

Psychological essentialism in selecting the 14th Dalai Lama

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Psychological essentialism posits that humans naturally assume that individuals have underlying invisible essences that determine the categories they fall into [1]. In some cases this essence is biological, as in DNA; in others it reflects the history of the item, such as who owned it or the intention underlying its creation. It is argued as well that this essence can give an object special status, underlying the lure of sentimental objects such as baby shoes and collectable items such as autographs and original artwork [2]. In particular an object that has been touched, used, owned or created by a high-status or revered figure can radically increase in value. In a 1996 auction, for instance, President John F. Kennedy's golf clubs sold for \$772 500 and a tape measure from the Kennedy household sold for \$48 875 [3].

Such examples raise certain questions, however. Did the person who bought the Kennedy tape measure really believe that it contains a distinct invisible essence that other tape measures lack? And, if so, is this sort of psychological essentialism universal in humans or is it the product of Western culture (e.g. [4])? To address these issues we document here a case study of common-sense essentialism from a non-Western culture.

This example is based on eyewitness accounts of the search for the 14th Dalai Lama [5,6]. The relevant section concerns the testing of a particular two-year-old boy in his remote home village. A group of bureaucrats brought with them the belongings of the late 13th Dalai Lama, along with a set of inauthentic items that were similar or identical to these belongings. When presented with an authentic black rosary and a copy of one, the boy grabbed the real one and put it around his neck. When presented with two yellow rosaries, he again grasped the authentic one. When offered two canes, he at first picked up the wrong one, then after closer inspection he put it back and selected the one that had belonged to the Dalai Lama. He then correctly identified the authentic one of three quilts.

As a final test the boy was presented with two hand drums: a rather plain drum (authentic) and a beautiful damaru, which was far more attractive than the original. That is, there was a forced choice between an object with the essential property versus a highly salient distracter.

The results were as follows, 'Without any hesitation, he picked up the drum. Holding it in his right hand, he played it with a big smile on his face; moving around so that his eyes could look at each of us from close up. Thus, the boy demonstrated his occult powers, which were capable of revealing the most secret phenomena.' ([5], p. 18). Another observer described this recognition ability as a sign of 'super-human intelligence' ([6], p. 67). (Note that the use of exact copies means that the boy could not succeed through past-life memory; some special power of discernment would be required.) Based on his performance, this boy is now the current Dalai Lama.

Our point here is not that the authentic objects were actually imbued with the essence of the 13th Dalai Lama (a metaphysical question that is beyond the scope of our inquiry). What matters is that the Tibetan bureaucrats believed that the objects were. Hence they constructed a procedure that presupposes the existence of invisible essences – essences that require special powers to perceive – and used this procedure to make a decision of major importance. We take this as evidence of the ubiquity, naturalness and importance of psychological essentialism.

References

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