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Psychological Essentialism in the Serek ha-Yahad and the Two Spirits Treatise

The Qumran sectarian texts display a thoroughgoing cosmic dualism that carves humanity into rival camps of good and evil. Building upon recent socio-historical approaches to the Qumran movement (e.g., Newsom, Regev, Jokiranta), this paper investigates the psychological mechanisms that underpin the sect's dualism and its construction of in-group/out-group boundaries. Specifically, evidence from experimental and developmental psychology and cognitive anthropology is used to argue that the Serek ha-Yahad and Two Spirits Treatise (1QS 3:15-4:26) reflect a deeply-engrained psychological essentialism wherein non-group members are conceptualized as having inherently different biological essences. Numerous studies show that young children and adults intuitively posit the existence of hidden internal properties that are permanent and define living species in the natural world. This essentialist tendency appears to be universal and is often extended to the social domain, as people readily impute a common unifying essence to entire social groups. This is an example of what the anthropologist Lawrence Hirschfeld calls the "naturalization" of social categories. Further cross-cultural ethnographic work reveals that people essentialize different ethnic groups as belonging to different species. After reviewing this literature, I closely examine the Serek and Treatise's use of kinship terms (e.g., bne-hoshek, dorot), the word "spirit" (ruah), and language denoting human nature and living species (e.g., toledot, min), in order to demonstrate that essentialist intuitions about outsiders provide a foundation for the sect's dualistic and deterministic worldview. Importantly, the essentialist thinking in these literary works is also firmly grounded in and channeled through the intertextual interpretation of scripture. The Treatise, in particular, draws on the rich creation vocabulary in Genesis 1-3 to formulate its dualistic stance. This textual production, I argue, is therefore best understood in terms of dual-processing models of human cognition. That is, the exposition of human nature in the Treatise illustrates the interaction of what cognitive scientists refer to as reflective and intuitive mental processes, in this case representing an example of reflective textual elaboration on prior essentialist intuitions.