

## ESSENTIALISM IN PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, EDUCATION, SOCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC SCOPES

Mehmet ŞAHİN <sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Education, Necmettin Erbakan University, Konya, Turkey

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### Abstract

*Essentialism is an approach assuming that people and things have natural and essential common characteristics which are inherent, innate and unchanging. Thus, it is regarded as an educational philosophy. However, having the common essence and the same essentials at the same levels can lead to undesired practices in real life too. Even nouns and pronouns used in daily communication reflect some connotations of a philosophy as a system of beliefs about reality based on how we perceive ourselves and others in terms of our existence. How we address ourselves and others also represents our point of view related to the relationship and interaction between us and others. Essentialism as a philosophy has impact on our differentiation or unification ways while addressing. In this sense, the pronoun we represents a kind of unification while the pronoun you refers to a kind of discrimination or differentiation, which can be referred as a kind of taxonomy used in communication. This paper seeks to present how essentialism is used as the basis of our daily communication and its role in our discriminating and unifying efforts in social, cultural and scientific domains. Essentialism in education asserts that common and essential ideas and skills belonging to a certain culture should be taught to all citizens at the same level at especially primary school level. To do this, the teacher's authority in the classroom is emphasised and the subject matter is the centre of the curriculum. The essence or the centre of education is the core curriculum which is a combination of hard work and rigorous effort. The unification role of essentialism is represented in the core curriculum that aims to transfer the essential knowledge and skills needed for the equal and well-balanced citizens. The discrimination function of essentialism comes out in politics, natural sciences in the form of taxonomy.*

**Key words:** discrimination, essentialism, essence, taxonomy, unification

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\* Corresponding Author. Associate Professor Mehmet Şahin  
E-mail address: sahinmehmet033@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

Plato (428–348 BC) was a leading Greek philosopher and the disciple of Socrates, who founded the *Academy* where Aristotle studied. He studied the philosophy of Parmenides, whose conception of permanent, unchangeable and imperishable substance as the truth. Plato's idealism suggests that all things have an *essence*, an *idea* or *form*. A substance has certain characteristics: durable, separable, and identical but everything explains its being with the help of the discrimination between essence and existence. As essence is the *what* of a thing, the substance and essence have been among the most fundamental concepts of metaphysics focusing on faith and reason as they are permanent, unchangeable and imperishable. In Christian history, while the Catholics maintained a strong attachment to the past and traditions in terms of classics, the Protestants focused on what was essential for their time and daily life. Thus, for them, the curriculum is supposed to cover the essential subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic, which leads to the theory of education termed as essentialism.

Essentialism in philosophy stresses that people and things have natural characteristics and these characteristics are inherent, innate and unchanging since they compose the essence of that being. In other words, entities or beings have an underlying and unchanging essence and this is necessary to its identity and function, with which it is identified. In education, essentialism is an educational philosophy or approach which assumes and proposes that all children should learn the traditional disciplines and basic essential subjects thoroughly and equally. It can be defined as a doctrine that certain traditional concepts, ideals, and skills that are essential to society should be taught thoroughly and methodically to all students, without considering individual conditions, capacity, ability, needs and interests. The primary objective of essentialist education is to transfer the traditional knowledge and cultural heritage of a certain society and civilization to students. A core curriculum serves this when it covers the study subjects on the surrounding environment and basic and unchanging natural laws. The disciplines that encourage a happier and more educated living style are included in the curriculum for this purpose (Howick, 1971, p. 49). Thus, traditional disciplines serve to transfer and transmit cultural heritage to students in a way that the teacher determines.

According to Essentialist movement, there is a common core curriculum that is based on the essential knowledge to be transmitted to students in a systematic and disciplined way making use of academic rigor. These common core subjects refer to cultural heritage, which is represented in the great works of great thinkers and writers. The main objective of this transmission is to preserve intellectual and moral values and standards. Schools are the main settings to transfer this

heritage with the disciplined efforts of teachers from the main and perennial textbooks and essential or classic works. The cultural heritage is transferred with the help of textbooks because textbooks are essential and timeless sources of knowledge and skills to be transmitted. This transmission can be carried out only by academic rigor, which is to be encouraged by the teacher. This does not mean that essentialism as an educational philosophy is completely different from perennialism. In perennial movement, the core curriculum is fixed, which is in opposition to essentialism because essentialist educators agree that the core curriculum may change since schooling should be dynamic and practical. Students are members of the society and they should be prepared to become valuable members of society in which they are living. However, hard work is encouraged and respect for authority and discipline is to be instilled in students. These virtues are emphasised in essentialism because the progressivist approach did not take them into consideration. Especially, the American educator, author and editor William Chandler Bagley (1874-1946) opposed many of the practices of progressive education in the USA. The pioneers and supporters of essentialism as an educational philosophy are William Bagley, James D. Koerner (1959), H. G. Rickover (1959), Paul Copperman (1978) and Theodore Sizer (1985).

## **2. Psychological essentialism and language**

According to psychological essentialism, certain categories have an underlying reality that cannot be observed or detected directly. For example, children are not regarded as concrete thinkers but they have an early tendency or curiosity to search for hidden and invisible features of entities. Gelman (2005) deals with the framework of psychological essentialism. It can be observed that preschool children and adults from a variety of cultural contexts expect members of a category to be alike in non-obvious ways and they treat certain categories as having inductive potential, an innate basis, stable category membership, and sharp boundaries. According to Medin and Ortony (1989), essentialism functions as placeholder notion. They claim that a person can believe that a category possesses a common essence although he or she knows nothing about what that common essence is. A child, for example, may believe that deep and invisible differences between males and females exist. However, that child has no idea about what those differences are. Thus, the essence placeholder implies that category members are alike in unknown ways. It may be a shared underlying structure or an innate, genetic, or biological basis to category membership. In addition, these categories have sharp, fixed and unchanging boundaries (Gelman, 2003, 2004).

Essentialists consider the language that children hear. For them, nouns imply that a category is relatively more stable and consistent over time and contexts than adjectives or verb phrases.

According to a study by Gelman & Heyman (1999), 5- and 7-year-old children first learned about a set of individuals with either a noun or a verb phrase. Generic noun phrase is another important linguistic device and the generic noun phrase refers to a category rather than a set of individuals. Thus, generics express essential qualities and imply that a category is coherent and permits category-wide inferences (Carlson & Pelletier, 1995; Prasada, 2000). Another point to be considered is that there are language-specific devices that convey essentialism. For example, young Spanish-speaking children make inferences about the stability of a category based on which form of *to be* is used to express it (Heyman & Diesendruck, 2002).

### **3. Educational Essentialism**

The term *essentialist* first appeared in a book written by Michael John Demiashkevich (Null, 2007). In his book, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Demiashkevich regards some specific educators, including William C. Bagley, as essentialists. In addition, Demiashkevich compares the views of essentialists with those of the Progressive Education Association. He describes how the Progressives preach a hedonistic, self-indulgent doctrine of change although the essentialists focus on the moral values and responsibilities taking permanent principles of behaviour into consideration. Thus, Demiashkevich mentions the arguments between the two educational philosophies and likens them to those between the Socratic and the Sophist ones in ancient Greek philosophy (Null 2007). Therefore, as a result, the Essentialist movement was born out of the struggle between the traditionalist approaches and progressive approaches to education, curriculum, didactics and pedagogy.

The Essentialist movement in education first appeared in the USA in 1938 as a reaction to progressive approaches which were prevalent and popular in the 1920s and 30s especially with the efforts of some educators like J. Dewey. Behind this reaction, there was The Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 to 1939. It is referred to as the worst economic fall in the history of the industrialized world and thus, the leading educationists like Bagley, started to question the educational system and its role in this collapse and crisis. Bagley identified two specific and essential defects of the United States' educational system. For him, the dominant educational theories, such as Progressivism, were essentially making it weak and feeble, and the relaxation of academic standards in many school systems had led to the policy of widespread social promotion despite the lack of required skills and knowledge (Gutek, 1997).

Considering his analysis regarding the educational system and problems associated with it, Bagley is regarded as the father of the essentialism movement in education. He was an American

educator and editor who criticized pragmatism and progressive education in his writings and works. He specifically advocated educational essentialism by publishing mainly on topics like teacher education, curriculum, philosophy of education, and educational psychology. He criticised the education system there and stated that students in the U.S. were not getting the same levels of education as the students in Europe at the same age (Null, 2007). Bagley compared American education with the education systems of other countries such as Germany and judged it to be weak, lacking in rigor, full of unnecessary extra features and inadequate because the education system in his country could not prepare youth for active and productive participation in society (Webb, 2006). According to Bagley, students were not getting basic skills, and the teachers' colleges were not preparing efficient and proficient teachers in teaching those skills. In this period, schools were moving toward progressive education and the authority of the teacher and principal, the role of the school were lost and the students were no longer obedient to authority. In short, the authority of teacher and school were lost for the sake of progressivism and pragmatism. He was not pleased with the education system and he defined education as the process by means of which the individual acquires experiences that would function in rendering his future action more efficient (Bagley, 1905). In addition, a good education should be based on a core curriculum of traditional subjects. Education must thrive to develop good citizens for the use of society. Thus, education should be available to all children and citizens. In this case, standardized tests should be avoided as these tests might be biased against minority groups, which can hinder all citizens to be involved in education at equal levels.

#### **4. Application of essentialism in education**

For this approach, elementary schools are the main focus as they are the primary and essential stage of the whole education. All the children in elementary schools should be given a good grounding in reading, writing and arithmetic. The study of core subjects like the languages, humanities, sciences and mathematics will be constructed on that grounding. Respect to the authority of school and teacher is of high importance and it is provided with hard discipline. Thus, discipline is a key characteristic for essentialist approach as the discipline at school will bring up the discipline in life and society. Academic knowledge and rigor, patriotism, and character development are important characteristics for a good citizen. Therefore, children or students at school are required to learn discipline, civility and respect for school authority. This will help students to function effectively in life and as members of a civilized society (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). According to this approach, teachers are required to instil students with the

essential characteristics to develop the character of students and they need to be equipped with academic knowledge, rigor and patriotism as a part of character development. To this end, traditional disciplines or back-to-basic approaches are regarded as essential tools. When this is achieved, students will have the skill of reasoning, they will be able to train their mind and ensure to be a member of a common culture for all citizens (Sadker 2006). In other words, essentialist education focuses on teaching basic skills and intellectual self-discipline. While doing this, traditional academic disciplines will help students and they will accumulate the wisdom and cultural heritage of western civilization. To do this in the right and effective way, all the transfer to students should be carried out by the teacher in a way that he/ she determines.

The core subjects such as reading, writing, literature, foreign languages, history, mathematics, science, art, and music are supposed to serve as transmitter of the western cultural heritage. These disciplines are regarded as traditional disciplines as they help teachers focus on back-to-basic approaches. These disciplines will also help schools transfer cultural and historical heritage of western civilisation to students by making use of appropriate and right skills, attitudes and values determined by the teacher as the sole authority (Ellis, Cogan & Howey, 1991). These skills are essential skills because they will prepare students for advanced education, the world of work, and effective social and political participation (Guttek, 2004). The final aim is to help the citizen develop and transform into an intellectually and individually well-developed, well characterised, adorned with values like patriotism, discipline, respectful and hardworking citizen. In the current context, science, the arts and principal skills which were beneficial in the past should be reflected in the future and the main function of formal education is to keep the main elements and essentials of human culture and transfer them to students (Guttek, 2001).

The main principles of the essentialist approach are as follows:

- Hard work, respect for authority and discipline are the essential skills for citizens to be acquired.
- Interdisciplinary studies are not adopted since differentiated and specialized subjects developed and organized by experts are the focus (Guttek, 2004).
- Since hard work and discipline are important, the teacher should be rigid and disciplinary.
- Since it is a teacher-centred philosophy, the teacher is the leader of learning and teaching. Therefore, maintaining order and discipline in the classroom is the teacher's main responsibility (Essentialism, 2018).

- The curriculum covers core subjects and essential knowledge and skills are given in the textbooks. In addition, academic rigor is essential for the transfer of the knowledge in the textbooks.
- Traditional disciplines work in the curriculum and the curriculum is subject-centred.
- The teacher is in the centre and he is the sole authority to design the curriculum based on the core disciplines.
- Since the teacher is the sole authority, he or she must be academically well-qualified, appreciate and promote learning and character development. The teacher must also control the students and determine how to distribute appropriate rewards and penalties (Howick, 1971, p. 51).
- Since the students are passive receivers, the transmitting method is the lecture and tests applied by the teacher.
- The final objective is to transmit the common core curriculum to students in a systematic and disciplined way.

## **5. Essentialism as a discriminating approach**

Essentialism is based on the belief that things or entities have qualities, attributes, or meanings that cannot be separated from them since they have an inherent essence or true nature to them. Despite seemingly being positive, this nature or inherent essence, in fact, allows and promotes people to categorize or put individuals or items into groups as well. The fact that people can categorize others or discriminate them based on their common essence or nature can bring up serious problems for societies. Race is regarded as a common sense and used as a discriminating agency, it comes out as racial essentialism. One of the discriminating ways is to focus on the origin or race as the common essence or nature. In other words, racial essentialism can be regarded as a belief based on a common genetic or biological essence. That essence defines, determines and encompasses all members of a racial category. If essentialism is applied to racial identity, racial categories occur with distinct, specific, fixed and stable cultural values, beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. When they start to use the WE pronoun to assert themselves, the ones outside this circle becomes the other and they address others with YOU. Finally, WE and YOU can be hostile pronouns if they are used for discrimination. However, when WE and YOU evolve into WE, it means the common features serve unification. While the owners of the common and uniform essence of a racial group is categorized and used to provide uniformity, this

categorization can also differentiate them from members of other racial groups. In this case, the YOU pronoun appears to differentiate one race from others. In addition, the common cultural values can serve the same function. It is also possible to understand racial categories in terms of essential or common cultural features and values. In this case, it is called cultural essentialism. Thus, cultural essentialism is the practice of categorizing groups of people within a culture or differentiating theirs from other cultures based on the common and essential qualities of one certain culture. It is possible to observe even in the current sociological structure that certain groups are always excluded from social activities or cooperation within the country in which they live since they have racial or cultural differences. Thus, generalized prejudice or bias about race and culture comes out of this dimension of essentialism. When we consider the category of African Americans in USA, we take differences between the Whites and African Americans into account and we group them into different categories in our mind based on our bias. In this stage, essentialism serves us to differentiate or discriminate one group that has a common essence from another that does not have this essence. The same pattern of essential discrimination can be grounded on race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality and thus, the whites, males, Republicans, homosexuals come out. In our daily life, it is a common argument that men are more aggressive than women. It is grounded on the hormonal differences and here biology is used to argue that a particular social difference and/or behaviour are unchangeable. However, the same statement can be also regarded as an implicit discrimination or categorization of human beings into men and women. The following can be a few examples of implicit discrimination of human beings in real life:

- Boys are boys and will be boys
- Muslims are inherently violent or prone to terrorism
- Women are closer to nature than men
- Women are inherently better parents due to their inherent maternal instincts
- Women are more empathic than men

It is clear that the sharper the boundaries between categories are, the sharper the discrimination will be. This has advantages and disadvantages depending on the unifying or discriminating role of the essentialist approach. It is another fact that when we know someone's category, we can think a lot about that person ranging from bias based on differentiation to sympathy based on similarity. Since membership to a category is permanent and a member cannot easily become non-member, the essence attributed to that category is always with that person,

which leads to stability of the membership to that category and thus the advantage or disadvantage never ends.

### ***5.1. Taxonomy***

Taxonomy is regarded as another product of essentialism. Taxonomy is used as a scientific term to define and describe organisms by giving names and forming and placing them under classes. In other words, the scientists segregate organisms based on their types and they give a separate name to each group of these organisms. In addition, social taxonomy conveys the same idea in the social context. However, it is segregation among people and not among different kind of species or organisms. Thus, profession, religion and nationality can be the basis for segregating people in social taxonomy.

### ***5.2. Quantitative and qualitative perspective***

The scholars who are not in favour of essence search do not support classification or taxonomy in the scientific sense. Instead, they prefer measurement instead of origin quest. Measurement is the attribution of numerals to objects or events in accord with any certain rule. Thus, it has been the term to be used for classing and naming things or entities. This has been an important issue of positivist philosophy regarding scientific knowledge and methodology. The positivist approach holds the view that only factual knowledge gained through observation and obtained through the senses can be measured and this measurement makes it trustworthy. The scientific research findings should be usually observable and quantifiable or measurable so that it can be expressed as a result of measurement. However, the other method regards the quality of a being or event and it can never be measurable since one event or moment can never be the same twice. It is not regarded as a proper approach to explain or analyse the qualitative aspects of an event or being by using the techniques to make it numerable or measured and expressed in numbers especially in social sciences since social events are not static but dynamic. Thus, the two approaches of research have emerged: quantitative and qualitative.

### ***5.3. Anti-Semitism and racism***

The Nazis have had a racist ideology that came out of ancient religious teachings and these ideas took on a biological aspect based on the essence of a race. Together with the heliocentric approach, it turned into racial superiority in time. For example, Germans, from a nationalist perspective, considered Jews to be the enemies of Jesus Christ as a common belief. Thus, they treated them as an enemy group and this movement increasingly influenced a nation and the persecution of the Jewish minority.

Racism is defined as a perspective that sees the world and life from a racist point of view taking actions, practices or beliefs into consideration to reflect the racial worldview. This ideological perspective uses racial taxonomy and divides or classifies people into different, separate and exclusive biological entities. Thus, in this perspective, a link between inherited physical and personal traits, intellect, morality, and other cultural values and behavioural characteristics plays an important segregating role in the formation of races. When it is supported by the heliocentric approach and a certain race puts itself in the very centre, racism comes out as a hazardous and unsafe challenge and problem since that race accepts that the members of that race are innately superior to members of other races. Thus, superior races consider their people as super humans and they begin to take other people from Africa against their will to make them slaves. In addition, since they are super humans, they can form a trade system based on the slaves they collected. In this way, in human history, it is stated that more than 30 million people were taken as slaves from West Africa and sold into slavery although this is regarded as a brutal action. It is interesting that, in the views of superior races or inferior races, essentialism, in the sense of discrimination based on the common and essential features, plays an important role. As a result of racial discrimination, the members of inferior races deserve less respect and concern, and they are less intelligent and generally less capable or they never deserve living in the world as a human being.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is a generally accepted idea that the thought behind our deeds and actions is the determining factor for the meaning of our motives. In this context, the philosophy upon which we establish our real life naturally determines the way we are to follow throughout our life. On the one hand, essentialism is not only an educational philosophy but also serves as a ground for many social and universal problems that humanity has been experiencing. On the other hand, social taxonomy, racism, anti-Semitism and feminism can be regarded as the social aspects of these problems while qualitative and quantitative research approach in combination with positivism has the roots in essentialism, which goes back to ancient Greek philosophy. Therefore, WE and YOU are not only the pronouns we use in our daily life. They represent many scientific, social and ideological perspectives in daily real life as well.

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