcoff proposes a notion of 'positionality' along just these lines.

Madonna is an apposite example of the debate over the essence/accident distinction, since many of her admirers claim she is the paradigm of the post-modern person for whom there is no unchanging essence at all but merely a sequence of accidents. If Madonna's seemingly limitless ability to transform herself is taken seriously, then, *pace* Aristotle and Descartes,

Madonna suggests that there is no such thing as essence at all. Philosophers may not use Madonna as their exemplar, but be warned that some will still make a claim that is the same in essence, if not in accident.

SEE ALSO

- 4.1 *A priori/a posteriori*
- 4.12 Necessary/contingent
- 4.13 Necessary/sufficient

READING

- Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bks 7, 8, 9 (fourth century BCE)
- ★ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)
- Saul Kripke, 'Identity and Necessity', in *Identity and Individuation*, ed. Milton K. Munitz (1971)
- ★ Linda Alcoff, 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', *Signs* 13.3 (1988), 405–36

4.10 Internalism/externalism

Where would you find meanings and thoughts? Some might say in words, spoken or written. But common sense would say that they are essentially *representations* of thoughts and meanings, not the things themselves. To find those you would need to look (metaphorically, at least) inside heads, where they sit alongside reasons and justifications.

Describe something as 'common sense' to a philosopher, however, and you may as well just paint a target on it and await the hail of bullets. Hilary Putnam took a particularly well-aimed shot when he wrote, 'Cut the pie any way you like, "meanings" just ain't in the head!' Others have said the same, albeit less colourfully, of reasons, justifications and thoughts. These thinkers are all *externalists* of various kinds, while those who maintain that the head is where meanings, reasons, justifications or thoughts reside are *internalists*. Note, however, that one can be an externalist about some things and an internalist about others. Externalism and internalism come in many shapes and forms, the three main varieties of which we'll deal with here.