Properties and Accidents Reveal What Things Are

We turn back to the distinction between accidentals and essentials, and more specifically to the distinctions among accidentals, properties, and essences. We have seen that the essentials of things must be distinguished into their properties and their essences, and both of these must be differentiated from the accidentals that occur to things and are predicated about them. More needs to be said about these three dimensions of speech and the interactions among them.

Step One: Predicating Accidentals

All three of these components – the accidentals, the properties, and the essences – can be predicated of things, but they are predicated of them in different ways. For that reason, they have classically been called the “predicables.” Thus, we might say to someone, “Susan was smiling when she entered the room.” In this case, we predicate “smiling when she entered the room” accidentally of Susan. Susan was smiling at that moment, but she might have been scowling or glaring instead. If we were to say, “But remember: Susan is capable of smiling,” we would probably be predicating the power to smile as a property of Susan. In the antique terminology, we would be saying that she is risible. (If we were reporting this as a mere fact, however, perhaps as the fact that she can now smile again after having been grieving for a month, the predication would be accidental; we would not be reporting on what she is essentially capable of doing, but on what she is now able to do in these circumstances.) Finally, if we were to say, “Susan, after all, is a rational being,” we would be predicating “being rational” as part of what she is and not just as a property that she has. The feature would be declared as part of her essence or definition. It is not something that she is capable of but something that she is. Predication, therefore, is not univocal. It can occur in any of these three ways.
When we converse with others, most of our statements are of the first kind, accidental predications. The predication of accidentals is informative because the accidental does not necessarily “go with” the thing in question, and people have to be advised whether or not the feature does in fact belong to it. There is nothing odd about an accidental predication; it is the default manner of saying something about something. There is something odd, however, about the other two. Thus, in my previous paragraph, I had to add the phrases “but remember” and “after all” to the second and third examples in order to make them plausible. There is nothing unusual about telling someone that Susan was smiling at a certain moment, but there is something peculiar about observing that she is capable of laughter or that she is rational. Normally we do not say such things, nor do we need to say them. If the listener knows who and what Susan is, he would not need to be told about her properties and essence. Still, sometimes it is necessary to say such things, and it will be philosophically important for us to determine when the necessity arises.

We might be tempted to think that accidents, properties, and essences are to be explored in ontology, in the science of being. They seem to be different kinds of features of things. They do in fact belong to things, but they show up as such ontological features in our speech and through its syntax. They are correlated with different kinds of activities on the part of people engaged in discourse. They belong not just to ontology but also to what we could call the theory of judgment or the phenomenology of speaking and thinking. Exploring the differences among accidentals, properties, and essences will not only clarify the way things are; it will also clarify what speech is, what we are as agents of disclosure, and how we are actualized in our discourse. The contrasts among accidents, properties, and essences, furthermore, are not to be correlated simply with human “consciousness,” but with conversation. They show up primarily not to a single mind but to minds activated in the reciprocities of speech.

We are trying to examine how things show up in syntactic speech. We should mention at the start that our inquiry ought not to focus just on single judgments. Judgments don’t normally occur one by one. Each judgment is indeed a unit, but it is a unit within a larger whole. In order to give a philosophical analysis of judgment we must focus on a whole conversation, a series of judgments that gradually unfold the thing in question. A conversation or a discourse is the proper whole within which the judgment can be philosophically understood. True, we sometimes do make a single statement, but this is unusual and should not be taken as the standard. If we focus on a single judgment, we lose all the flexibility and nuance that are in play when things are made to show up through speech. As we proceed in our analysis, we may take single judgments as our examples, but we need to remember that any particular judgment belongs to a series of reciprocal statements made in conversation.
Step Two: Moving On to Properties

When we speak, we bring something before ourselves and our interlocutors and we say something about it. Normally, we say something that is accidental to the thing. We inform our interlocutor about the thing; we say, for example, “Anselm was smiling as he spoke to the class.” In this speech, Anselm is manifested as featured in a certain way at a certain time.

Standard predications serve to disclose an object as having some accidental feature. Every such feature, however, is nested within a property: Anselm was smiling, but he was able to do so because as a human being he has the property of risibility, which can be actualized in different ways or not activated at all. We might also have said that Anselm was not smiling; being risible belongs to him essentially and always, but smiling does not.

Each accidental predication specifies a property. The property itself, however, is not stated in the predication. If Helen says, “Anselm was smiling,” she does not have to add, “and he is risible.” She assumes that her interlocutors know about this property and do not need to be informed about it. Smiling is, after all, just one of the activations of the power we call risibility, and if we are familiar with the actuality then we must have a sense of the potentiality behind it. The property remains unstated when the accidental is declared. When we highlight a feature we do so, necessarily, against a background that is unstated. The background property could become declared in our speech, but its way of coming to light is different from that of the accidental nested within it, and the way a speaker declares a property to someone is different from the way he declares an accidental. He also treats the listener differently.

The fact that all accidental features are given as nested within a property shows that predications have a certain “depth.” They have two dimensions and not just one. They are not confined to the dimension of the predicate that has been stated. Even to say something simple, such as “The box is green,” makes the assumption that the box has the property of being colored, but no one normally feels obliged to tell another person that boxes are colored. If you know what a box is, you would know that it is colored, because being colored is a property of being a box and of any spatial, material object. You would not, however, necessarily know that it is green, because being green might or might not belong to it. If a speaker were to pull back and say that the box is colored, it would be more to remind the interlocutor of what he already knows (or should know, or was presumed to know), not to inform him about the box and its properties.

A property is a potentiality or a power, and it can be realized in multitudinous ways. Bodies have shape, but any given body has an indefinite range of figure and size. Human beings are risible, but they can go from grins to belly laughs, from a giggle to a guffaw. If properties “flow” from
the essence of a thing, they each in turn issue in a waterfall of possible
accidentals.\footnote{I am grateful to Joshua Maroof for this image.} Any time we use a word to designate a feature of a thing, we
surreptitiously invoke the distinction between potentiality and actuality. We predicate the feature, but we do so against the unspoken background
of the potentiality, and we at least implicitly know both of them, the
feature and the property. The potential and the actual are not just
dimensions of things but also dimensions at work in our speech. They
function within the contents that are ordered by the syntax of our
statements.

It would be wrong, therefore, to think of predicates as mere labels that
we attach to features (or to ideas we have of features). They are not one-
dimensional. They select a feature within a range of options located within
the property that underlies the feature, and we need to specify the feature
because there are so many other ways in which the property could have
been actualized. This selection is made possible not just by the virtualities
of the language; it is not just that English gives us a range of words to
designate the various kinds of risibility (laugh, chuckle, snicker, giggle,
chortle, titter, smile, grin, sneer, guffaw); English gives us these possible
choices in vocabulary because we can be engaged in a continuum of
actualizations of our risibility. Some of them have become encoded in the
language, but there are a lot of variants that do not have distinct names,
such as the kind of laugh that comes between a sneer and a giggle. Acci-
dental predicates, therefore, implicate a property as the potentiality
behind them.

Step Three: Moving On to the Essence

The property itself, however, is not at the bottom of what comes to light in
speech. The property is nested within something still deeper, the essence
or the definition of the thing, but it is nested within it in a manner dif-
f erent from the way an accidental feature is nested within the property.
The property is not a specification and actualization of the essence (as
“smiling” specifies and actualizes “risibility”). The property is different
from the essence and yet it “flows” from the essence as from its “source.”

But these terms are metaphors. Can we say more about how the prop-
erties are related to the essence? How do the properties and the essence
come to light when we speak? We have already seen, in Chapter 7, that our
awareness of properties gives us an implicit glimpse of the essence from
which they flow; properties and essence are given concomitantly. Let us
examine how.

Whenever we predicate something of something, the something about
which we say it serves as a kind of receiver. It is like a tub or a basket, that in
which the accident and the property are to be placed. To use the classical term, it is a substrate, that which “lies beneath” the features we designate as its predicates.\(^2\) But these formulations are also metaphorical, because predication has nothing spatial about it and the entity that underlies the accidents and properties is obviously not really a tub or a basket. Predication is a logical maneuver and not a spatial one. Still, we do use such spatial terms when we speak about predication, and they do seem to tell us something. Metaphors will not mislead us if we know that they are metaphors. Can we unpack them?

Predication is a public performance. When we predicate we do two things. First, we bring something into the center of our conversation, and, second, we declare something about what we have introduced. Our first move, bringing something into the discussion, is done in view of the second. We bring the thing forward in order to say something about it, not to eat it, not even just to look at it. We bring it forward to bring it to light through syntactic articulation. When we introduce the entity (by saying something like “This ...” or “The sleeping dog ...”), our interlocutor waits for us to complete our statement. If we were to stop there, if we were to say or indicate nothing more, he would wait for a moment and would then say, “So? What about it?” No matter how pragmatic the context of our speech may be, there is something simply contemplative about each predication.

And obviously, to bring something into the conversation, to “haul it into court” for judgment, does not necessarily mean that we bodily toss it out in front of us and our interlocutors. Sometimes we do point something out; sometimes we do take the thing out of a box and place it before the others; but most of the time we speak about things that are absent. Normally, we converse about what is not there before us. That we can do so is remarkable, and it shows the power of speech to master absence. It also shows how nonspatial and nonbodily our identifications and predications are.

So the first step is to introduce an entity into the conversation, to establish a reference. But bringing an entity into the conversation may be quite complicated, and it may stand in need of two or three steps. Sometimes we simply mention the thing’s proper name, or we use a common noun or a descriptive phrase, and the thing has been successfully entered. At other times, however, we may have to delimit or define the thing we are bringing into the discussion. We may not have made it clear to our interlocutor what we are talking about, so we need to make a further explanation before we can say anything about the thing. The thing is not yet adequately there; we need to specify the topic, and the conversation is

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\(^2\) When Aristotle discusses the meanings of entity or substance (\textit{ousia}) in \textit{Metaphysics}, VII 3, he first examines substance as substrate, as \textit{hypokeimenon}, because that is the sense that is most obvious to us. He moves on, however, to substance as essence as being more primary.
put on hold for a moment until the thing is entered and the discussion can go on.

When we do specify what we are talking about, we have not yet said anything about it. Rather, we have simply defined it, and definition is not the normal kind of predication, in which we state something informative about a subject. Aristotle himself tells us that knowing the nature of a thing is different from predication, but he does not mention the conversational context in which the distinction can most evidently be seen. Definition simply introduces something into the conversation, while predication articulates some feature belonging to the thing we have successfully introduced. We are dealing with two different moves in the conversational game.

Suppose that we try to introduce something into the conversation and the interlocutor does not know what we are talking about. We begin to define the thing we have introduced. To define something, we must start with something that we do not need to define, so we start with the genus, which is not just an ontological dimension of the thing in question but a dimension that the interlocutor is familiar with. We cannot speak of a genus entirely apart from the conversational setting in which it is presented as such. Suppose that we are in the middle of a conversation and we want to speak about aardvarks; we say something like, “Well, consider aardvarks; they come pretty much in one size . . . .” But our interlocutor has no idea what they are (a form of Dutch cottage cheese? a kind of potato?), so he interrupts us and says, “Wait a minute; what are you talking about?” He cannot identify what we have tossed into the conversation, so all the predications we would go on to make about it, all the features we would drop on it, all the accidentals we would state about it, would be pointless. They would be left suspended, hanging in the air with no substrate to come down on.

So we respond to our interlocutor’s question by interrupting our conversation; we stop predicating and back up from the thing we want to introduce; we move back to a genus, to a genus that the interlocutor knows: “It’s an animal. You know, of course, what an animal is.” Once we are assured that the interlocutor knows the genus, we begin to specify it: “It’s an animal that lives in Africa; it’s nocturnal and about five feet long; it’s like a pig with a long snout, large ears, and a long tongue; it burrows in the ground, and it eats termites. That’s what an aardvark is.” These features are given not as predications but as specifications, as parts of a definition. They are being used merely to establish a reference, to enter an entity into the conversation, not to continue the conversation itself. We have interrupted the predicational drift of the conversation in order to clarify, by a definition, the thing that we are introducing into the discussion.

In this case of the aardvark, the specifications were properties of the thing. In other, more elegant cases, the specification can be carried out by simply giving the difference that identifies this kind of thing in contrast with other things. In such cases we would give the “specific difference,” and we would have a purer kind of definition, in which we were able to provide the genus and difference: “You don’t know what an oligarchy is? It’s a political form (you know what that is) in which the wealthy rule.” Such a specification of a genus by means of a “difference” is the paradigmatic form of definition. The “rule of the wealthy” is not a property of an oligarchy but its substance, its defining difference. The rule of the rich does not flow from oligarchy but defines it.\(^4\) There are, however, many instances in which we cannot determine the difference; what sort of genus and difference can one give for aardvarks? In such cases, we define by giving some of the properties that distinguish the entity, not by giving its specific difference.

How can we get an elegant definition, one made up of genus and difference? By making a distinction, which is to say, by bringing out a difference. More specifically, it can be done by making the strategic distinction that differentiates this kind of thing from all other kinds. The distinction would differentiate the thing from its proximate things, those with which it is likely to be confused. Whenever we make a distinction, we are implicitly defining a thing. To speak somewhat redundantly, we are specifying a species. We are differentiating the thing within an encompassing genus, and we are doing it for someone, in order to carry on a conversation. We may not spell out the entire definition for our interlocutor; we may not declare the genus and the difference; most of the time the genus is left unspoken because it can be taken for granted.\(^5\) It is the context or the horizon within which we specify what we want to introduce into the conversation. But there has to be a genus if the distinction is to have friction and give us a grip on things.\(^6\)

When we, in our philosophical analysis, speak of something unknown as being introduced into the conversation, we are not talking about the unfamiliarity of a word, but the unfamiliarity of a thing. If it is the word that is unfamiliar, the speaker could always provide a synonym; but if

\(^4\) Presenting a definition as though it were an accident can be exploited in jokes: “There is one positive thing you can say about money: it’s a good medium of exchange.” Money is not a medium of exchange; it is the medium of exchange.

\(^5\) The genus is like the major premise in an enthymeme, the syllogism appropriate to rhetorical argument. The major premise in an enthymeme does not need to be stated because it is the expression of an opinion that everyone shares. To state it would be to state the obvious. The genus also does not normally need to be stated, but it becomes necessary to mention it when we must define something and need to back up into the genus in order to get a starting point for the definition.

\(^6\) On the importance of the genus as a setting for distinctions, see Robert Sokolowski, “Making Distinctions,” in his *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 66–9, 75, 82–5, 88.
the interlocutor is unfamiliar with the thing, then no synonym will help. It is then that an explanation by means of genus and difference is needed. The fact that one is using a genus and difference is a sign that one is explaining a thing and not just a word.

A Remark about Our Method

We must interrupt the discussion of our three predicables (the accidental, the property, and the parts of the essence or definition) to make some remarks about the method we have been following. We have been treating these three dimensions as they arise in human speech, and more specifically in human conversation. We might be inclined to discuss the three in a more purely metaphysical way and to think of accidents, properties, and essences simply as aspects of being, apart from any human involvement. Some things are substances, others are properties of substances, and still others are just accidents. The accidents don’t count for much ontologically; they have a very feeble hold on being and are practically nothing, but the other two kinds of beings, substances and properties, are more robust. All three dimensions, the weak and the strong, belong to things in themselves.

Have we, in our analysis, diluted the metaphysical import of accidents, properties, and essences? Have we “relativized” them by connecting them to the human conversation? Have we made them into dimensions that arise only when we project human thinking into being? Not at all; what we have done is to bring out the subjective conditions that allow the objective distinctions to be disclosed.

When we converse with other speakers, we talk about things. We articulate them syntactically, and, as we have claimed in Chapter 5, the formal structure of syntax is a residue of public conversation. As we articulate things syntactically, we allow the distinctions between accidents, properties, and essences to come to light. The syntactic form serves as a kind of frame within which the difference between accidentals and essentials comes forward in the contents of what is being presented, and this occurs as we turn to one another in conversation. These differences are not just read off things in themselves; they arise when things become phenomena and legomena, but both phenomena and legomena involve accidentals being contrasted with essentials. There are no conversations or manifestations in which these differences do not come into play, in which we do not distinguish between people who know what they are speaking about and people who are lost in coincidentals and talk without understanding.

The differences in question do not just arise over against a single mind that exercises different kinds of intentionalities toward things. They arise over against people engaged in conversation, telling things to one another and introducing different entities into the conversation. The various
intentional acts are not just rays that emanate from our brains (from someplace behind our eyes) and stretch toward things; they are accomplishments in our conversation. A definition, for example, is not merely a combination of words that somehow matches the way the thing is put together; it is a successful entering of an entity into a conversation.

Consider how a dictionary can be understood from this perspective. In this view, the many definitions in a dictionary are not so many verbal representations of things in the world; they are, rather, so many potential entrants in the human conversation, so many things waiting to be called into the exchanges between one speaker and another. When we look up a dictionary definition, we do so not simply to bring a form into our minds but to be able to say something to someone about something. We discover the things that are, but as they are for speakers.

I would like to use some Husserlian terminology to clarify the place of human conversation in distinguishing among essences, properties, and accidents. In his phenomenology, Husserl wishes to give two kinds of analyses, “noetic” and “noematic.” A noetic analysis focuses on intentional acts, such as perception, memory, and categorial articulation, and it tries to describe their structures and relationships. A noematic analysis focuses on the objective correlate to the noetic intentions: it describes the perceived object as perceived, the remembered object as remembered, the categorially articulated object (a state of affairs) as articulated. In his analyses, however, Husserl primarily works with the solitary person and his consciousness; he analyzes “my” mind as carrying out these various intentionalities and disclosing the objects that are given in different ways to me.

But “I” as engaged in thinking am not actualized as “me” except as played off against another speaker in discourse. As stated in Chapter 4, I wish to offer an improvement on Husserl’s descriptions. I would have the noetic analysis focus not on a single mind but on the persons engaged in conversation. From this perspective, a predication is not just my mind rising from perception to intellectual articulation, but one speaker manifesting an object to another by saying something about it and thus bringing out one of its features. The state of affairs correlated with an activity of judging is, therefore, not just a state of affairs over against me and my own consciousness, but a state of affairs, a phenomenon and a legomenon, articulated by one speaker for another. A genus is not just an overarching background for a differentiation I want to make in my own experience of a thing; it is the setting that the conversationalists are both familiar with, the setting within which I as one speaker can bring out for another the difference between this thing and that.

We can clarify this adjustment by looking to a doctrine that Husserl develops in Cartesian Meditations and in his other writings on intersubjectivity. An important step in his analysis is to reach what he calls the “sphere of
ownness” (*Eigenheitssphäre*). He proposes that we try, imaginatively, to think away any dimension of other minds. This “reduction to the sphere of ownness” is not like the factual removal of other persons (in that case, the sense of other persons would remain, but nobody would be there). We are to abstract from the very dimension of other persons, and see what would be left in our experiencing, as well as in the world given to our experiencing. This residue would be the sphere of ownness. Husserl claims that in this sphere we would still have a world with permanent bodies in it. Our own body would stand out as different from the others (we would still “hold sway” in it); we would still experience spatial mobility and kinesthesia. Husserl knows that we could never exist in this way – the sphere of ownness is an abstraction, not a concrete possibility – but he undertakes this philosophical maneuver in order to show what is added to this abstract sphere when other persons come into play. It is a device that he uses to clarify intersubjectivity and the experiencing associated with it, and to show that his philosophy is not solipsistic.

But Husserl seems to imply that categorial intentionalities could be imagined to occur in the sphere of ownness. He does not make a special point of this, but he does not deny it either, and he does explicitly say that there are “eidetic objectivities” within the sphere of ownness. I would claim, however, that categorial forms and syntactically shaped experience could not be thought to occur in the sphere of ownness, because such syntax is the deposit of conversational action, and such activities could not occur without the presence, in principle, of other speakers.

In adjusting Husserl’s thought in this way, I do not merely add the domain of conversation to the solitary consciousness; rather, the categorial level belongs first and foremost to the intersubjective exchange, not to the single mind. To discuss thinking, with its use of syntax, we must start with conversation. The noematic structures are constituted in this context, not in the solitary consciousness, and their structure can only be understood as correlated with the noetic intentionalities of human conversation. We do at times engage in private cogitation, but such solitude is the marginal instance and the aberrant situation. What Husserl describes is the extreme case and not the normal.

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8 Husserl’s purpose in developing the theme of the sphere of ownness is often overlooked. He observes that the tone of his transcendental philosophy might make people think they are being led into solipsism, and he wishes to counter that impression. The reduction to the sphere of ownness is not a dive into solitude but part of an argument that shows that we and our minds are not solitary. See ibid., §42, p. 89, and §62, p. 150, where he says, “The illusion of a solipsism is dissolved.”
9 Ibid., §47, p. 105.
One more point needs to be made concerning genus and difference as parts of definitions. In scholastic philosophy, the notions ‘genus’ and ‘difference’ are said to be “second intentions.” They are not predicated directly of things themselves, as “first intentions” are. Genus and difference are predicated of things as known by us, as conceptualized or as present “in the mind.” They arise when the intellect reflects on itself and on what it contains. Here again, I would like to change the emphasis and publicize these issues; I would claim that “first intentions” are primarily said of those things given to the participants in conversation, and “second intentions” are the dimensions that arise when things are reflectively considered as spoken about and known by the conversants. Genus and difference should not be treated philosophically by considering a single mind and examining how it articulates things and reflects on itself; they come forth primarily when one speaker attempts to introduce a new topic into his conversation with other speakers. He appeals to a generic background and makes the strategic distinction that defines the thing in question for his interlocutors.

Properties and Essences as Mysterious and Obscure

The dynamic and differentiated interplay among essence, property, and accident occurs in regard to every name. It is not just full-fledged substances like trees and horses that have essences, properties, and accidents. Any thing that is nameable in any way engages these dimensions. Traffic, for example, is not a full-fledged substance, but it can be named and articulated in the manner we have described. If a speaker says, “Traffic . . .,” the part of the

10 See, for example, Robert W. Schmidt, S.J., *The Domain of Logic according to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 127: “Logic is concerned with the nature under the aspect of these intentions which follow its existence in the intellect and not under that of the existence which it has in external reality.” See also p. 128: “There is nothing in reality directly corresponding to logical intentions such as those of genus and species.” In this understanding, a genus appears when the intellect reflects upon its mode of knowing and upon what it contains within itself; a second intention, such as a genus or species, “presupposes a reflection upon the act of understanding and the concept or term of that act” (p. 119). In other words, the mind sees that it understands a genus as containing a variety of species. This relation of genus to species is a feature primarily of the way the intellect understands things, not immediately of the way things exist, and, therefore, the word *genus* expresses a second and not a first intention. Second intentions have only a remote and mediated foundation in things. This analysis of genus and species is indeed illuminating, but I think it is better still to think of them in terms of a conversation, not just in terms of a single intellect and its reflective capabilities.

11 In fact, Schmidt quotes Aquinas as saying that dialectics and sophistics, which discuss argumentation and speeches, examine such things as genus and species (ibid., 128). Aquinas says this in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, where he paraphrases Aristotle. I should also mention that Schmidt says that the terminology of first and second intentions is used only marginally by Aquinas himself; see p. 123, n. 90.
world designated by that word enters into the conversation, and we wait to hear what the speaker is going to say about it: “... is very heavy on I-66 at this time.” And this accidental predication is nested within the property that flows from traffic, namely, that traffic can be more or less intense at any given moment. Every traffic report, every weather report engages our intelligence in this differentiated way. We can introduce the words color or azure or monthly rent into the conversation, and each of them will bring out a part of the world that has a definable essence with properties flowing from it and accidentals nested in them.

The three layers of accident, property, and essence might seem simplistic and obvious, but that is because we have been using a standard and familiar example: Anselm is smiling, his smiling is based on his risibility, and this property flows from his rationality. But take a more obscure case. Sylvia is selling her valuable furniture and using the money to help Jasper, who is in desperate straits. This is an accidental predication: she is at this moment selling these things to help that person. The activity can be rather clearly described, but what is the property behind this event? What is going on? Is it simply an admirable instance of benevolence? Is it family loyalty? Is it a need to make restitution? Perhaps it is none of these but some other unknown property and potentiality, one of the things that people do that we may find hard to name. The question may remain open; we may never know exactly what is going on. And if the property is shadowy, so is the essence from which it flows. Sylvia is a human being, a rational animal, and her conduct is, therefore, one of the ways in which a human being can act – but how and why? What is it in human nature that is the source of such ways of acting? How does this property, the possibility of this sort of activity, “flow” from being human? What is human being, if this kind of thing flows from it? What is Sylvia, and what are we?

For that matter, even the connection between risibility and human rationality is not all that easy to understand. What is it about rationality that makes us capable of smiling? And what is risibility, that it can be activated in both a joyful laugh and a cruel smile? The familiarity of the example masks the obscurity of the issue.

If our words register anything at all, we can be sure that the forms of accident, property, and essence will be there behind what we name, but in many cases we may not know specifically what the properties and the essence are. We have the syntax and are able to make accidental predications; we can give an approximate description of what is going on; but we don’t know what is really happening. We cannot easily identify what the “deeper” parts of the situation are, the properties and the essence, and yet we do know that there are properties and that they flow from an essence that is there, obscure as the properties and the essence may be. The evidential force of our words witnesses to the reality of the thing. This is where the “depth” between accidents and properties, and between
properties and essence, becomes more than just a trivial and obvious move into another dimension.

Artists exploit these differences. They call up auras of mystery and hidden depths. They hint at things that are hard to name directly. T. S. Eliot, toward the end of *East Coker*, mentions, parenthetically, “The evening with the photograph album.” This poem, like all of the *Four Quartets*, is about the way we, as human beings, exist both in and out of time. We exist in such a way that we are caught up in the current flow of time, but we can also have the past (as well as the future) immediately present to us.\(^2\) We can even occasionally touch something that seems neither past, present, nor future. In the passage from *East Coker*, Eliot has just contrasted “the evening under starlight” with “the evening under lamplight,” and he describes us spending the evening under lamplight with the photograph album; we look back at ourselves pictured in time past, and we do so in the present, in the glowing light of a human artifact. This predicate is highly accidental. It even depends on there being photograph albums and lamps, a situation that was in play only in the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, in certain parts of the world. (Would we now look at images on a computer monitor? Does this change make us less nostalgic, or are we nostalgic in another way? Can human beings arrive at something like dreamtime after they have constructed electric lights?) What is the human property behind the accident of looking at photographs under lamplight? And from what part of our essence does this property flow? What are we, that we can and need to do such a thing?

Eliot tries to lead us to the answer, or to tease it out of us, and he tries to do so through the accidental predication of ourselves enjoying the photograph album. But in order for such an artistic construction to work, the accident that is brought to mind has to be the right one, and it must be set in a proper context; it has to be the kind of predication that awakens our minds and makes it possible for us to glimpse the property in which the

\(^2\) We have seen that the involvement of syntax differentiates rational from nonrational experiencing. Rational creatures also have a distinct kind of temporality. The “meanings” or “propositions” they achieve are omnitemporal. A proposition or an equation, for example, recurs as identically the same at different moments of time (it is always the very same Pythagorean theorem each time we think or speak of it). It is also possible for intellectual beings to make their past or their future present to themselves in a way that nonrational creatures cannot. I who remember can experience my past self as the same as my present self. Also, rational beings are capable of reminiscence and not just of memory. In both these ways, in entertaining ideal significations and in exercising rational memory, intellectual or spiritual beings can achieve identifications that transcend bodily time and motion. The temporality of intellectual beings was recognized in medieval philosophy and theology; it was called *aevum* and was considered intermediate between time and eternity. I am grateful to Cornelius O’Brien for bringing the relevance of *aevum* to my attention.
accident is nested. It must also lead us on further, beyond the property to
the essence, whether or not we can spell it out. The accident is explicitly
stated, but the property and the essence are insinuated. The writer has to
know which episode to describe; the painter has to know which expression
to sketch; the sculptor has to know which pose to capture. The artist must
choose his incident.

Lear behaves in one way toward Goneril and Regan and in another
toward Cordelia; what is the human property that is being activated in this
“accidental” event, and what is the nature of the fatherhood – or the
human nature – that lies behind the potentiality? Cleopatra arrives in
gilded, scented splendor; everybody in town rushes to see her, leaving
Antony behind, sitting alone in the marketplace: vision, scent, attraction,
desire, isolation – all in their combination a property that flows from our
human nature. What is human being, that it gives rise to such possibilities?

A particular artistic achievement, if it is successful, has such a twofold
depth: we move beyond the accidental statement to the property behind it
(to the potentiality that this accident actualizes), and from there to the
essence from which the potentiality flows. These are two different kinds of
depth. The same formal steps occur not only in artistic constructs but also
in natural inquiry. A lion stalks and brings down a zebra; what animal
property does this incident actualize, and what are animals that they do
such things? This compound boils at this temperature, and that com-
 pound boils at that; what are these compounds, that they act and react in
that way?

We know the three dimensions of accident, property, and essence
together. We do not know them separately one by one; they are three
dimensions of one insight, and they come as a package. The accidental
predicate is grasped against the background of the property, and the
property in turn is understood as flowing from the nature of the thing, the
correlative of the name that we use to identify the subject we are speaking
about. Every time we predicate something of anything, all three dimen-
sions are at work. In one respect, the accidental is the weakest of all these
forms of being, because it comes and goes and does not flow necessarily
from the entity itself, as the properties do; but in another respect, the
accidental is the clearest and the truest of the three, because as we declare
it we know it actually occurs, whatever it may signify. We have looked at
the pictures in the photograph album, whatever property this action
engages and whatever part of our nature it reveals. The incident becomes
ineluctable once it occurs, however contingent it may have been.

Distinctions as Specifying the Essence

We must clarify in particular the presentation of the essence. We might
especially need to be reminded that the essence presents itself to us only in
conjunction with the properties and accidents. In traditional scholastic thought, we are told that the “first act of the intellect” is to grasp the essence of a thing. The second act is judgment, in which the intellect “composes and divides”; that is, it asserts the existence of what we have conceived and articulates accidents and properties. The third act is reasoning, in which we move from one judgment to another and establish conclusions. Following Aristotle, Aquinas calls the first act of the mind the “grasp of indivisibles,” and says that it is prior to the activities of both defining and judging. This grasp seems to provide the raw material for the other acts of reason.

In the analysis we have given, however, the essence is not presented by itself; it comes to light only “behind” or “beneath” or “within” the properties and their actualization in accidents. In our philosophical analysis we do not begin with the “first act” of the intellect; we begin by considering the third act, reasoning, or, as we have formulated it, the reciprocal reasoning that is conversation. The grasp of an indivisible cannot be examined by itself, as emerging simply from sense experience; it must be understood in the setting provided by conversation and the predications that make it up, both of which are structured by syntax. But once we are given the phenomenon of conversation, we do find within it such a thing as the grasp of an indivisible or the presentation of an essence or a kind, and this indivisible is presented to us as that from which the properties and the accidents flow.

The presentation of the essence involves the making of distinctions. Andrew is an automobile salesman. Amelia, his friend, is visiting his dealership. She has been watching his behavior and listening to his comments about people who come into the showroom. He is friendly and attentive to some people, and he speaks well of them; he is inconsiderate and abrupt with others and speaks badly about them. Later, Amelia says to Andrew, “I don’t understand why you treat some of your customers in one way and others so differently. Why is your conduct so inconsistent?” Andrew replies, “It’s not inconsistent at all. They are different kinds of people. Some are shopping and others are just browsing. Browsing is not shopping. I don’t waste time with browsers, and, furthermore, I don’t like them very much.” A similar story could be told about real estate agents or computer salesmen. Amelia may not have been able to see a difference between the two kinds of people, but Andrew, as an experienced salesman, immediately picks up clues – properties expressed in accidents – that tell him whether he is dealing with a browser or a shopper.

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I q. 85, a. 8. See also article 3, where Aquinas speaks eloquently of vagueness in our knowledge; we first know things “sub quadam confusione” until we articulate parts and wholes.
Before Andrew made his distinction, Amelia was experiencing and describing all the visitors to the showroom as customers. She saw Andrew treating these customers in two different ways. For her, his conduct did not add up. It was not consistent. It went in two different directions when, she thought, it should go in one. Andrew seemed to articulate properties that conflicted with one another, but Amelia was looking for cohesion. She was trying to apply all the accidents and properties to one kind of thing, but Andrew was speaking and acting in regard to two.

So Andrew made a distinction, and as he did so, a new essence, a new kind of thing, the browser, manifested itself to Amelia. She had been treating everyone globally as a customer, but now she distinguished the genus (people coming into the showroom) into two species (shoppers and browsers). The genus had to be there as the setting within which the distinction could be made, but it became activated as a genus when the two species, each with its special difference, were articulated within it. Now the properties have been placed into two tubs, not one, and Andrew no longer seems inconsistent.

Of the many things involved in this procedure, the one that interests us most is the fact that an indivisible (the browser) has been presented to the intellect of Amelia. The difference that defines the browser is the manner in which he investigates. He looks idly at the cars and equipment, without any serious intent to buy, whereas the shopper is looking as a step toward buying. The shopper has an intention under which his visit is ordered and he is busy, while the browser is a flâneur. A synonym for browser is window shopper, which is an elegant concept: we can see what is in the store window, but we cannot pick it up and buy it, so our “shopping” is bound to be idle.

The browser is definable by a genus and difference; he belongs to a species or a kind, and through all the conversational discourse between Andrew and Amelia, through all the properties and accidentals that come to light, and finally through the distinction that is made, this species becomes present to Amelia’s mind. The species could not become present to her just by itself in an isolated “first act of the intellect,” segregated from the various predications and the conversation in which it was embedded.

How We Grasp Indivisibles

The browser is an indivisible, an adiaireton or asyntheton, because he is the origin of a number of properties that are realized in accidental ways. One of his properties is, for example, his tempo. This property is activated in this particular browser at this moment by the way he drifts casually from one model of car to another, a fact that is grimly noted and stated by Andrew (“He’s wasting my time”). But the browser’s indivisibility is even more sharply brought out for Amelia when he is distinguished from the shopper, when his “kind” is distinguished from its neighboring “kind.” It is
when Andrew says that browsing is not shopping that the indivisible browser is truly registered for Amelia. At that moment the essence enters her intellect.

The essence of browsing has entered her mind, and all its associated properties fall into place. The assorted properties and their more immediate phenomena now make sense. But this does not mean that Amelia has fabricated some sort of new hypothesis or postulated some new kind of entity separate from the phenomena she had already noticed; rather, the phenomena are now simply seen as belonging to one thing and as being the potentialities of that one thing. They are now taken as the way that one thing can essentially act and react. The phenomena take on a cohesion as belonging to one being. The phenomena are not mere accidents or coincidences; rather, they belong, through their properties, to browsing, and browsing is shown up as being an entity. It is something that is and does not merely seem to be. The properties themselves, therefore, also are, but they are in a derivative way. There is a single entity on which they depend for their being, and the truth and density of browsing, its reality, is warranted by the fact that there is something that browsing necessarily is not, namely shopping. Because it necessarily is not something else, it necessarily is what it is, and the properties that flow from it truly are as well. What we are describing is what Aristotle presents in Books 7 to 9 of the *Metaphysics*, where he shows how the entity or substance of things shows up in our speech.

Another service that distinctions perform is to pin down the significance of a word in a particular conversation. Practically every name in a language has multiple meanings, which might be either purely equivocal or related by analogy to one another. Even the word *browser* has more than one meaning. It can, nowadays, refer to a kind of computer software as well as to someone looking at merchandise. In its primary meaning, browsing is contrasted with grazing, and in two ways: in one distinction, browsing is done by wildlife and grazing by livestock; in the other, browsers nibble on leaves, bark, and stems, while grazers feed on grass and other vegetation close to the ground. Andrew, in the automobile showroom, would not distinguish his browsers from grazers or word processors, but from shoppers, and his specifying distinction determines which of the multiple meanings is at play in the current conversation. And besides using the term in one of its standard, acceptable ways, a speaker might use it metaphorically to bring out an entity that may not yet have its own name.

We have said that the presentation of the essence brings coherence to the properties and accidents, and allows us to understand them as “flowing” from the entity in question. To say that things fall into place this way, however, is not to say that we now somehow understand how the properties flow from the thing, as though we had discovered the mechanism in the entity that generates these properties. If we suddenly realize that we are dealing with a browser and not a shopper, we come to
know why the person is moving around slowly and carelessly and we stop expecting him to act otherwise, but we do not know what it is in his makeup that generates these properties. All we know is that these properties belong to this kind of thing. That is the kind of thing it is.

Dual Usage of a Name: Individual and Kind

A name can be used to signify either a particular individual or an abstraction, and the use of the name can oscillate between the two designations. Thus, Andrew might grimly say to Amelia, “The browser is now looking at the SUVs,” and he would be speaking about the man who is wandering over from the convertibles to the SUVs. Andrew might also say, “If you are not careful, the browser will chew up a lot of your time.” As he said this, he would probably be speaking about the browser as such and browsers in general; he is waxing philosophical about the life of a car salesman.

But this second statement is ambiguous; Andrew might possibly be using it to refer to the annoying visitor and not to the species. The ambiguity is inevitable, because any name used to identify an individual also connotes a kind (even a proper name will generally connote a male or female person or a certain kind of thing, such as Rover or Tabby). The word browser might be used to denote this man, but then it would identify him not just as a man but as a browser, and it might also be used to denote the species, and in doing so it would connote this individual as well as all the instances of that kind.

There are interesting flexibilities that come along with this dual usage. We might use the word to identify the individual and then to predicate some accidentals of him as an individual of that kind: “That browser is the slowest one I’ve ever seen; he’s been here an hour.” The predicate stems from the man’s essence as a browser. But we might also use the word just to establish a reference to the individual and then say something about him that stems from other parts of his nature, from one of the genera that encompass his being a browser: “That browser has three children.” He has offspring not as a browser but as a human being or, perhaps, as a mammal. We would more likely state this as, “That man browsing over there has three children.” A given word is like a lens that can be tilted this way and that, and it would direct our focus in correspondingly different ways. Its focus can oscillate between the tode and the ti.

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14 My remarks in this section are an attempt to deal with “the problem of universals.” I treat it not simply as an ontological or an epistemological problem (“How can an individual concept have universal reference?”), but as an issue that arises in the way words can be used, to signify either the thing or the kind.

15 On establishing a reference by formulating a description, see Robert Sokolowski, “Referring,” in Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions, 189, 196–8, 202.
Not all listeners will be able to follow when the use of a word fluctuates between signifying the individual and the kind. Some will be unable to generalize and will just take in the individual signification. Shakespeare tells the story about Antony and Cleopatra and also directs our minds toward seduction and infatuation as such, but some hearers will remain fascinated only by the story, not by the kinds of things or the essences that are instantiated in it. Such listeners might be intrigued by the events that are narrated in a story but may not be able to catch the moral, although they would probably sense that something more than the mere incident is at play. The story seems to be “deep” in a way they cannot quite grasp.

Another feature of names is that the use of any name engages universality, and it does so either explicitly or implicitly. When a name is used, either it designates an essence (as distinct from the properties that flow from it and the accidents that actualize the properties) or it connotes that essence. If Andrew uses the word browser to designate the kind, he specifically leaves out of focus whether the browser is young or old, tall or short, male or female. Precisely because these features are left out, the term is universal, because it can be applied to a browser with any such characteristics. When the intellect abstracts ‘browser,’ it does not take it away from such potential features, but merely leaves them undetermined. Then, the term can always be put back into a setting in which some of its features are specified. The name is then used in a given situation to refer to this browser with these accidents, and in this case it would be used in a particular way, but because it always connotes the kind and does not just designate this thing, the universal always hovers in the background and the name can always be adjusted to a universal use. The speaker shows whether he is engaging the universal or the particular use by what he says before and after this utterance of the word.

When speakers use names in these two ways, they are not using options they have set for themselves. The flexibility we have between designating individuals and designating kinds is not a human convention about words that we agreed upon at some moment in the distant past. It is a possibility given to all human beings by the things that they know and bring to light in speech. It is not we who decide that we will speak about individuals and kinds, but things that lend themselves to such discourse.

The thing may present itself, but it still speaks to and through us, and we confirm this fact from time to time by the declarative use of the first-person pronoun. This usage shows not only that we have introduced syntax into the sounds we make and the things we disclose, but also that we are responsible for the essentials and definitions that – if we have been successful – have been registered in what we say. Such usage expresses a certain authorial confidence and satisfaction in the verdicts we have made.