

## Essentialism as a Key-Concept for Environmental Policy

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### Research Article

#### ABSTRACT

Based on a brief historical and epistemological review of essentialism, on one hand, and empirical and calculative methods of thinking and acting, in connection with instrumental rationalism, on the other, the aim of the present work is to prove that environmental problems and their management can't be studied and efficiently faced unless they are essentially understood as ensuing social phenomena and actions, which are deeply interwoven with our utilitarian approach of thinking and acting, and should be faced with essentially enlightened political actions. And that is, because within this market oriented utilitarian society—where superficial profit is the ultimate goal, and profit prevails over socio-ethical standards, ecological equilibrium and sustainability and a substantial well-being—it is dangerously insufficient to address ethical and in particular environmental issues in a positivistic way, superficially using empirically based quantitative methods and instrumental rationalism without essentially grounded approaches of the socio-political, ethical and environmental issues and without a philosophical reflection on intellectual and moral qualities. So, socio-ethical and political philosophy should address all these issues, and politics should aim at the promotion of the virtue of the citizens and their intellectual and moral qualities. To accept this crucial view means, subsequently, to radically change our philosophy of life, and to deeply understand and properly act, especially aiming at the formation of a society that essentially and prudentially seeks its happiness, and will subsequently undertake all the necessary interventions, in order to face also the today's acute environmental issues.

Keywords:

Essentialism, Environmental Policy, Liberalism, Philosophy, Values

#### INTRODUCTION

It should be emphatically noted, from the very beginning, that essentialism, being a complex and controversial term in the history of ideas, is not used, in this paper, to define an eternal and invariable underlying human nature, or to oppose social change, and, thus, to connote social conservatism and an anti-democratic perspective. It is rather the rational and honest pursuit of the first causes, of the deeply grounded, substantial features of an act, event or concept, that characterizes an essentialist way of exploring and understanding reality, in all fields of action; and the persistence to such a honest essentialism can only be regarded within a presupposed ethically defined context, regardless of the underlying ethical theory. If this theory is utilitarianism, in contrast to deontological or virtue ethics, so I argue that the pursuit of the first causes is strongly interwoven with epistemic, technical, instrumental or mainly economic and quantitatively defined values.

There is a basic concept which over the centuries epistemologically connects empiricism with positivism, utilitarianism, neo-positivism and post-modern pragmatism; this concept, expressed in a negative way, is the unanimous rejection of essentialism in studying reality and all issues interwoven with reality, in all fields. This total rejection of essentialism also means, among other things mentioned further on, a rejection of substantial values, of an ontology of value and moral realism, of the sacred, of possible paths that lead from "is" to "ought", of having an educational vision for a moral

education aiming at “the metaphysical task of completing the formation of a person”, and virtue ethical sentimentalism<sup>[1,2]</sup>, of having the feeling to act responsibly, or of our duty towards future generations.

On the other hand, rationalism, as the fundamental indispensable part for turning empirical knowledge to advantage, or even as the counter-part to empiricism, is often degraded, in our post-modern era, to instrumental rationalism and pragmatism, which-aiming to or based on empirical mostly calculating utilitarian concepts and results-also seems to reject essentially grounded approaches of socio-political, financial, ethical, educational and environmental issues.

Especially when measuring techniques or calculative methods are used, the joined action of empiricism and realism, particularly within a positivistic view which is mainly based on quantitative observations and statements, shows a lack of qualities, such as essential understanding of phenomena, practical wisdom-as it is defined by Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and applied on his *Politics*-, socio-moral sensitivity, feelings, intuition and imagination, which are necessary for right, relative political actions, for preventing wrong actions and evaluating the socially moral right ones. All these requirements are of significant importance to bioethical issues, and, thus, also, and I would say primarily, to environmental issues, in a wider sense of bioethics.

It must be said, from the very start, that the problematic and dangerous situation that mankind faces today, concerning greenhouse gases, temperature rise of the planet, climate change and crude disturbance of the equilibrium of the ecosystem, didn't appear suddenly. It is the result of the final prevalence-in all the “theaters and amphitheatres” of mankind, for more than six decades at least-of the most superficial, anti-essential, utilitarian, pragmatic, market oriented and one-sided profit-based attitudes and practices, at the expense of an essential and prudential approach of techno-scientific development and the eudemonia and flourishing of human and non-human beings on this planet.

Based on a brief historical and epistemological review of essentialism, on one hand, and empirical and calculative methods of thinking and acting, in connection with instrumental rationalism, on the other, the aim of the present work is to prove that environmental problems and their management, can't be studied and efficiently faced unless they are essentially understood as ensuing phenomena and actions which are deeply interwoven with our human-centered, utilitarian approach of thinking and politically acting. And that is, because within this market oriented utilitarian society—where superficial profit is the ultimate goal, and greed and profit prevails over socio-ethical standards and ecological equilibrium and sustainability—it is dangerously insufficient to address bioethical and in particular environmental issues with policies, that one-dimensionally and pragmatically try to face these issues in a positivistic way, superficially using empirically based quantitative methods and instrumental rationalism without all the other very important above mentioned qualities. To understand this crucial point of view means, subsequently, to think and undertake all necessary actions, in politics, education and ethics, in order to change our philosophy of life, which means in order to answer the ancient Greek and always valid question, how to live a good life.

## **Empiricism and the Lack of Essentialism: A Brief History-Philosophical Review**

Under epistemological consideration, there is an empirical, entirely anti-essential thread-the starting point of which can be detected at the 17th century, with its scientific revolution-connecting Comte's positivism and Mill's positivism and utilitarianism of 19th century with neo-positivism of the beginnings of the 20th century, and with pragmatic thought and practice of post-modern era. It must be emphasized, that this anti-metaphysical, anti-essential ideology is strongly related to today's scientism and technocratic way of thinking and operating in all areas of life, and more specifically in politics and government, economy, management, education and ecology. It is also related, based on scientism and technocracy, to the libertarian approach that science and ethics are two different fields, entirely unlinked.

Although essentialism was not entirely rejected from the empirical thought of the 17th century (Locke's philosophy is a characteristic example), its total rejection takes place with the appearance of positivistic, neo-positivistic and today's pragmatic ways of thinking and acting. This rejection, which also goes hand in hand with the separation of science and ethics<sup>[3,4]</sup>, can be easily detected in all fields of modern and post-modern times, from politics, economics, sociology and ecology to scientific work and its evaluation, management, education and its assessment.

In economics and economy in particular (and not only in this field), there is a very dangerous permanent and growing trend, within a positivistic and technocratic grounded libertarian context, to create and imply complicated but not sufficiently completed-especially concerning the exclusion of the very complex socio-ethical and cultural variables-mathematical models. This way, all different essential characteristics of societies and cultures, on which these models will be implemented, are not considered to be significant for the output of this implementation, and are, therefore, excluded, leading in inefficient and unfair results with bad socio-ethical as well as economic impacts. In this case we could speak of an economic disaster, also with implications on environment.

The utilitarian and pragmatic (in its philosophical sense) way of thinking and acting and the lack of essentialism connected to it, have also an impact to the quality of values that this ideology stands for, and subsequently for its ethical theory and moral practice. So, the important values for modern and post-modern society and its Techno-Science are

mainly epistemic and instrumental values, such as accuracy of measured data-when pressing deadlines and circumstances allow it–, their reproduction, objectivity, verification and falsification principles, leadership (an essentially not accurately defined feature, that also Hitler possessed) with instrumental or technical skills and competences (the three magic words for everyone’s evaluation in our days), utility and exploitation of knowledge and methods, or production efficiency and profit at any cost. Surely, all these values are of major importance for techno-scientific research and production activities, but are insufficient to morally face environmental issues on an essential basis.

Epistemologically, historically and socially related to the above mentioned utilitarian ideology is also the priority, in our modern and post-modern era, of effectiveness and profit, at any cost, with the subsequent acceptance of separation between facts and values and, consequently, between science and ethics, in contrast to an essential way of thinking and acting. So, a gradual transition from the ancient Greek “paradigm” to our modern and post-modern relativistic, utilitarian and pragmatic “paradigm” took place over the centuries.

In a brief account, milestones for this transition-regardless of their otherwise positively expressed small or great contribution to the theory of ideas and society-were: a) Roman culture, with its materialistic, utilitarian and regal power of pragmatic thinking and acting, b) Augustinus’ utilitarian and pragmatic philosophy, c) especially the 17th century, with its scientific revolution and the Baconian as well as Cartesian ideal of conquest and exploitation of nature, d) the Enlightenment, with its subjectivism as well as its rejection of metaphysics and the category of the sacred <sup>[5]</sup>, e) the two industrial revolutions in England, in the late 18th and the late 19th century, f) the positivistic and neo-positivistic currents in the 19th and the 20th century, with their elimination of metaphysics, and finally g) the pragmatism of our post-modern times.

At this point it is important to note, that Socrates used to identify virtue with utility. Although referring to knowledge in a utilitarian way–considering it, *prima facie*, as practical knowledge, that is a knowledge of conduct and way of life, as well as of self-knowledge–he understands it in a more intellectual, essential and absolute way, not yet identifying it with empirical knowledge and trying to acquire it choosing the right method. In a passage of Plato’s *Protagoras*, Socrates appears to discuss the measuring art, as a scientific method, as a useful tool for acquiring science, for the evaluation of an act and the possession of virtue and *eudaimonia*. On the basis of the importance of Socrates’ philosophy, his *prima facie* utilitarian views–which are entirely different from the utilitarian considerations of our days–are more essential than practical, since they seek the care and the salvation (utility) of the soul.

Moreover, according to Plato’s *Republic* <sup>[6]</sup>, the Pythagorean, in its essence, necessity for governors to undertake a very close study of the science of numbers is “not for using this knowledge as merchants or peddlers, but on war, as well as in order to facilitate the soul to change from becoming to truth and essence” (525b 11-c6). Indeed, his metaphysically grounded idealistic philosophy, is very far from materialism, positivism and in a superficial way considered pragmatism, and, thus, deeply grounded in essentialism.

Although more empiric than Plato’s philosophy, Aristotle’s political theory is also based on a rejection of greed, and on essential and prudential ground as mentioned in his *Politics*, virtues are not possessed based on material goods, but rather material goods are gained with virtues, and *eudaimonia* is associated with ethics and intellectual strength and not with the possession of material goods (1323a 38–1323b 6); moreover, as it is already mentioned in his *Nicomachean Ethics* <sup>[7]</sup>-that the good and the just are the objectives of political science (NE, 1094b 14-15), and that politics is strongly associated with ethics (NE, 1094b, 5-7)–Aristotle famously advocates that “no man and no city can achieve something good without virtue and prudence” <sup>[8]</sup> (*Politics*, 1323b 29-34). According to the Greek philosopher, moral virtue aims at the final Good of human *eudaimonia*, which is the final end of our actions, and is not individualistically oriented, but seeks the “common Good” and *eudaimonia* of the entire society (NE, 1097b 20-22, καὶ 1177a 10).

And here arises, as Sandel underlines, in an Neo-Aristotelian way <sup>[9]</sup>, “one of the great issues of political philosophy: shall a just society promote the virtue of its citizens?” Or shall the legal system remain neutral towards the opposing views on virtue, in a way that the citizens shall be free to choose by their own the best way of life?” Sandel advocates, that despite our absorption in welfare and freedom, we can’t free ourselves from the concept of justice, that particularly and fundamentally demands, beside our choices, virtue, as an essential presupposition for the reflexion on a better way of life. So, politics and ethics should care and cultivate the virtue of the citizens.

In our case, as we are seeking, within an ethical context, the first, deeply grounded causes of environmental pollution, we do not only mix up causes and results, but we often confuse means with ends, taking the means principally as the ultimate goal of our efforts. However, measurable values, as economic costs, efficiencies, outputs, wealth and growth are only means in our essential effort to achieve a good life, an examined life, according to Socrates, that is worth-living. So, essentialism should also play a major role as a methodological tool in politics, for creating a substantial world-view-with an analogous political practice-as well as the proper socio-ethical sensitivities that will allow us to live an essential life and find a substantial happiness (*eudaimonia*).

Taking all these into consideration, we must consider the possibilities and degrees of freedom we have, in order to face environmental issues and environmental policies in general, within a so ethically and morally hostile economical and socio-political globalized framework.

## **Environmental Ethics and the Lack of Essentialism in Post-Modern Socio-Political Actions**

The crucial question to be answered is whether we can understand and morally face environmental issues thinking and acting within an economic and socio-political system, that totally rejects any substantial deliberation and discussion of issues that do not directly contribute to the increase of profit, or governmental or military power at any cost.

So, let us firstly discuss, in brief, some characteristic ways, in which our market and profit oriented globalized society tries to face environmental issues.

A rational method that can be used in moral evaluation of scientific and technical enterprises and applications, such as environmental issues arising from the rapid and uncontrolled development of biotechnology (for example bio-fuel production from mono-crops farming), is the following four-step procedure<sup>[10]</sup>:

- Analysis of the existing situation (list of parties involved, their interests and positions)
- Analysis and characterization of moral principles and intuitions
- Evaluation, from a moral point of view, of the posed arguments
- Implementation of the final suggested positions

The last step of implementation is surely a matter of political enforcement by the authorities; and the main question here is whether a political system, that acts within a utilitarian and pragmatic ideology and a society (properly led by this system), that worships and promotes profit at any cost are capable to essentially proceed to the above mentioned method-which means that the political authority and the society would already have accepted to deliberate and act within an ethical and moral context-and how easily would such a choice be made, “especially when scientism, technocracy, economism and, finally, a positivistic and pragmatic view prevail over ethically and morally grounded science, technology, economics and a substantial, holistic and unifying view in world-politics, world-economics and scientific and educational institutions”<sup>[11]</sup>.

With regard, for example, to biofuels production from monocrops farming (“fuel vs. food”), the major arguments that favor it are of utilitarian nature, while the opposing arguments are also, and mainly, socially and ecologically centered, and more specifically, they are of strong socio-economic and bioethical (including the environmental) nature. Indeed, “these issues are strongly related to our socio-ethical sensibility towards the problems that the farmers will have to face, as well as to the intrinsic value that the environment shall have for us, as an aesthetic value as well, disconnected from any utilitarian considerations”<sup>[11]</sup>.

As also Gomiero et al. relatively underline<sup>[12]</sup>, “there is a need to conduct serious and deep analysis on the environmental and social impact of large scale biofuels production before important energy policies are launched at global level”. And the question that here arises is what else is a “deep analysis” than an analysis within the context of essentialism? Or, referring, within a more general perspective, to another argumentation that concerns environmental issues, it is mainly our greed and shortsightedness that basically cause ecological disasters, and what is needed to avoid them is the virtue of prudence<sup>[13]</sup>, which in my opinion is strongly associated with a capability to seek causes and argumentations within a framework of essentialism.

So, the basic question that arises here is whether the political system is able to conduct such a serious and deep analysis, to avoid power games and acts, greed and shortsightedness, practicing the virtue of prudence and creating the proper conditions-under which the above mentioned socio-ethical sensibility and the recognition of the environment’s intrinsic value can flourish –, if it chooses to argue and act outside of a theoretical and practical context that should be deeply characterized by essentialism. Indeed, this choice is not an easy step to make, since positivistic, technocratic, bureaucratic and utilitarian-pragmatic views (considered in an entirely incorrect and mostly superficial and shortsighted way) prevail, within a strongly antagonistic society, that being accordingly organized on a political, socio-economic, and techno-scientific level displays all negative features of scientism, technocracy, economism and an one-sided, utility oriented worldview.

Let us pose, at this point, a crucial specific question, which characteristically shows the difficulty of taking the right action within the libertarian context. Indeed, and it is not necessarily a thought-experiment, how easy do you think it would be, for his future in the company, for a maintenance engineer to propose and take the decision to stop for some days the constant oil production at a platform in open sea, in order to undertake, necessary in his expert opinion, maintenance works, and perhaps some innovative experimental work, which could give new useful information for the prevention of a future disastrous sea water pollution, that had great possibilities to happen? We, clearly don’t know how

easy it would be, because such a decision would hardly take place, without the maintenance engineer being removed of his position. The same picture can always be found in international governmental affairs and politics.

Another characteristic example, as it is proposed by the one-sided, profit oriented economists is the method of the fusion (incorporation) of the economic devices. According to this method, which can be implemented by the private sector, “when, for example, an industrial enterprise A pollutes with its wastewater a sea area, causing troubles and reducing the productivity of a fishing enterprise B, the two enterprises can be incorporated in a way that the ‘external’ influences would now become ‘internal’, and the new enterprise would now adjust the production levels of the two joined activities to the new data of the production cost” [14]. I am afraid that this method is not only applicable for a very small number of enterprises, as it is mentioned in literature, but runs the risk, as the pollution is not really faced, to produce—after a while, when the new incorporated private enterprise will become bigger and economically stronger—greater external pollution. Furthermore, it must be emphatically noticed, that according to libertarian economists, “the pollution must be limited to that point at which the cost of technical improvements, for a further limitation of the pollution, begins to overcome the benefit from the damage decrease (caused by external charges), that pollution generates” [14]. Taking all these into account we are obliged to admit, that without a prudential and decisive intervention of the political authority with its necessary and properly oriented policies (and it is not easy to take precautionary measures within the libertarian context, against the free market philosophy), no enterprise in the private sector will easily abandon the pursuit of profit in order to address the issue of pollution.

But to put economy over politics, in the way that today’s politics has allowed it to happen, is surely not an essential and prudential act, not only for the people but also, at the end, for the economic system itself. And prudence, that is reflection within the context of essentialism, is needed to acknowledge it.

Moreover, scientific reports constantly prove and advocate that climate change cannot be easily stopped, that the ideas and technology applied to stop the planet over-warming are not sufficiently effective, until now, that market-oriented pollutant distribution policies not only show a lack of essential confrontation with the problem, but are rather a dangerous joke, and that there is no guarantee that we have not moved, with regard to climate change, to an irreversible situation. So my question is do we have, ethically and morally, the right to let greed govern our lives, and play Russian roulette with our children’s lives and the lives of future generations?

On the other hand, I don’t think that all these problems would be solved by changing from capitalism to Marxism. Marxism, indeed, can theoretically show some positive features and intentions, and, thus, a more promising chance, theoretically only, to master the human greed and the corresponding social and environmental problems connected with it. As Jonas refers [5], ‘the greater rationality in the management of the Baconian heritage’, ‘the advantage of total governmental power’, the ‘enthusiasm for utopia’ that can be ‘transmuted into enthusiasm for austerity’, and finally ‘the advantage of equality for the readiness to sacrifices’, could theoretically constitute some positive presuppositions on the side of Marxism. Though, unfortunately, as political practice and environmental policies have shown—within the anti-democratic, totalitarian communistic regime—all these characteristics could not be comprehended in their essential sense, and no serious attention to environmental issues has been given. So, essentialism can only be comprehended and exercised within an enlightened and responsible liberal society.

## CONCLUSION

It is argued, that one-sided profit oriented society cannot base its socio-economic philosophy on essentialism, and politically face environmental issues within a wider, deeper founded context that mainly differs from its own. In other words, this society does not have the fundamentals, the philosophy, firstly to recognize the urgent situation of the environmental problems, secondly to relate these problems with its own way of thinking and acting and thirdly to suggest, against its profit oriented interests (which, in its eyes, would be a contradiction in terms), ideas and practical solutions in order to politically promote essential qualities, values and virtues and consequently address the problem of environmental pollution in a satisfactory and secure way.

A possible solution can only come from a radical change of our worldview, with an overcoming of our greed and selfishness, in order to deeply understand the urgency of the situation and the great danger of planet over-warming, and to politically act properly, especially aiming, within the context of essentialism, at the political formation of a society that in a wider framework prudentially seeks its substantial happiness, and in a more particular context the necessary interventions, in order to face the today’s acute environmental problems. And this enterprise can only be undertaken within an enlightened liberal and responsible society.

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