

Contingent essence

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Based on Fine’s influential critique of modal accounts of essence in “Essence and Modality” and subsequent papers, I argue (i) that essence is an a-modal concept, neither analysable in nor reducible to modal terms and (ii) that essential properties can be exemplified contingently. I argue that it is possible that wholes lack parts that are nevertheless essential to them and that Kripke’s famous ‘proof’ of the essentiality of origin and constitution does not in fact establish that it is not metaphysically possible that this table is made of a different block of wood than it actually is. I conclude with some general observations about illusions of possibility and conceivability arguments.

Essence and modality

(i) a has ϕ essentially $:\Leftrightarrow \Box(a \text{ has } \phi)$

The simplest modal account of essence has several severe problems:

- (i) At least on a straightforward interpretation of the right-hand side, (i) implies that a exists necessarily.
- (ii) As remarked by Terence Parsons and Ruth Barcan Marcus, (i) has as a consequence that every necessary truth determines an essential property for any object.
- (iii) Another problem (Dunn 1990), is that some essential relations seem to be one-sided, i.e. giving rise both to essential and to accidental relational properties. This asymmetry is lost in our definition.

In his 1994 paper “Essence and Modality”, Kit Fine criticises the project of elucidating the notion of essence in modal terms. He discusses two conditional variants of the categorical account (1), (2) and (3):

(2) a has ϕ essentially $:\Leftrightarrow \Box(a \text{ exists} \rightarrow a \text{ has } \phi)$

(3) a has ϕ essentially $:\Leftrightarrow \Box\forall x(x = a \rightarrow x \text{ has } \phi)$

Against the sufficiency of the proposed conditional criteria (2) and (3), Fine raises three points of criticism:

- (i) If one of Socrates and { Socrates } exists, then, necessarily, so does the other. If both exist, it is necessary that Socrates \in { Socrates }. So (2) and (3) entail that Socrates essentially is a member of { Socrates } and that { Socrates } essentially contains Socrates. While the latter may be right, the first is contra-intuitive.
- (ii) Second, all necessary truths and in particular all statements of essence hold if Socrates exists. It seems odd, however, that we can, by discovering the essential properties of Socrates, discover all necessary truths or the essences of all other objects.
- (iii) Third, if Socrates exists, then necessarily, he, his parents, his left arm etc. exist. But having the parents or the left arm he has is not obviously an essential property of Socrates and so should not be regimented by the definition of essence alone.

The grounding of modality

Fine (1994: 4) accepts the necessity, but not the sufficiency of the modal criterion for essence: if a is essentially F , then a could not have been other than F . An important motivation in play is the idea that modality is not primitive, but should be grounded in something else:

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“...any essentialist attribution will give rise to a necessary truth; if certain objects are essentially related then it is necessarily true that the objects are so related (or necessarily true given that the objects exist). However, the resulting necessary truth is not necessary simpliciter. For it is true in virtue of the identity of the objects in question; the necessity has its source in those objects which are the subject of the underlying essentialist claim.” (Fine 1994, 8-9)

This account of necessity rests on a principle of cumulativity: if it is true in virtue of the identity of a that p , then it will also be true in virtue of the identity of a and b . In many cases, however, group essences seem thinner rather than thicker than the essences of their individual members. It is one thing, however, to say that modality must be grounded in actual existence, and a much stronger claim to “take a metaphysical necessity to be a proposition true in virtue of the identity of all objects” (Fine 1994: 15). Modality can be grounded in essence without being identical to it.

Extrinsic essence, ontological dependence and Humphrey

- (4) a identity-depends on b $:\Leftrightarrow \exists R$ (it is essential to a that aRb)
 (5) a existence-depends on b $:\Leftrightarrow \Box(a \text{ exists} \rightarrow b \text{ exists})$

We intuitively recognise a difference between modal covariation with respect to existence (5) and “identity-dependence” (Lowe 1998) (4). But what about the *zygote* I descended from? The property *having descended from zygote* z both seems essential and extrinsic, as do many others: (i) essentiality of origin, (ii) essentiality of (some cases of) causation, (iii) essentiality of constitution, (iv) essentiality of shape (of figures, for example), (v) essentiality of location (of events, at least), (vi) essentiality of reference (of rigid designators), (vii) essentiality of involvement (between events and their participants). In all these cases, we should be able to distinguish identity dependence from existence dependence, which is the more plausible candidate for an explication of substance-hood (modulo, perhaps, some caveats concerning necessary beings). Consider the essentiality of origin:

“Now could this table have been made from a completely different block of wood, or even of water cleverly hardened into ice ...? We could conceivably discover that ...But let us suppose that it is not. Then, though we can imagine making a table out of another block of wood, or even from ice, identical in appearance with this one, and though we could have put it in this very position in the room, it seems to me that this is not to imagine this table as made of wood or ice, but rather it is to imagine another table, resembling this one in all external details, made of another block of wood, or even of ice.” (Kripke 1972, 113-114)

What “we could conceivably discover that ...But let us suppose that it is not.” amounts to is usually interpreted as a conceptual distinction between epistemic and alethic modality: For all we know, the table could have been made from ice. The table could have turned out to have been made from ice. But still it is not (metaphysically) possible that the table has been made from ice. The table (this table, the one we suppose to be made from wood) could not turn out to have been made from ice. I think the distinction is rather between ontological dependence and essence: The table could have turned out to have been made from ice because it is a substance, an independently existing material thing that is not ontologically dependent on anything else. The table, given it is what it is, could still not turn out to have been made from ice, because then it would be a different, albeit perhaps a qualitatively identical table. Being made out of this block of wood is an essential property of this table, but not a necessary one. Something else can represent a way the table might be that is not related to this block of wood. This other thing, however, would not be this table, but only represent an alternative way for this table to be.

Consider the famous ‘Humphrey-objection’ to Lewisian counterparts:

“...if we say ‘Humphrey might have won the election (if only he had done such-and-such)’, we are not talking about something that might have happened to *Humphrey*, but to someone else, a “counterpart”. Probably, however, Humphrey could not care less whether someone *else*, no matter how much resembling him, would have been victorious in another possible world.” (Kripke 1980: 45, fn. 13)

Two unsatisfactory replies:

“Kripke’s argument confuses sentences of the technical language of Lewis’s semantic theory, which are outside our natural language or at least constitute an extension of it, with sentences of our ordinary language, and so misapplies intuitive judgements about sentences of ordinary language to the technical ones.” (Hazen 1979: 321)

“I think intuition is well enough satisfied if we take “myself” [in Humphrey’s thinking ‘I myself might have won’] to modify “might have won.” Humphrey thinks that he himself, and not someone else who resembles him, has the modal property expressed by “might have won.” And that is true on anybody’s theory. In counterpart theory, it is true because Humphrey himself, in virtue of his own qualitative character, is such as to have some winners for counterparts.” (Lewis 1983: 42)

A more satisfactory reply:

“I think counterpart theorists and ersatzers are in perfect agreement that there are other worlds (genuine or ersatz) *according to* which Humphrey – he himself! (stamp the foot, bang the table) – wins the election. [...] Counterpart theory does say (and ersatzism does not) that someone else – the victorious counterpart – enters into the story of how it is that another world represents Humphrey as winning, and thereby enters into the story of how it is that Humphrey might have won. [...] Thanks to the victorious counterpart, Humphrey himself has the requisite modal property: we can truly say that *he* might have won. There is no need to deny that the victorious counterpart also makes true a second statement describing the very same possibility: we can truly say that a Humphrey-like counterpart might have won. The two statements are not in competition. Therefore we need not suppress the second (say, by forbidding any mixture of ordinary modal language with talk of counterparts) in order to safeguard the first.” (Lewis 1986: 196)

In other words: the thing that wins is not Humphrey, but something representing Humphrey: Lewis is right about modality, but Kripke is right about essence.