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The Oxford Handbook *of* THE HUMAN ESSENCE

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John F. Dovidio

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Martijn van Zomeren is Professor of Cultural and Political Psychology of Social Relationships at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He received his Ph.D. *cum laude* from the University of Amsterdam in 2006, received various dissertation awards, early career awards, and grants, and is an international expert on collective action, activism, and social change. The main theme in his work is the importance of theoretical integration in the various fields that he has contributed to, as reflected in his 2016 book, published by Cambridge University Press, entitled *From Self to Social Relationships: An Essentially Relational Perspective on Social Motivation*.

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PREFACE

What is the *human essence*? Although typically viewed and addressed as one of the "big" questions in philosophy, modern advances in social psychology inform us about what makes us human and what *moves* and *motivates* us in our very essence. In this volume, we have assembled an array of psychological answers to the same "big" question about what it is to be human. Social-psychological answers are absolutely pivotal because the question about the human essence requires a deep and comprehensive understanding of the human condition vis-à-vis a rapidly changing modern world. Are we rational actors? Are we evolutionary survival-seekers? Are we political animals? Indeed, the human essence is not just an academic notion but also very much a political, societal, and practical "big" question. The question of the human essence is thus of central interest to students and scholars in, for example, psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and cognitive science. Simply asking the question already promotes reflection and easily sparks debate both within and across disciplines.

This volume articulates what social psychology can tell us about what makes humans unique and illuminates why it is important for a science of human behavior to develop broader and integrative theories that acknowledge the many different human essences that define us. The volume includes the perspectives of leading international scholars in the field who offer a range of stimulating perspectives for understanding the core issue of the human essence. The contributors offer a broad and diverse set of intriguing answers to the question of what is the human essence based on cutting-edge social psychological theorizing and research. The chapters also raise new and important questions about human nature and identify new directions for future inquiry into this foundational issue. One key observation across all of the chapters is that the field is in need of "bigger-picture'" and integrative theorizing.

Importantly, the chapters are written in an essay-like style that allows contributors to articulate what the human essence is without jargon or empirical details. Furthermore, this volume uniquely brings together scholars who otherwise would not be found in conversation, expressing perspectives ranging from evolutionary approaches to the human essence to social constructivist accounts that essentially deny its existence. As

such, the volume offers a unique view on social psychology, as well as on human nature and existence more generally.

We gratefully acknowledge all of the assistance that we have received in creating this book. Oxford University Press has provided invaluable guidance and support at every stage of the project. We appreciate the encouragement, support, and patience that our spouses, Marieke and Linda, have displayed; their support was invaluable at every phase of the project. We also acknowledge the support of Luzia Heu, who searched hard to find a fitting illustration of the human essence for the front cover of this book. In addition, we are indebted to our colleagues and our students for challenging us to address issues—such as, What is the human essence?—that transcend the specific research questions that typically occupy us. Their insights, reflections, and, sometimes, challenges stimulated us to ask this question, one that is unusually broad in social psychology but is among the most important and influential questions to address.

We also acknowledge the financial support we have received from several funding agencies during the time we have worked on this volume and for supporting the work that created the foundation for this project: for Martijn van Zomeren: NWO VENI Grant 451-09-003; for John Dovidio: NIH/NHLBI 2RO1HL085631-06, NIH/DHHS R01DA029888, and NSF 1310757.

In conclusion, understanding what makes us human is critical for the study of human behavior, institutions, and policy. How we answer the question about what is the human essence not only determines our scholarly agenda but also shapes our personal perspectives on others, our relationships with them, and the decisions we make in our daily life. These assumptions influence how we view the past and the ways we choose to navigate the future. This volume provides diverse scholarly perspectives on the human essence in ways that will thus benefit students, scholars, and those who simply value important insights for understanding who we are in our very core.

The Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence

Introduction

CHAPTER

1

Introduction: The Human Essence

John F. Dovidio *and* Martijn van Zomeren

Abstract

This introductory chapter discusses the meaning of the human essence in psychology and the potential impact of answers to the question of what is the human essence can have on the field. It highlights key perspectives on "the human essence" presented in the volume, with particular emphasis on the reciprocal relationships among individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness. The chapter explains how the evolution of humans' cognitive abilities produced both unique individual capacities, such as powers of reflexivity, and social adaptations, such as the development of culture. It also discusses individuality as a human essence, which is a view expressed in in several chapters of the volume that draw insights from work on existential psychology, meaning, free will, self-evaluation, goals, and basic physiological processes. Another common theme it identifies across several chapters is that the capacity for change and growth through the pursuit of truth, beyond individual self-interest, represents the human essence. The chapter concludes with an overview of organization and the content of the other chapters in the volume.

Key Words: communication, cultural embeddedness, evolution, individuality, essentialism, existentialism, motivation, self, sociality, theory

In this volume, the human essence represents the *attribute or set of attributes that make human beings what they fundamentally are, which they have by necessity, and without which they would lose their identity as human beings*. Questions about the human essence have occupied scholars and laypeople for centuries. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre have offered influential but fundamentally different insights into the human essence, all of which had significant social implications historically as well as in contemporary life. Yet contemplating what is essential about human beings is not just a philosophical exercise. In fact, within psychology, much of the classic study of psychoanalysis, including works by Freud and Jung (Slife & Williams, 1995), made foundational assumptions about human nature and thus about human essence. Social psychology, at its earliest roots, also wrestled with this question. In one of the first social psychology textbooks, McDougall (1908/1936) posited that social behavior is governed by a set of primary instincts (flight, repulsion, curiosity, self-abasement, self-assertion, and parenting), which broadly governed thought and action. The parenting instinct, for example, produced the capacity for tender emotion, which

McDougall believed motivated a range of human prosocial behaviors involving "generosity, gratitude, love, pity, true benevolence, and altruistic conduct of every kind" (McDougall, 1908/1936, p. 61). This early interest in the human essence across different areas of psychology is unsurprising because understanding the very core of being human permits the development of a comprehensive science of human beings and their behavior.

Yet surprisingly, within psychology the question of the human essence has received only limited attention recently. This is perhaps because of the strong focus in contemporary psychology generally, and in social psychology in particular, on experimentally manipulable variables with immediately observable consequences (i.e., the power of the situation; e.g., Milgram, 1974). Because of this tendency, psychology and its subfields tend to have many different and isolated theories and models to explain human behavior, but the number, heterogeneity, and sometimes inconsistency of these explanations highlight the need for theoretical integration and bigger-picture theorizing (Ellemers, 2013; Kruglanski, 2001). This kind of conceptual synthesis is crucial because assumptions about the human essence influence what issues psychologists pursue, how they address these issues, and how they interpret the results (Duarte et al., 2015; Slife & Williams, 1995). The main goal of the present volume is to bring the question and assumptions of psychologists out of the scholarly shadows. By bringing this question into the light, the volume considers the potential promise (and pitfalls) of addressing the question openly, showcases the various social-psychological perspectives on human essence, suggests links between and among them, and makes those insights available for a broad audience.

In line with observations about the theoretical and empirical fragmentation in psychology (Van Zomeren, 2016), this volume reveals a broad and diverse set of promising and intriguing answers leading scholars in the field of social psychology to the simple question of what it is that is so essential about us. The sophistication of the answers and the conviction with which these scholars express their views indicates that it is a question that needed to be asked. The array of answers, reflecting sometimes-conflicting perspectives, demonstrates that the question about the human essence is a timely and generative one. Indeed, advances in social-psychological theorizing and research suggest that humans can be viewed as biological beings as well as cultural creatures, rational reasoners as well as emotional enigmas, moral minds as well as amoral agents, just to name a few. If there is a human essence, it seems to be rather diverse in kind.

It is exactly this richness of perspectives that we showcase in this handbook, in which we assemble key theoretical accounts of "the human essence" in social psychology. We do so by allowing eminent leaders in the field from different meta-theoretical traditions (e.g., essence based in *individuality, sociality,* and *cultural embeddedness*) to write focused, clear, and concise essays about what is the human essence. In addition, we invited a discussant for each of these subthemes to respond to these essays and consider commonalities and differences and, where possible, opportunities for theoretical integration.

In the remainder of the introductory chapter, we ponder the meaning of the human essence in psychology and consider the potential impact on the field of answers to the question, What is the human essence? We then describe the organization of the book and the rationale behind it. We

follow that by presenting brief overviews of each chapter, highlighting key themes within and across chapters.

What Does Human Essence Mean?

To promote coherence and consistency in focus across the chapters, we presented the authors who contributed to this edited volume with the same working definition of the human essence—the one with which we began this chapter. This view of the human essence may include uniquely human attributes (e.g., our awareness of being mortal, our perception of free will), but it may also reflect attributes shared with other animals but which may be distinctively human in form or in combination (e.g., our ability to be equally aggressive and pro-social). While providing a unifying thread spanning the volume, our multi-faceted definition of the human essence permitted authors to focus on various aspects in identifying the key elements of the human essence.

Several authors focused on qualities that are *uniquely human*—those that do not appear to exist, based on current scientific knowledge, in other animals—as defining elements of the human essence. Baumeister, for instance, articulates this position in his chapter. He describes the human essence as "crucial aspects of human behavior that are *qualitatively different* from non-human behavior. Humans are animals too and are capable of acting like animals, but they have additional mental powers that animals lack, and human behavior is accordingly shaped by processes and meanings that are radically different from what is seen elsewhere in nature" (p. 48).

A number of chapters in this volume posit that the evolution of humans' cognitive abilities produced both unique *individual capacities*, such as powers of reflexivity, and *social adaptations*, such as the development of culture. A number of authors (see for, example, chapter 3 by Proulx and chapter 2 by Sullivan & Palitsky) identify the existential experience as the defining factor in the human essence—that we are autonomous, responsible, and conscious beings who are aware of our existence and of our mortality. Proulx asserts that the human quest for *meaning* lies at the heart of the human essence. The expansiveness of human thought permits people to think beyond the present, and the ability to imagine creatively allows humans to conceive of and pursue *alternative futures* (see also chapter 14 by Reicher). The capacity to reflect on who we are forms the basis for particular motivations that also define the human essence. Two of these motivations, described by Gregg and Sedikides in chapter 5, relate to self-assessment, which involves understanding about who we are through objective and social information, and self-enhancement, which reflects efforts at *self-improvement* (see also chapter 6 by Cornwell and Higgins).

The uniqueness of human qualities identified by chapter authors also extends to *social* aspects of our existence. Baumeister, in chapter 4, further proposes that humans' cognitive capacities enabled us to develop other, distinctly human qualities to facilitate group life. According to Baumeister, the ability to recognize and exert *free will* enables humans to control immediate impulses, delay gratification, and make choices in ways that are necessary for complex social systems to develop and flourish. The capacity and reliance on sophisticated language systems are critical for creating complexly coordinated societies and, ultimately, culture. As Kashima suggests in chapter 16, one facet of *language* is that it allows people to reflect collectively on their experience and to seek answers together, for instance about the human essence. The development of culture also requires the

regulation of social life around core principles, or *values*. Values define what is right and wrong for individuals and provide standards for evaluating oneself and, important for effective social group functioning, others (see Ellemers, chapter 12). As Cieciuch and Schwartz explain in chapter 18, values are uniquely human and there is a universal set of values, but various cultures differ in assigning priorities to them.

Rather than restricting human essence to qualities that only humans demonstrate, several chapter authors identify the human essence in an attribute that may be similar to one observed in other species but which is distinctly different in humans. For example, in her chapter, Ellemers offers examples of animal *morality*, such as empathy and self-sacrifice for cohorts. However, she argues that morality in humans, even if it is rooted in similar origins, is more complex and multifaceted because it "encompasses more abstract, *symbolic* implications of specific behaviors that can become dissociated from their original survival value" (p. 148).

The qualities that we share with other animals but that have evolved in distinctive ways in humans play important roles in shaping human relations. Schroeder and Graziano, in chapter 9, contend that whereas many other species exhibit *empathy*, it should be identified as an important element of the human essence because "the nature of human empathy as represented in dyadic helping situations goes beyond the automatic reactions of nonhuman species . . . ; the prosocial acts that result from these sophisticated social links are unique to human relations in terms of both affective and cognitive qualities" (p. 119). Nadler contends in chapter 10 that although *helping* is common among conspecifics in other species, the flexibility with which humans employ helping to convey compassion or status is a defining feature of helping within the human essence. In chapter 7, IJzerman and Hogerzeil describe *thermoregulation*—the regulation of body temperature for optimal functioning—as a fundamental process across species, whether cold-blooded or warm-blooded. The necessity of this process for survival embeds it as part of the human essence, but what makes it a distinctive element is the extension among humans to its role in regulating social relationships and influencing the structure of society. One might argue whether these distinctions between human and nonhuman morality, prosociality, and thermoregulation reflect difference in degree or in kind. Regardless of the specific nature of the difference, these distinctive human attributes can be argued to qualify as elements of the human essence.

Finally, some authors identify as elements of human nature qualities that are part of the human essence but which we directly share with members of others species. For example, Vandello and Puryear discuss *aggression* as a key element of the human essence in chapter 11. Yet many other species, including insects, are also aggressive. Thus, the human essence may refer to attributes shared not only with animals that are closely related to us evolutionarily (such as other primates), but also with many that are distinctively different. Excluding aggressiveness from the human essence would thus deny an important element of what it means to be human.

What Is the Value of Identifying the Human Essence?

We, the editors, initiated work on the *Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence* because we believe that addressing the core question about what defines being human is both of broad interest among scholars, students, and laypersons, but also a foundational question for the science of human

behavior. As we articulate in more detail in the concluding chapter of the volume (Van Zomeren & Dovidio, chapter 22), we observe that research in psychology, generally, and in social psychology, in particular, reflects many discrete theoretical endeavors—thus reflecting an entrepreneurship model of science. We believe that significant conceptual progress in the study of human behavior requires more attention to broad, unifying theorizing. This brings us to the focus on the human essence: Understanding the human essence would represent a key element of a unifying theory because it shapes foundational assumptions about what, how, and why people do the things that they do. If one wants to know, for example, why people take part in mass demonstrations, then assuming them to be rational actors or emotional responders to injustice will probably lead to very different mobilization strategies. Different assumptions about the human essence have quite different implications for research, policy, and practice (Slife & Williams, 1995).

This point is worth repeating: Understanding the human essence is not just an academic notion but also very much a political, societal, and practical "big" question. After all, political actors often seek to move or otherwise motivate individuals in society (e.g., to vote, to pay taxes) and thereby assume a certain human essence (e.g., individuals as rational actors that seek to optimize self-interest). Similarly, governments and other forces of social order often treat their citizens as if they are responsible and accountable individuals, just as politicians themselves are treated as if they are responsible and accountable representatives. Such assumptions, however, may be incorrect as much as they are incomplete.

We self-consciously brought together authors from different areas of social psychology who would not typically be found within the same volume or in scholarly conversation, specifically to display the diversity of views on the human essence. The volume is also designed to allow for reflection and debate about the human essence through the presence of discussant chapters for different sets of chapters. Thus, we anticipated some disagreement and actually welcomed it. Indeed, while the volume identifies compelling candidates as elements of the human essence, there seems to be no consensus on a single defining feature.

We view this diversity of perspectives as a strength of the volume because these perspectives, in fact, do triangulate on some common themes. Collectively, the chapters suggest that understanding the human essence requires recognizing the aspects of human evolution that are *shared* with other species, such as the need for coordinated group activities and hierarchical organization of groups, as well as those aspects that are *distinct* in form (e.g., prosociality) or existence (e.g., self-reflexivity) from other species.

The different elements of the human essence identified by authors in the chapters of this volume highlight the reciprocal *relationships* among individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness—the three main topical sections in the volume—in shaping the human essence and uniquely human experience. Humans' advanced cognitive capacities enabled people to think beyond the present, exert restraint and recognize free will, and understand that we exist and some day will not exist. These unique self-reflexive capacities form the foundation for motivations to better understand who we are as individuals and to become better than we are. These motivations operate in a social world, which leads us to pursue our duties and responsibilities (what we

should do) and our ideal goals, our hopes, and aspirations. They lead us to adopt values shared by others, and to behave morally, which enables the collective to operate effectively. Communication with language and symbols helps us develop shared experiences and form shared beliefs and values; these are the building blocks of culture. And our cultures, in turn, shape our values, beliefs, aspirations, and imagination. Individuality, sociality, and culture operate in concert and recursively, influenced by and contributing to what we mean by the human essence.

Although we expected a diversity of views and some controversy related to authors' different positions on the subject and suspected that there would be some challenges concerning whether the human essence was a valid concept to begin with (e.g., Gergen's chapter), we did not anticipate some concerns authors expressed about the potential pitfalls, and even danger, of asking questions about the human essence. We appreciate these reservations and note some here, because they are important cautions. Asking questions about the elements that comprise the human essence carries with it certain assumptions and promotes a particular view of human existence. Kashima observes in his chapter that the question we posed to authors "assumes that the category of humans can be defined by attributes, that is, some identifiable objects or substances that characterize the category" (p. 196) and "tends to paint a stark, all or none, *classical Aristotelian view* of the human category, which presumes a sharp boundary between humans and nonhumans" (p. 197). We, the editors, acknowledge these valuable points.

An additional set of comments, one voiced by other authors in addition to Kashima, is that asking a question about what is the human essence might imply an answer that emphasizes attributes that may widely perceived as unchanging and unchangeable. As Reicher notes at the beginning of chapter 16, making attributions to the human essence has been a tool often used by members of dominant groups to maintain a social order that benefits them. Specifically, to the extent that dominant groups control the cultural narrative, efforts to identify the human essence are likely to create depictions of the human essence that hold qualities associated with the dominant group as the standard that defines being human, potentially relegating other groups to categories that are subhuman. Reicher explains that how the human essence is defined can naturalize the status quo, which legitimizes the status quo and significantly limits social change. This has been a recipe historically not only for oppression but also for genocide.

However, while respecting these important cautionary arguments, we, like Reicher, agree that the threat is not in asking the question about what is the human essence but in biases that shape the way the question is answered. Without asking the question, we cannot identify and correct such biases. Indeed, many of the attributes that the authors of the chapters in this volume have identified highlight the capacity to be flexible (e.g., through free will), expansive and inclusive in thinking and action (e.g., in identifying with others, being prosocial), and fair and just in behavior as the fabric of societies. A common theme across several chapters is that the capacity for change and growth through the pursuit of truth, beyond individual self-interest, represents the human essence.

Acknowledging the need to be both cautious and critical of the positions held by the authors and editors of this volume, we explain the organization of the volume and provide brief synopses of the chapters in the next section.

Organization of the Volume

We structured the volume into three sections (*individuality, sociality,* and *cultural embeddedness*) that focus on different levels of analysis of the individual in a social world. A strong focus on individuals' hearts and minds is consistent with an emphasis on *individuality*, whereas an emphasis on social interaction and relationships reflects a broader perspective on individuals in their social contexts (*sociality*). Finally, an even broader perspective involves individuals in social contexts that reflect distinct systems of meaning (i.e., culture). From this point of view, *cultural embeddedness* implies a consideration not only of what is universal about human essence but also what is variant across cultures. Such different assumptions have different implications, for instance in terms of the methods preferred and used to study human behavior. Psychological studies of individuals' cognition, attitudes, and behavior typically rely on theories that embrace human *individuality*. For example, studies often use experimental methods that intentionally put individuals in isolated cubicles where they make choices in very "minimal" social settings (e.g., social dilemmas, minimal group paradigm). As such, any real-life social interaction with other individuals is avoided (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). This is quite different from assumptions about the human essence that revolve around *sociality*. Assumptions about the sociality of the human essence almost certainly involve other people, one's relationships with them, and social interaction and learning processes that lead them to act in less "minimal" and thus more real-life settings. Consequently, this requires different theories and methods about what motivates individuals to do the things they do (Reis & Gable, 2015).

Third and finally, one can go another step further by moving outside of an often given, even taken-for-granted, cultural context (e.g., Western democracies; Henrich, Heine & Noranzayan, 2010). *Cultural embeddedness* implies not just a view of individuals in their social context, but also a view on the broader system in which these individuals are embedded. Studying cultural embeddedness requires different theories and methods that identify key dimensions on which cultures differ, often based on large and longitudinal cultural databases.

Of course, not all contributions to the volume will fit perfectly with the theme of the section under which they appear. But this nicely communicates one of the aims of this volume, as both the commonalities among chapters within a section and the chapters that bridge different thematic sections help us in complementary ways to identify the essence of all these different views on the human essence.

Chapter Overviews

In this part of our introduction to the volume, we briefly preview each chapter to provide a general overview not only of individual contributions but also of what is to come collectively.

Section 1: Individuality. The first section of the volume explores individuality as the human essence. The seven chapters in this section (chapters 2–8) address this issue with insights from work on existential psychology (by Sullivan & Palitsky), meaning (by Proulx), free will (by Baumeister), self-evaluation (by Gregg & Sedikides), goals (by Cornwell & Higgins), and basic physiological processes (by IJzerman & Hogerzeil). The concluding chapter of this section (by Van Zomeren) compares, contrasts, and synthesizes the various perspectives presented in these chapters on individual-level processes and the human essence.

Sullivan and Palitsky, in their chapter, "An Existential Psychological Perspective on the Human Essence," consider the existential experience a defining quality of the human essence. However, different areas of psychology adopt different perspectives on this experience. Clinical existential psychology generally characterizes the human condition as "insusceptible to total apprehension by means of categories and heuristics" (p. 24). As a consequence, clinical existential psychologists typically focus on the whole person, appreciating the individuals' unique qualities, rather than on symptoms or events, while also acknowledging their own role as part of the client's world. By contrast, experimental existential psychology, exemplified by terror management theory (e.g., Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015), emphasizes humans' unique capacity to be aware of their own mortality. When people become reminded of their mortality, they reaffirm psychological structures, such as religious or nationalistic beliefs, that normally buffer experiences of death anxiety and adopt a range of defenses to relieve feelings of threat. Sullivan and Palitsky integrate elements of these two existential perspectives in psychology and argue that the human essence is that individuals are unique—relative to other animals and to each other.

In his chapter, "Masters of Our Universe: The Existential Animal," Proulx also draws on existentialist perspectives to bridge contemporary research in psychological science with classic work in philosophy, specifically Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, and popular culture. Proulx explains how the kinds of processes discussed by psychologists are reflected in archetypes described by Nietzsche (Knights and Priests) and represented by characters in current popular media (e.g., in the animated series, *Masters of the Universe*). These characterizations are "cultural metaphors that allow insight into construals of human essence" (p. 41). Similar to other scholars in this volume, Proulx credits humans' particular cognitive capacities as foundation for humans' unique status as existential animals. According to Proulx, the continuous search for meaning combined with the cognitive capacity through which to achieve this sense of meaning represents the human essence.

Baumeister's chapter, "Free Will and the Human Essence: Responsible Autonomy, Meaning, and Cultural Participation," identifies free will as a distinctive element of the human essence. Baumeister defines free will as the capacity for free action, which is intentional behavior "based on rational thinking by an agent who is not being coerced by external factors" (p. 48). According to Baumeister, free will is a distinctly human quality that evolved to enable the development of culture. Culture helps humans address biological challenges of survival and reproduction, but it requires "responsible autonomy"—personal choices for actions that balance the achievement of individual objectives and control with respect for the rules of society. Free will enables humans to engage in the control of impulses and the ability to make rational choices that are needed to achieve complex forms cooperation with others. Baumeister concludes, "Nature made us for culture, and part of that involved giving us what many people call free will" (p. 56).

Gregg and Sedikides, in their chapter, "Essential Self-Evaluation Motives: Caring about Who We Are," propose that the "essence of being human is caring about *who* one is and wishing for it to be some desirable way" (p. 67). Humans' unusual cognitive capacities permit recognition and understanding of the self as an entity in ways that distinguish them from other

animals and to represent the self not only in what it currently is but also in what it can be. Accordingly, our two most fundamental motivations, which are important elements of the human essence, are *self-assessment* (involving pursuit of objective knowledge about the self and to verify that knowledge) and *self-enhancement* (relating to achieving and maintaining high self-esteem and self-improvement). Gregg and Sedikides conclude that "the essence of being human is caring about *who* one is and wishing for it to be some desirable way, but at the same time having the conclusions one wants to draw constrained by rationality" (p. 67).

Cornwell and Higgins build on the idea of the motivational foundation of the human essence in their chapter, "The Tripartite Motivational Human Essence: Value, Control, and Truth Working Together." They identify the human essence in terms of a unique combination of three fundamental motives working in concert—value, control, and truth. *Value* motivations involve basically the goals of approaching pleasure and avoiding pain. However, in humans, value motivations are more elaborate, involving drives to achieve ideal goals related to hopes and aspirations; (a *promotion* focus) or to fulfill duties and obligations—what one "ought" to do—and avoid losses (a *prevention* focus). The *control* motivation relates to Baumeister's focus on free will: It involves the motivation to achieve self-efficacy and exert free action. The *truth* motivation has the goal of an accurate, coherent, and consistent understanding of one's physical and social environment. Cornwell and Higgins show that these motivations are highly influential individually, but the authors further explain how this particular configuration of motivations uniquely define the human essence.

IJzerman and Hogerzeil, in "People as Penguins: Thermoregulation as Part of the Human Essence," discuss how basic physiological processes and needs shape the social nature of the human essence. Building on findings that higher-quality social networks lead to happier, healthier, and longer lives, these authors highlight the central importance of having loving and caring relationships. However, IJzerman and Hogerzeil ask the additional, and even more fundamental, question of *why* people have a need to belong. They offer the intriguing proposal that "thermoregulation—the regulation of body temperature—is not only essential for staying alive, but it is also an essential feature of the human need to belong and for social integration more generally" (p. 84). The authors provide numerous and varied examples of the implications of social thermoregulation in human behavior, including maternal behavior, morality, and hierarchical relations within groups, and they conclude that thermoregulation is "an important universal" for warm-blooded animals that live in groups generally, but particularly so for humans, who live in uniquely complex societies.

Finally in this section, Van Zomeren discusses these diverging yet relatively individualist views of human essence in his chapter, entitled "The Obviousness and Obvious Limits of Individuality as Human Essence." The seeming obviousness pertains to locating the human essence in the individual body, brain, and mind. As Van Zomeren contends, it is difficult to see how we can ignore hearts and minds when considering the human essence. At the same time, a focus on body and mind brings along some old yet unsolved philosophical issues such as the body-mind problem. Furthermore, Van Zomeren discusses the obvious limits of locating the human essence primarily within the individual given the importance of influences from outside the individual, such as groups and culture, which critically

shape human existence and behavior. Van Zomeren thus suggests that what if we use the notion of individuality, we may be missing that what happens *between* individuals cannot be reduced to the experience of either individual alone. This set of observations constitutes a window on the next two sections.

Section 2: Sociality. Chapters 9–15 in the second section of the volume all explicitly address the social nature of the human essence with respect to interpersonal relations and group processes. These chapters identify qualities that are linked to different facets of human exchange as elements of the human essence. The qualities include prosociality (by Schroeder & Graziano), helping (by Nadler), aggression (by Vandello & Puryear), morality (by Ellemers), justice (by Tyler), and collectivity (by Reicher). Giner-Sorolla, in his discussant chapter, offers commentary and original insights into the role of sociality in the human essence.

In their chapter, "Prosocial Behavior as a Human Essence," Schroeder and Graziano assert, "Prosocial behavior is at the center of our human existence—*it may be a central part of the human essence*" (p. 109). They define prosocial behavior as actions that bring benefits to others and are essential for binding humans in relationships and groups; thus, "if they were disabled or removed, individuals lacking these abilities would be unable to enact critical, species-typical activities that make us humans" (p. 109). Because prosociality is observed across a range of species, the authors do not argue that it is uniquely human, but they do assert that being human requires the presence of prosociality. Moreover, they contend that "the helping, sharing, and apparent cooperation of other organisms lack the unique and complex qualities that characterize the essential nature of human prosociality" (p. 110). The unique nature of human prosociality and the fact that this prosociality is critical for humans to function collectively qualify it as an important element of the human essence.

Nadler's chapter, "The Human Essence in Helping Relations: Belongingness, Independence, and Status," builds on the assumption and is closely aligned with the position of Schroeder and Graziano in asserting that "helpfulness is the behavioral glue that makes up solidarity in relationships and groups" (p. 123). Nadler also argues that it is not helpfulness alone that distinguishes humans from other species, but it is the specific qualities of human helpfulness that make it part of the human essence. Moreover, Nadler makes the novel argument that helpfulness helps humans balance their needs for belonging and independence. For example, in human and nonhuman groups, helping builds prestige. Also, strategic helping between groups, more specifically forms of helping that foster the dependence rather than autonomy of the recipient (e.g., direct provision of needed resource instead of instructions that would enable and empower the recipient to obtain the resource independently), can help establish or reinforce the status of one group over another. This flexibility and complexity make human helpfulness an important element of the human essence.

Vandello and Puryear explain in their chapter, "Does Aggression Make Us Human?," that aggression, which is common across species, is also a defining element of the human essence. They acknowledge that aggression "is just one strategy and cooperative behaviors were probably a bigger driver of human evolution" (p. 136) but propose that understanding that aggression is part of the human essence has important conceptual and practical implications. They review historical philosophical

perspectives on this issue, as well as psychological research on biological, environmental, personality, and situational influences on human aggression, incorporating cross-cultural, ethological, and evolutionary perspectives. They note, however, that even as an element of the human essence, expressions of aggression are not inevitable and can be overridden by cultural learning or social constraints. Therefore, Vandello and Puryear suggest that aggression might be best viewed as a "behavioral tool"—one that may have served the species well in its evolutionary history but may be less necessary or effective in contemporary life.

In "Morality and Social Identity," Ellemers identifies moral norms and values, which distinguish between "right" and "wrong," as key features of human essence. Moral norms and values provide primary guidelines for the decisions people make and standards against which human behavior is evaluated. These moral judgments are used to regulate the behavior of individuals living together in social groups, with social exclusion as the ultimate sanction for moral transgressions. Ellemers reviews literature on animal morality but highlights the distinctive nature of human morality. She observes, "Human morality is different from animal morality in that it also encompasses more abstract, *symbolic* implications of specific behaviors that can become dissociated from their original survival value. It involves the cultural and social anchoring of specific moral guidelines, for instance in religions" (p. 148). Ellemers further explains how moral guidelines can be functional to the extent that they help provide such groups and their members with a unique and distinct social identity. However, because people often perceive their group as morally superior to other groups, moral norms and values also often contribute to social tension and intergroup conflict.

In his chapter, "Justice and Human Essence," Tyler makes a strong case for the notion that the human essence involves not only the ability to achieve justice but also the capacity to develop a consensus about what is just. He explains, "Justice is the grease that lubricates among the different and potentially conflicting desires of different people, allowing those conflicting desires to work together" (p. 160). While he allows for the possibility that other animals may also experience some form of a justice motive, he asserts that justice is essential to human functioning because it provides guidelines for managing conflicts and reaching agreements, allows people to decide when they should defer to authorities, and determines the degree to which people identify with collectivities. Tyler identifies a key question as to whether justice is a core element of the human essence because it facilitates cooperation or whether justice is a higher-order goal in itself.

Reicher, in his chapter entitled, "Biology as Destiny or as Freedom? On Reflexivity, Collectivity, and the Realization of Human Potential," adopts a broad perspective on the issue of social identity and the human essence. He cautions that allowing people—typically, those in the socially dominant group—to define the qualities that comprise the human essence invites them to select characteristics, which are difficult if not impossible to verify objectively, in ways that help reinforce the existing social hierarchy and legitimize existing inequalities. However, Reicher identifies the unique capacity of reflexivity not only as a likely element of the human essence but one that "creates rather than limits our possibilities. It makes us capable of manifold forms of social being, the distinction between which is a matter of choice rather than fate. It is the idea that *biology is freedom*." Reicher concludes "that 'human

essence' is a construct that has been used to maintain the worst of worlds but which can be a tool to create the best of worlds" (p. 182).

Giner-Sorolla, the discussant for this section on Sociality in his chapter, "Six Social Elements in Search of an Essence," acknowledges the diversity of perspectives represented by the chapters in this section while also identifying several common and interrelated themes. One such theme, on which the authors take different positions, is the relationship of "animality" to the human essence. Giner-Sorolla observes, "One view insists that animality is something that will always be with us, while the other believes in a progression from an animal state to one that highlights the more uniquely human characteristics" (p. 186). Another theme—this one shared across all of the chapters—is that "none of the uniquely human phenomena mentioned seems to be an unalterable reflex" (p. 187). Giner-Sorolla then speculates about whether the ability to question the nature of the human essence is in itself essential to the human essence in that (1) it involves a level of abstraction that is unique to humans and (2) it reflects a willingness to extrapolate observations into theory that extends beyond what can be directly observed.

Section 3: Cultural Embeddedness. The third section of this volume represents a more macro-level perspective on the human essence. It considers cultural embeddedness as the human essence. Chapters 16–21 in this section address issues relating to cultural communication (by Kashima), political participation (by Klandermans), values (by Cieciuch & Schwartz), relationships (by Adams, Estrada-Villalta, & Kurtis), and social-constructionism (by Gergen). In the final chapter of this section, Fischer identifies how these chapters converge on how culture, both as a cause and consequence, relates to the human essence, as well as on where and how the authors' positions diverge.

Kashima, in his chapter, "Talking about Humanness: Is Human Essence Talk a Human Essence?," elaborates on the unique reflexive capacities of humans, a thread that runs through several chapters in this volume, focusing specifically on "human essence talk" as a defining element of the human essence. Like other chapter authors, such as Reicher, Kashima warns about the potential danger of talking about the human essence because it "has a multitude of human implications, by delineating humans vis-à-vis 'non-humans,' and constraining our imaginations about what humans can potentially become" (p. 196). Nevertheless, with some irony, he proposes that human essence talk is likely to reflect the human essence, because it occurs cross-culturally, is rooted in the capacity to be self-aware, and involves symbolic representations of oneself and others as psychological agents communicating through language. This chapter converges with several other chapters in the volume in highlighting that humans' sustained interest in reflecting on what it means to be human, which gives meaning to being human, represents the core of the human essence in a way that is qualitatively distinct from other species.

Klandermans's chapter, "Promoting or Preventing Change Through Political Participation: About Political Actors, Movements, and Networks," identifies political participation as a unique capacity possessed by humans that "fundamentally shapes a human being" (p. 207). Political participation refers to actions by ordinary citizens intended to promote or prevent social and political change. Whereas several chapters in this volume emphasize qualities that enable humans to live in complex societies and cultures as candidates for the

human essence, Klandermans argues that political participation is uniquely important because it enables humans to change the societies in which they live. He reviews a constellation of individual factors that motivate political participation—including instrumentality, ideology, identity, emotion, and instrumentality—and the role of social-level factors –such as social networks. What makes the capacity for such behavior relevant to the human essence is that it involves action that is not driven necessarily by personal gain but often to achieve symbolic values in coordination, in spirit and in effort, with others.

In the chapter, "Values and the Human Being," Cieciuch and Schwartz review psychological and philosophical traditions in the study of values. Cieciuch and Schwartz describe, based on empirical work, a circular model representing a universal set of values and their relationships. One axis on which of the model is situated is anchored by Growth—Anxiety Free at one end and Self-Protection—Anxiety Avoidance at the other end; a second, perpendicular dimension ranges from Social Focus to Personal Focus. On this circular model, values that are motivationally compatible (e.g., benevolence and universalism) are close together, whereas values that are motivationally in conflict (e.g., self-direction and conformity) are on opposite sides of the circle. Whereas the motivational meanings of the values are universal and defined by their location on the circle, the language used to articulate values is a product of culture and therefore differs cross-culturally. The authors argue, based on the larger literature on values and their own cross-cultural research, that because values are essential to being human and the likelihood that only humans use the category of values, that values are a critical element of the human essence.

Adams, Estrada-Villalta, and Kurtis, in their chapter, "The Relational Essence of Cultural Psychology: Decolonizing Love and (Well-) Being." address how aspects of interpersonal relations may speak to the human essence. They contrast the historically influential essentialist perspective in psychology, which assumes that entities have specific fundamental properties, with a decolonial approach, which recognizes how conventional scientific wisdom is not only culturally influenced but is also significantly shaped by the limited perspective represented by western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Henrich et al., 2010) cultures. These authors, who adopt the decolonial perspective, emphasize that "human essence does not emerge 'just naturally' as the simple expression of some genetic blueprint, but instead requires engagement with corresponding cultural affordances" (p. 235). The authors highlight the "the relational essence of being by illuminating its foundations in collective, cultural-historical processes." (p. 239). The facts that environmental conditions can shape cultures historically and these cultural differences can determine how individuals relate to each other, both socially and intimately, suggest that while the human needs that motivate relationality may be common, the essence of being human resides in the enormous variety of ways that cultures, and the individuals within them, can adapt how they relate to others and their historical circumstances.

In his chapter, "Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction," Gergen compares and contrasts cognitive, neurological, and evolutionary/genetic orientations to understanding the human essence. He observes, "Historically, the three orientations have not only tended toward separation, but even antagonism" (p. 250). He further highlights an important limitation

that all three of these orientations share. Gergen explains, "the prevailing view of human essence treats the individual as a bounded being, one who possesses within (the body, the cortex, the mind, the genes) the major determinants of action" (p. 252), and he challenges these orientations collectively for their individualist ideology. Instead, he emphasizes social and cultural embeddedness in the human essence. Humans can be seen, for example, essentially as "cultural carriers" and as selves "inextricably woven into the social milieu" that are a reflection of others' views of them. Gergen emphasizes, however, a third perspective representing a relational conception of human nature in which concepts of human essence are culturally constructed and that prioritizes relational process over individual functioning.

Fischer's discussant chapter for the section on Cultural embeddedness, "Human Essences and Cultural Embeddedness: A Gene-Culture Co-Evolution Perspective," attempts to frame biology and culture as different and competing influences in shaping the human essence, explaining that "culture *is* biological. Biological processes shaped over millennia have culminated in a species that has the ability to read and write, play computer games, and fly airplanes" (p. 262). He then pursues this perspective to highlight the distinctive emphases of chapters in this section and offer critical analyses of them. He explains how the cumulative and complex aspects of human culture help define the human essence. Whereas other species also have culture, human culture is distinguished by the degree to which individual innovation over time and across space is transmitted and by how humans' elaborate and socially consensual division of roles and statuses enables the dissemination and adoption of innovation.

In our concluding chapter of the volume, "Human Essence in Conclusion: Why Psychology Needs a Bigger Picture and How to Get There," the editors review the three key aims of the volume and assess how well each has been achieved. These three objectives are (1) to highlight the diversity in theoretical perspectives in social psychology on the human essence; (2) to focus attention on the potential value for the field of asking bigger-picture questions, such as about the human essence; and (3) to outline an organizational structure for different perspectives on the human essence. The elements of this structure are represented by the sections of the volume on individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness. Van Zomeren and Dovidio explain how these different "lenses" through which researchers view the human essence affects what they see and what they come to understand about human behavior. The editors conclude by emphasizing the complementary nature of the various types of analysis, and they propose that by asking primarily broad and fundamental questions—such as, What is the human essence?—the promise of that complementarity can be realized theoretically and empirically.

Conclusion

Asking the question—What is the human essence?—poses many challenges. It is, at the outset, a controversial endeavor, as the views expressed in the chapters of the volume attest. Some authors question whether there is such a thing as a human essence. Other authors allow that it does exist but caution about the inherent dangers of asking such a question: How people choose to answer the question may be shaped, often unconsciously, in ways guided by motivations to affirm a researcher's or a particular society's values and beliefs. Science does not occur in a vacuum; it is often shaped

by culture and sometimes by personal bias (Slife & Williams, 1995). Assertions and conclusions about the human essence can thus justify social inequity and perpetuate system-justifying myths cloaked as scientific truths (Duarte et al., 2015). In addition, even if we successfully navigate this minefield of potential biases, the diversity of perspectives presented about the nature of the human essence in this volume reveals little consensus among scholars (Van Zomeren, 2016).

Although some may view this as an indication of the futility of such a project, we see both the controversial aspects of the question and the variety of answers as evidence for why this volume is important and timely. The question is one of great scope, much larger than those typically addressed in scientifically based psychological research. It is not surprising that there will be some trepidation among scholars attempting to answer it. Like the classic story of the blind men in the dark who touch an elephant in separate places to learn what is like, each investigator might reach a different conclusion, and these conclusions may seem contradictory. However, using a different metaphor, these interpretations are also different pieces of a puzzle, and without any one piece the puzzle cannot be completed. This volume has assembled the pieces and, while recognizing the different perspectives that produced these pieces, begins the arduous process of assembling them into a coherent picture. We acknowledge that we are at the beginning, not nearing the end, of that process. But no journey can start without taking a first step.

In conclusion, we reiterate two of the most compelling reasons that it is so important to promote this process of asking and answering the question about the human essence. The first reason is that, as we highlighted earlier, assumptions about the human essence influence the research questions that psychologists ask, how they conduct their work to answer these questions, and how they interpret their empirical findings. Failure to acknowledge the influence of these assumptions allows them to operate unchecked in ways that can contaminate scientific "truth." The second main reason to address the issue of the human essence is because the study of highly focused theories in psychology in isolation, even if the theories are convincingly supported, can advance the scientific study of human behavior only to a limited degree. The whole, indeed, is more than the sum of its parts. Encouraging researchers in the field, through the stimulating positions advanced by the leading scholars in this volume, to move beyond theoretical fiefdoms to take a broader and more integrative perspective on the human essence thus promises new and unique opportunities for forging a truly comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

Further Reading

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SECTION 1

Individuality

CHAPTER

2

An Existential Psychological Perspective on the Human Essence

Daniel Sullivan *and* Roman Palitsky

Abstract

Existentialism arose in the 19th century as a philosophical countermovement to perspectives prioritizing universal human essences over the uniquely situated nature of each human existence. Two schools of existential thought—the *dialectical-psychological* and *cultural-phenomenological*—have exerted divergent influence on the contemporary movements of experimental and clinical existential psychology. While clinical approaches stress the patient's phenomenological situation and need for meaning, experimental existential psychology employs modern quantitative methods to test hypotheses regarding threat and defense processes. Despite different emphases, existential perspectives see the human essence as characterized by three qualities: (1) the uniqueness of the human species and the individual; (2) the indissolubility of the person and the situation; and (3) the ubiquity of freedom and threat in human experience. In an attempt at synthesis, we trace these themes across clinical and experimental existential psychology, highlighting how these perspectives differ from mainstream approaches in their explanations for phenomena such as depression.

Key Words: affective intentionality, clinical existential psychology, depression, existential threat, existentialism, experimental existential psychology, psychotherapy, self-determination theory, terror management theory, human essence

Psychology has always been concerned with understanding not only the human essence, but aberrations of that essence—in other words, with the thoughts and behaviors of individuals who have difficulty adapting to everyday social life. Yet how are such problems typically conceived? Consider, for instance, the problem of a person going through depression. A typical clinical psychologist—say, someone trained in cognitive behavioral therapy—would attempt to determine the behaviors, automatic thoughts, and core beliefs contributing to the depression and systematically work to alter them. A typical social psychologist would focus on anomalies in the person's attributional style—whether they demonstrated "depressive realism" (an absence of positive illusions about self and world) or whether they were prone to rumination.

To what extent do these perspectives do justice to the heterogeneity of individual experiences of depression? Consider some excerpts from narratives provided by depressed patients in Ratcliffe's (2015) book *Experiences of Depression*:

> [Depression] would feel like I had a large nautical rope threaded through my stomach, with a knot bigger than both my

> fists together at the front pushing on me under the weight of an anvil behind me (p. 77) . . .
>
> I felt slightly pulled back from reality, as though there were cotton wool between my brain and my senses. A feeling of exhaustion often prevented me from being able to interact with the world (pp. 31–32) . . .
>
> I'm not a proper human being, I am a failed human being. Everything that goes wrong in my life is directly my fault . . . I am a waste of a human life (p. 135).

These vivid examples point to the fact that there is something missing in the typical accounts of depression. Even if these accounts have some accuracy, they seem sanitized and remote when confronted by such stark testimony. We propose that this is because Western scholarship typically breaks the human essence into parts that are studied separately. Often, this essence is dichotomized in some version of mind-body dualism: there is the material world, and then there is human subjectivity, and while these interact in a mediated way (subjectivity "filters" the outside world) they are never fully merged (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015). Yet in these examples, it is clear that the experience of depression—like any human experience—involves interrelationships among world, body, and mind that can never be truly decomposed.

Mainstream models have achieved improvements in treatment efficacy; nevertheless, the dualistic or mediational views that have accompanied them are inadequate for the movement in thought known as existentialism. In the 19th century several European philosophers commonly surmised that what was lacking in social science was an accurate image of the *existing human being* in contemporary cultural circumstances (Barrett, 1962; May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958). The work of these reactionaries developed into what could be identified as two distinct "schools" of existential thought. The subsequent strains of existential philosophy have produced a certain fracturing of perspectives across disciplinary and methodological lines within existential psychology. In this chapter we hope to make some advance toward integrating existentialist perspectives by illuminating how their different emphases can be united in a core set of themes representing a global existential view of the human essence.

Historical Overview: Two Schools of Existential Thought

The dialectical-psychological school. In the mid-19th century, Kierkegaard (1954) laid the groundwork for what has been called the "threat dialectic theory" in existentialism (Sullivan, Landau, & Kay, 2012). According to this theory, people oscillate on a regular basis between two opposing "poles" of threat. These poles are, on one hand, the threat that occurs *prior to* action in the world—associated with abstractness and the emotion of uncertainty-related anxiety—and on the other, the threat that occurs *following* action in the world—associated with concreteness and the emotion of guilt. Sartre (1943/2001) referred to these poles as the anxiety of *transcendence* and the guilt of *facticity*. Sartre further contributed the notion of *bad faith*: the thesis that people attempt to deny the radical ambiguity of their dialectical nature by defensively oversimplifying their existence (e.g., compensatory investment in social roles or patriotism).

To clarify these ideas, consider an example of the threat dialectic as it might occur in the context of depression. Clinical depression is characterized by repetitive thinking that takes the form of worry or