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# Essentialism and Method[1]

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ABSTRACT: This paper mainly addresses the relation between essentialism and philosophical method. In particular, our analysis centers on the anti-essentialist argument that proposed, given its essentialist bonds, the abandonment of the notion of method. To this end, we make use of the empirical evidence concerning essentialism provided by psychological research, which has shown that our proneness to essentialize is not a by-product of our social and cultural practices as some anti-essentialists have thought. Rather, it is a deeply rooted cognitive tendency that plays a major role in concept formation and so in our understanding of things. Thus, given that such inclination toward essentialism is certain to happen, we argue for a conception of method that, while not overcoming such tendency, avoids the presumed disastrous consequences feared by most anti-essentialists.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive bias – essentialism – method.

## 0. Introduction

In 2014, the website *edge.org* launched the debate on the following question: What scientific idea is ready for retirement?[2] 178 persons tried

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[2] See https://www.edge.org/response-detail/25366

to give an answer, one of them, Richard Dawkins, said that essentialism is 'scientifically confused and morally pernicious' and so it must be abandoned. One of the reasons for its abandonment, according to Dawkins, is that it 'makes no sense in the light of evolution and other gradualistic phenomena' that is to say, essentialism is unjustifiable (incompatible, incoherent) in the light of other beliefs (e.g. evolution).

The same rejection of essentialism found its way into the realms of Philosophy in the 20th century to the extent of becoming a dirty word. As argued by some anti-essentialists, notably Richard Rorty, notions as essence are part of the representationalist sort of epistemology, which relies on an idea of the mind understood as a mirror that represents an external and independent world populated with 'intrinsic natures' that we must seek to gain true knowledge. Holding such view, Rorty said, lead us to believe that we need a criterion, a method, to determine which representations portray more accurately the world. In this sense, such refusal of essentialism involved the abandonment of other notions such as 'method' allegedly equally connected with the representationalist epistemology.

With this in mind, this paper aims at examining the relation between the notions of 'essentialism' and 'method' and showing that the claimed abandonment of such notions is based on some misconceptions about what essentialism is and how it is related to the notion of method. Beside the introduction and conclusion, the paper is arranged in these sections: 1) Essentialism and method; 2) Anti-essentialism against method; 3) Inevitability of essentialism; and 4) Method without going beyond essentialism. In section 1, we explore the links between essentialism and method. Section 2 critically examines the anti-essentialist argument proposed by Richard Rorty. In sections 3 and 4, we develop our argument. Namely, in the former section, we argue for epistemological essentialism based on the research findings from developmental psychology; and in the latter section, we look at a sample of essentialist theorizing in which the allegedly disastrous bonds between essentialism and method are rendered unproblematic.

## 1. Essentialism and method

Richard Rorty, in his *The Linguistic Turn*, remarked that with the purpose of bringing to an end the philosophical discussion about methods and

trying to turn philosophy into a science, many philosophers had proposed the adoption of a new method that is purported to limit the task of philosophy (cf. Rorty 1992). In doing so, most of them have claimed to bear no presupposition; however, as Rorty pointed out, no one of those philosophers has succeeded. It is because a philosopher's choice of a particular method is always determined by her metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. It might give us an idea of philosophy according to which philosophy is a matter of opinion, a discipline in which there are no specific criteria for the solution of philosophical problems and, in this sense, no knowledge can be acquired. For this reason, Rorty says, it would be more advantageous, for the sake of finding new topics to discuss, if we focus on unwrapping the presuppositions involved in the utilization of particular methods (cf. Rorty 1992, 2). If we take Rorty's suggestions seriously, we have to agree that every claim about the proper method in philosophy is always idiosyncratic and dependent on one's epistemological and metaphysical commitments.

One of those assumptions is the belief that things or objects have essences. The term 'essence' was introduced into the philosophical vocabulary by St. Augustine who used the term to translate the Greek *ousia*, which was already an important part of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. However, despite the many attempts to narrow the scope of the notion of essences, it is still a vague concept; that is to say, it has become an overworked word. With this in mind, without intending to provide a precise definition, the way we understand here 'essence' could be broadly characterized as the existing substance, entity, property or force that causes things to be the way they are, that is, what causes the emergence of other properties; which in turn sustains its identity (unchanging); and, determines its category. It must be mentioned that essences are thought to be intelligible, but sometimes also hidden or unobservable.

Moreover, the first attempt to formulate a complex theory of essences and so to lay the foundations of essentialism as a philosophical view is widely credited to Aristotle. As a result, 'essentialism' has come to designate the metaphysical view, asserting the existence of such entities and pointing to the need to distinguish between essential and accidental properties. Indeed, essentialism is, philosophically speaking, primarily a metaphysical doctrine whose supporters have been trying hard to answer

questions related to the place occupied by essences in the world, its existence, the role they play on the structuring of our world and its classification.

In the same way, there have been relatively recently some attempts to introduce a new particular kind of essentialism, highlighting the epistemological consequences of believing in those entities we call essences, namely epistemological essentialism.[3] The main idea behind epistemological essentialism is the old Aristotelian idea that knowledge presupposes the existence of something that is stable and intelligible, that is, an essence, which turns research or inquiry into an attempt to penetrate true nature, the essence, of things. It is in this way, undeniably metaphorical, that epistemological essentialism has been defined. However, we think that such way of defining epistemological essentialism does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of essentialism as a psychological fact, that is, as intuitions about the constitution of things and their place in a particular group.

For this reason, the way we understand epistemological essentialism here is that it is the guiding *belief* that things have essences or invariable properties that make them what they are, without which those things (or group of things) would cease to exist. Such essences are usually thought to have a causal force that makes the world the way it is, defining membership in a kind and having thus a profound impact on the way we conceptualize, represent, and understand the world, knowledge, thought, language and culture.

It is important to emphasize that we are here concerned with essentialism as a *belief* that has profound consequences on the ways humans perceive and evaluate the world and the way knowledge and inquiry have been construed. Therefore, it means that we are not seeking to make a case for or against the existence of essences, that is, we are not concerned with challenging or supporting any metaphysical claim, but rather our main concern is an epistemological sort of essentialism. Furthermore, we do not think that our arguments for epistemological essentialism support the idea that there are essences somewhere in the world or that they constitute the

[3] It also has been called methodological essentialism, but this name never enjoyed enormous popularity (cf. Popper 2002).

objective reality. Certainly, there is no evidence that essences exist, yet there is growing evidence demonstrating that we tend to believe so.

Epistemological essentialism, we argue, provides a comprehensive framework that describes how laypeople, scientists, as well as philosophers, evaluate and understand the process of seeking knowledge. Undeniably, such tendency towards essentialism[4] has been around, either implicitly or explicitly, in the philosophical literature, shaping philosophies for quite some time. It has been giving shape to how philosophers understand inquiry or the search for knowledge. Sure enough, one of the ways in which essentialism affects philosophers' representation of inquiry is that it needs to be done according to a fixed and systematic procedure, that is, it requires a method. A method is always conceived, broadly speaking, as a definable pathway with a constant or definite pattern to be followed when seeking knowledge.

In the light of essentialism, a method appears depicted as an inherent feature of knowledge, without which we would be, paraphrasing Plato, like a blind man. Also, essentialism manifests itself more clearly when philosophers think of true knowledge as the knowledge of such underlying properties that make things what they are, and a method is what makes such knowledge findable. In the same way, the very idea of 'pattern' or 'regular intelligible form' is essentialist in itself. In this sense, we argue that essentialism seems to be an assumption underlying any account of methods in philosophy. In other words, any proposed philosophical method is rendered workable only by adopting a sort of epistemological essentialism and not otherwise.

For example, Plato conceived of his method of dialectics as the only means 'to find its way to the very essence of each thing' so, the one who is skilled in dialectics is "the man who is able to exact an account of the essence of each thing…" (Plato 1969, VII, 532a-534b). Similarly, Aristotle proposed his method of demonstration, which, when put into practice, "…enables us to pursue knowledge of the essence of a thing" (Aristotle 1928, I, 14).

The same nexus between method and the epistemological essentialism can be found in the writings of some medieval theologians. Although

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[4] Hereafter, 'essentialism' and 'epistemological essentialism' are used interchangeably.

sometimes different words (ordo, via) are used, they all have the same connotations clustered around 'method' (procedure, means, way, road and so on). Such is the case of the idea of 'Itinerarium' used by St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (cf. Bonaventure 2002).

With this in mind, in his Itinerarium St. Bonaventure describes the various stages which a pious philosopher's mind must traverse through to know the being from which everything emanates, God, that is to say, the way a mind has to go to acquire the knowledge of what is essential to all things. However, for Bonaventure Philosophy alone does not suffice to achieve the knowledge of what is essential; faith must enlighten it. Then, a philosopher who attempts to know the essence, the first principle of everything, must make an effort not

> to read without unction, speculate without devotion, investigate without wonder, examine without exultation, work without piety, know without love, understand without humility, be zealous without divine grace, see without wisdom divinely inspired. (Bonaventure 2002, 39)

God, according to Bonaventure, is the one who enlightens our minds, enabling us to know himself through the vestiges of him that are in the world outside and inside us.

For Descartes, a method is, above all, the right path to follow when attempting to acquire certain and evident knowledge, which is incontrovertible by virtue of its essential nature. Descartes thought that through doubting we could get to know the essences of things and such fundamental knowledge provides a basis for any knowledge. In fact, Descartes claimed that by the use of his method he had come to know his very essence as a human being, which resides in thinking. Descartes made it clear when he said that after doubting the truth of the things he believed that "I thereby concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence resides in thinking" (Descartes 2008, 29). In this way, the phrase 'I am thinking therefore I am' that has become an unmistakable symbol of Descartes' philosophy, delates his essentialism. Likewise, Descartes pointed out a method is a mandatory requirement for the acquisition of such sort of knowledge (cf. Dear 1998).

The essentialism is so pervasive that essentialist characteristics of methods can be also found in recent times. That is the case, for example,

of analytical philosophy movement whose members assumed that philosophical problems could be resolved through analysis of language. So, the analysis was introduced as a method for clarifying the meaning of words and sentences and thereby solving (or, as the case may be, 'dissolving') philosophical problems. Although it has been said that it is hard to find just one model of how such analysis was performed and construed among members of the analytical movement, we can certainly find essentialist assumptions underlying the idea of analysis in the early days of the analytical movement. Significantly, philosophers such as Russell and the early Wittgenstein presupposed that language has a hidden, intrinsic or fundamental logical structure that could be discovered by a process of breaking down language (analyzing) into its constituent elements (words, propositions, etc.). The outcome of such process was purported to be a clarification of the meaning of words and sentences, and a subsequent insight into philosophical problems (see Hylton 1998, 38; Beaney 2000, 97-98).

On the other hand, as G. Hallett says, Kripke's and Putnam's theory of rigid designation are remarkable examples of essentialist theorizing. For the idea of rigid designation advanced by Kripke and Putnam meant that words such as 'water' (a natural kinds term) designate $H_2O$ regardless of whatever 'superficial properties' water may have or may cease to have. In other words, this is also a case of essentialist rigidity (cf. Hallett 1991, 19-22). Although it may be true that Kripke's and Putnam's method may differ from the conception of analysis of the founding fathers of the analytical movement, it is nevertheless true that some of their theories involve essentialism as an inevitable part of it, which makes them typical examples of essentialism within the analytical tradition.

## 2. Anti-essentialism against methods

Such omnipresence of essentialist theorizing has found many critics among philosophers, resulting in a firm rejection not only of essentialism but also of the idea of method.[5] One of the critics is Richard Rorty who

[5] For further details on Rorty's rejection of the idea of method, see Rorty (1991, 63-77).

claimed that the belief that there are essences or that there is a distinction to be drawn between intrinsic/accidental properties forms a crucial part of the metaphysical dualism, so characteristic of the Western tradition of metaphysics. Likewise, such belief, says Rorty, is complementary to other dualistic distinctions such as mind-body and appearance-reality, which lay at the core of a representationalist way of describing thought, knowledge, and language. Moreover, those dualistic distinctions have come to us through the vocabulary inherited from the Greeks, which in turn has triggered our readiness to believe that there are essences (cf. Rorty 1999, 47-51).

Believing that there is a distinction to be made between what is essential and accidental, according to Rorty, has led philosophers to believe in the existence of some pseudo-problems, namely: "the relation of appearance and reality, of the mind to body, of language to fact" (Rorty 1991, 99). These pseudo-problems suggest that there is something intrinsically privileged inside and outside of us that can be, somehow, described or accurately represented by equally privileged bits of language. An essentialist falls into the delusion that he came to believe in the existence of those intrinsic properties because those objects caused him to believe it and so the essentialist fails to see that those objects are made (rather than given) in the process of beliefs formation.

Moreover, Rorty says that the essentialist is the type who assumes two basic principles, namely Russell's Principle and Parmenides' Principle. The former says, "It is not possible to make a judgment about an object without knowing what object you are making a judgment about," the latter says, "you cannot talk about what does not exist" (Rorty 1991, 105). The adoption of those two principles led philosophers to believe that there exists a special sort of entities that we have to look for and that there is a difference to be made between identifying and describing those entities situated outside us. Rorty thinks that if we accept the idea that there are intrinsic properties, 'things in themselves', then inquiry becomes an activity of discovering, representing or getting hold of those 'objects'.

Instead, Rorty wants to persuade us to think of human mind as a web of beliefs, which is constantly self-reweaving.[6] Such beliefs have to be

[6] It has to be said that the web does not necessarily have any fixed 'core', which would be immune to revision.

understood as 'habits of action' that produce actions, which in turn produce new beliefs that have to be woven into the web of beliefs. We might call this process as 'coming to believe' or 'assimilating a new belief'. It happens at different levels, but sometimes such processes "… provoke the sort of long-scale, conscious, deliberate reweaving which does deserve the name" of inquiry. In that sense, Rorty proposes conceiving of inquiry as 'recontextualizing beliefs'. 'Recontextualizing' here means relocating the new belief in a web of existing beliefs, "for a belief is what it is only by virtue of its position in a web" (Rorty 1991, 94-98).

Given the strong rejection to think of inquiry as having to do with 'essences' or intrinsic properties that we discover or represent, the idea of method seems to become dispensable. In this sense, Rorty says, "by getting rid of the idea of different methods appropriate to the nature of different objects… one switches the attention from the demands of the object to the demands of the purpose which a particular inquiry is supposed to serve" (Rorty 1991, 110). By stressing the idea of 'the demands of the purpose' Rorty seems to be criticizing the idea of method understood as having a filter to percolate our thoughts amongst which there would be some privileged over others because those represent realities or primary qualities more faithfully than others. It would also put, allegedly, some methods in a privileged position in relation to others.

It must be said that we may agree with Rorty's diagnosis in that essentialism has been playing an important role in the way philosophers have construed inquiry and language and that the notion of method is anchored to essentialism. However, the idea that essentialism is embedded in our linguistic practices, which in turn may change contingently in accordance with our social needs and collective purposes, so that we could, as Rorty puts it, 'brush aside' essentialism is highly debatable. Of course, if essentialism is seen as a social construction, it is easy to conclude that essentialism, along with the notions anchored to it, is replaceable. However, cognitive and developmental psychologists have shown, as we shall see, that our tendency to believe that there are essences seems not to be as cultural, historical, socially relative and superfluous as the opponents of essentialism might have thought.

## 3. Inevitability of essentialism

The reason why essentialism appears to play a central role in our theorizing is that we are cognitively inclined to adopt essentialism. That is the argument of Susan Gelman who asserts that the essentialism is a cognitive bias that appears early in childhood and acts on the way we humans categorize or process information. Therefore, essentialism, Gelman says,

> is the result of several converging psychological capacities, each of which is domain-general yet invoked differently in different domains. (Gelman 2003, 6)

Such psychological capacities or mental abilities are the capacity to distinguish appearances from reality, the capacity to make inductive inference about properties of objects, tracking identity over time, the assumption that properties and events are caused (causal determinism), and deference to experts. These capacities did not appear to help the development of essentialism; rather they collectively have an impact on, or direct implication in, essentialist thinking (cf. Gelman 2003, 316).

According to Gelman, when we attempt to specify the intrinsic property of a thing, we identify it as a member of a category, that is, we identify things falling under certain categories because they possess that intrinsic, non-obvious and unchanging property. Thus, believing that things have intrinsic and non-obvious properties or that animals have innate nature gives shape to our concepts and so, it is

> a powerfully useful psychological disposition that directs adult induction and knowledge acquisition (including the sorts of hypothesis we entertain and attempt to confirm). (Gelman & Wellman 1999, 635)

Gelman suggests neither that there are essences, nor that we can get to know them easily; rather what she is saying is that we believe they exist and that such belief makes easier the development and growth of our conceptual corpus. That is to say, it helps us cope with the world by facilitating the process of categorization, which we, as living systems, must do to organize the amalgam of stimuli we are subjected to.

If this is so, that is, if essentialism is a sort of bias that develops in humans since early childhood without having a significant cultural influence,

then it seems that the idea of essentialism as a contingent bias becomes defective. What is more, as Gelman acknowledges, getting rid of essentialism would demand more than merely running away from it, as Rorty and most anti-essentialists suggest. For, as Gelman puts it,

> even when college students learn about species in a biology course, for example, we suspect it may be difficult to overcome the assumption that species are understood in terms of inherent features that each member possesses (e.g. 'tiger gene'), rather than appreciating that a species is an interbreeding population, characterized by diversity among its members and having no single determinative property. (Gelman & Ware 2012, 471)

It was initially thought that we tended to essentialize most powerfully with respect to natural and social kinds, but not to artifacts made by people. However, Paul Bloom has shown that our tendency to essentialize is not only limited to categories about the natural, but it also applies to categories of objects made by human beings, in which "the essence is seen as the creator's intention" (Bloom 2004, 55). This may be explained, as Gelman and Bloom have suggested, by the fact that essentialism is an implicit assumption, which is manifested in, expands to and adapts to different domains.

In the same way, the cognitive psychologist George E. Newman has found out that human tendency to believe that there are intrinsic properties shared by groups of things is manifested in activities as artwork marketing where the idea of authenticity plays an important role. The way people in those contexts evaluate authenticity presupposes the existence of an intrinsic value, an essence; hence, what is evaluated is whether objects embody or reflect such properties. To illustrate, when people compare an original artwork, let's say of Van Gogh, to its replications, what may give its intrinsic value to the original is that it was actually touched by Van Gogh (cf. Newman & Bloom 2012).

Similarly, it has been shown that the tendency to track essences seems to appear even in the absence of language, so essentialist thinking is prior to the acquisition of language. That is to say, essentialism seems to come into existence earlier than Gelman's studies had shown (cf. Phillips, Shankar & Santos 2010). Given this point, it seems that the argument that

essentialism emerged as a social construction at a certain time in the antiquity, which we have inherited through language, does not really work. Indeed, the fact that essentialism was already present in Plato's or Aristotle's philosophy only means that we have been essentializing for a long time.

The reason why essences seem to be everywhere is that our brains are made to track what is unchanging in the world to make sense of it. That is the argument found on Bruce M. Hood's SuperSense. By appealing to evolution, Hood found that

> [w]hat we do naturally and spontaneously at the most basic level is look constantly for patterns, imagining hidden forces and causes. Even the way we see the world is organized by brain mechanisms looking for patterns. (Hood 2009, 9)

That is to say, the human mind does not work arbitrarily and seems to capture unchanging, intrinsic features in objects, as long as it helps the brain to make sense of the world.

Essentialism gets a bad reputation mostly because of its social consequences. Essentialism, it is said, gives rise to evaluations and social attitudes toward others. So, essentialism: 1. "makes people less responsive to pressure to change their attitudes and judgments"; 2. "Reduces people's motivation to try to eliminate disparities between groups"; 3. "Reduces people's motivation to cross category boundaries", which, in turn, might potentially increase "prejudice toward members of stigmatized groups (Hispanics, homosexuals, etc.), driven by a tendency to essentialize their negatively perceived qualities" (Prentice & Miller 2007, 204). Sure enough, some of the social consequences of essentializing are disastrous. However, we can certainly reject this essentialist understanding of humans without necessarily rejecting essentialism in general.

On the other hand, following the advice of the opponents of essentialism and assuming that it does not play a major role or, even worse, that it is the base of a wrong image of human situation, is of no help in avoiding the negative consequences of essentialist thinking. For the studies, run by Gelman and others, suggest that essentialism is a part of human nature, that essentializing is something we do very well, and that it is mostly a useful tool.

Moreover, as Diana Fuss has shown, the anti-essentialist strategy of claiming that knowledge – including the very notion of essence – is socially constructed and historically determined does not do away with essentialist thinking. For the cases where certain social categories as 'woman' or 'man' are replaced by 'women' or 'men' on behalf of a more pluralistic use of language that stresses the underlying differences between individuals that fall into the same category, "the essentialism at stake is not countered so much as displaced" (Fuss 1989, 4). That is to say, essentialist thinking persists in such claims.

## 4. Methods without going beyond essentialism

Gelman's research as well as similar studies show that our deeply rooted cognitive tendency to essentialize seems to have a profound impact on the way we categorize and shape our conceptual system. Although Gelman has tried to distinguish between folks' essentialism and philosophers' essentialism, shying away from any possible conclusion about the role played by such cognitive bias on philosophical theories, it would be misleading to claim that there is a difference to be drawn between them. For it would imply that philosophers make use of some conceptual resources different from the rest of mortals, which would be highly debatable. In fact, as pointed out by Lakoff and Johnson, no matter how sophisticated a philosophical theory might be, philosophers employ the very same basic conceptual system shared by ordinary people within a given context when building up their theories (see Lakoff & Johnson 1999, 338).

Certainly, in the case of philosophers' essentialism it is not only an implicit assumption but also an explicit one, forthrightly stated and debugged in philosophers' theories. Nevertheless, philosophers, as well as 'ordinary' people, implicitly assume that there are some essences here or there and it is such belief that may guide the process of drawing inferences about the world, its form, and the way we get to know it.

In this sense, as we have already pointed out, the relationship between essentialism and method is explicitly stated in philosophers' theories. Method, in the light of essentialism, is a defining element of the pursuit of knowledge, that is, the sort of thing without which it would not be reasonable to undertake research about any given matter. Thus, it is method what

enables us to discover the true nature of a given thing. To illustrate this point, let us have a closer look at the Aristotelian and Cartesian conception of philosophical method. As we see them, those conceptions are equally essentialist in that they presuppose that inquiry must be done following a systematic procedure, that is, it requires a method to penetrate the intrinsic nature of things, but it is manifested differently, also having different consequences.

'Method', as it appear in Aristotle's works, sometimes means simply 'inquiry' or 'investigation' (cf. Aristotle 1944; 1983), but in other times, it means – more in line with its modern use – 'mode of pursuing an investigation' (cf. Aristotle 1934; 2002). In brief, for Aristotle 'method' has a general connotation, meaning pursuit of knowledge, inquiry or investigation. Furthermore, inquiry, according to Aristotle, is always goal-oriented, that is, aimed at achieving something. With this in mind, Aristotle made clear that an investigation and the way it should be pursued – that is, a method – is determined by the goal to be attained (Aristotle 1934, 1094a).

Moreover, it is an often-overlooked point that, for Aristotle, pursuing any investigation requires being familiar with the stated goals, that is to say, an investigation is aimed at something, and when we are after something, we do so because we are somehow familiar with that something we are after. Consequently, any given inquiry starts from what is more knowable to us or what is obvious. For, as Aristotle put it himself, "each man judges correctly those matters with which he is acquainted" (Aristotle 1934, 1094b). In that sense, Aristotle's essentialism regarding inquiry is betrayed by the notion of goals or ends, which in turn determine the method to be followed to attain them.

In contrast, in the light of the modern Cartesian conception, 'method' means a handy common set of rules that could be identifiable a priori or drafted beforehand, regardless of its intended use, which can serve as a sort of program of activities (an investigation) that start after the rules of the method have been devised. Equally, a method, as Descartes construed it, is a preset group of rules whose main purpose is the acquisition of a sort of absolute knowledge, which, according to Descartes, 'always remains one and the same' and it should not be wrongly separated and limited by any particular matter. In this sense, Descartes suggested that we would rather give up upon any attempt to undertake research on any matter without

having a predefined method (cf. Descartes 1985b, 360-371). Hence, in the case of Descartes' sort of essentialism regarding inquiry, essentialism is betrayed by his idea of method itself. That is to say, a method, in the light of Cartesian conception, becomes the main or, one may say, an essential feature of knowledge without qualification. Thus, true knowledge is methodical, that is, something acquired according to a given predefined procedure.

As shown above, the relationship between essentialism and method manifests differently in the philosophy of Aristotle and Descartes. It should be noted, likewise, that also the consequences of both sorts of essentialism are different. To explain, Aristotle's essentialism, as we see it, does not necessarily lead to the only-one-method-for-any-subject-matter idea, while Descartes in fact made such idea possible. For a method in the Cartesian sense, as long as it can be devised independently of any subject-matter, becomes something detached from the process of inquiry itself and its purposes, which, in turn, could raise some questions about the usefulness of such device.

Again, it could be argued that it is the same sort of essentialism that led Aristotle to claim the existence of a 'supreme end,' which would make some inquiries more worthy of being pursued than others and for the same reason would lead to the differentiation between disciplines, some being more authoritative than others. However, despite the mentioned concerns, we find Aristotelian essentialism more compelling in that, regarding methods, it does not lead us to think of methods in terms of artificially preset procedures or group of rules that regulate the way we should go about any inquiry, but rather as an activity defined by its goals, some more preferable than others.

In conclusion, we have no doubt that the most critical contribution of Aristotle's conception of method lies in the fact that an inquiry cannot be abstracted from its intended purpose, least of all, to become dependent on a sort of device arbitrarily and capriciously invented and truly different from its applications. Furthermore, what Aristotle's conception would tell us about the modern conception is that even if we keep alive the idea of a group of rules, such group of rules or procedure can only be found in the development of a research activity, of which it is its more or less simplified scheme. That is, a method, keeping its modern sense alive,

would have to be understood as a sort of pattern of a preexistent operation, which is identified *a posteriori*. Of course, it would imply that such device has no practical value for the inquiry process itself. However, as we see it, this look would render the debate about the philosophical method constructive because it would not only force us to focus on identifying the pattern, if there is one, followed by philosophers when pursuing an inquiry, but also discuss what philosophers do when they build their arguments.

## 5. Conclusion

Essentialism is perhaps one of the notions most vehemently opposed and rejected by philosophers from different strands over the past four decades. However, as shown above, most of the reasons for such a rejection are based on a poor understanding of what it is, how it emerges and on an overestimation of its consequences. Certainly, when social categories are essentialized, it gives us an erroneous account of the nature of humans. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the idea of 'penetrating the true nature of things' has been the guiding metaphor behind the success of that body of knowledge that we refer to as science (chemistry, genetics, for example).

In this sense, we argue for an epistemological kind of essentialism, which, in our view, provides an overarching framework that describes and explicates the way we represent inquiry. Such framework is useful to understand why the notion of method is inextricably bound together with our representation of the search for knowledge or inquiry. Indeed, the way we define what a discipline or science is, for example, presupposes the idea of having a method as a fundamental feature.

Likewise, we oppose the anti-essentialist argument that essentialism commits us to a sort of Sisyphean pursuit for knowledge and that it is behind the only-one-method idea. In fact, as has been noted, there are essentialist ways, namely Aristotelian, to construe inquiry such that it does not assume that there is a priviledged single method independently of the purpose of a given inquiry. Moreover, the Aristotelian essentialist conception of method provides a way out of the so-called problem of philosophical

method, for it forces us to focus on what philosophers actually do when they pursue knowledge.

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