Contingent Essence

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Abstract

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. In favour of (i), I argue that modality is quantificational and representational in a way essence is not, and that we have use for a non-modal notion of essence to distinguish two different conceptions of ontological dependence and to reconstruct the Lewis-Kripke dispute about transworld identity. In favour of (ii), 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 the one it is actually made o. I conclude with some general observations about illusions of possibility and conceivability arguments.

> "For example, someone might think that, whereas Socrates is
> essentially human, he is only necessarily Greek-or-not."
> (Yablo 1987: 297, fn. 6)

The modal account of essence

The simplest modal account of essence:

$$a \text{ has } \phi \text{ essentially} \quad :\Longleftrightarrow \quad \Box(a \text{ has } \phi) \tag{1}$$

The simplest modal account of essence has several severe problems:

(i) At least on a straightforward interpretation of the right-hand side, (1) implies that a exists necessarily.

(ii) As remarked by Terence Parsons and Ruth Barcan Marcus, (1) has as a consequence that every necessary truth determines an essential property for any object.

(iii) Another problem, raised by Dunn, 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.

The two conditionised variants of the categorical account (1):

$$a \text{ has } \phi \text{ essentially} \quad :\Longleftrightarrow \quad \Box(a \text{ exists} \rightarrow a \text{ has } \phi) \tag{2}$$

$$a \text{ has } \phi \text{ essentially} \quad :\Longleftrightarrow \quad \Box \forall x(x = a \rightarrow x \text{ has } \phi) \tag{3}$$

Against the sufficiency of the proposed conditional criteria (2) and (3), Fine (1994) 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) 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) 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 essential to Socrates and so not to be regimented by the definition of essence alone.

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:

> ...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.

A conceptual distinction

Two key differences between the concepts (belonging to the family) of essence and (those belonging to the family of) modality:

- Modality is 'quantificational', essence is not. A regularity over the space of possibilities suffices for necessity, but is at most indicative of essentiality.
- Modality is 'representational', essence is not. When we ask whether being F is necessary to some thing a, we ask whether we count *representations* of a as being $\neg F$ as representations of a possibility; when we ask whether being F is essential to a, however, our questions is not about representations of a, but about the importance of F to its nature.

Long-term aim: to articulate the view that essentiality is a genuine second-order property, whereas modal modifications do not apply to properties or objects, but are characteristics of how objects exemplify properties; to advocate a 'substantial' and realist theory of essence, which characterises essentiality as a genuine feature of properties, and an 'adverbial' theory of modality, taking "necessarily" and "contingently" to be modifications of the copula.

Two claims about essence:

- Essence is a-modal: to say, of a, that it is essentially F, is not to say anything about the modal status of "Fa".
- Some essential properties are exemplified contingently.

The amodality of essence: ontological dependence

Many candidates for essential properties are extrinsic, i.e. do not depend just on how matters are with the thing that has them. Origin properties (being descended from a particular zygote), causal properties (being the effect of a particular cause), constitution properties (being constituted by a particular lump of bronze), shape properties (having such-and-such a shape in a particular gravitational field) have all been taken to be essential to the things that have them. At least prima facie, however, this does *not* rule out that these things are substances, in the traditional sense of things capable of independent existence. Rather, we should distinguish:

$$a \text{ identity-depends on } b \quad :\Longleftrightarrow \quad \exists R(\text{ it is essential to } a \text{ that } aRb) \tag{4}$$

$$a \text{ existence-depends on } b \quad :\Longleftrightarrow \quad \Box(a \text{ exists } \rightarrow b \text{ exists}) \tag{5}$$

If essentiality implies necessity, however, then things to which I am essentially related are such that my existence depends on them. But whether or not I really counterfactually depend in this way on the zygote I descended from seems to be a different question than whether or not my origin defines what I am.

The amodality of essence: the Humphrey objection

Consider Kripke's famous "Humphrey objection" to modal realism:

...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 "coun-

terpart". 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, n. 13)

In reply, the staunchest of all realists agrees that according to him, modality is representational:

> 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.

Making a conceptual distinction between essence and modality allows us to say that Lewis is right about modality, but Kripke is right about essence.

Contingent essence: mereological essentialism

While 'in the strict and philosophical sense' of "part", wholes have all their parts essentially, there is another, 'loose and popular' sense in which they can change their parts, where y is a loose and popular part of x at t iff something that constitutes (= occupies the same place than) y at t is a strict part of something that constitutes x at t. Chisholm (1973: 593) then tries to account for our intuition that ordinary things such as automobiles could have other parts than they actually have by redefining "x could have y as a part at t" (in the 'loose and popular sense') as: there is a w and a v such that (i) w is strictly and philosophically a part of something that constitutes x at t, (ii) there is a time at which v constitutes y and (iii) there is a possible world in which w is strictly joined with v (i.e. there is something of which w and v are disjoint and the only strict parts). The modal intuition, then, is diagnosed as not really being about this automobile, but about something else that may do duty for it.

But what it takes for some other thing than my car to do duty for it is what it takes for it to represent a possibility for my car.

Contingent essence: essentiality of constitution

Consider Kripke's treatment of another appearance of possibility in his argument for the essentiality of constitution:

> "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 1980: 113-114)

What "We could conceivably discover that ...But let us suppose that it is not." amounts too is usually interpreted as a conceptual distinction between epistemic and alethic modality:

1. For all we know, the table could have been made from ice. The table could have turned out to have been made from ice.

2. 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 this is not what is going on in the passage, despite what Kripke and his exegetes say. The distinction is rather between ontological dependence and essence:

1. 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.
2. 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.

In an equally famous footnote, Kripke offers "something like a proof" of the essentiality of origin:

Let 'B' be a name (rigid designator) of a table, let 'A' name the piece of wood from which it actually came. Let 'C' name another piece of wood. Then suppose B were made from A, as in the actual world, but also another table D were simultaneously made from C. (We assume that there is no relation between A and C which makes the possibility of making a table from one dependent on the possibility of making a table from the other.) Now in this situation $B \neq D$; hence, even if D were made by itself, and no table were made from A, D would not be B. (Kripke 1980: 114, fn. 56)

A reconstruction of the argument:

1. Suppose it is possible that B is not made out of this hunk of wood.
2. Then it is possible that B and the table made out this hunk of wood are different.
3. By the necessity of distinctness, then they are actually different.
4. But B is actually the table made out of this hunk of wood.

The step from (1) to (2) may be granted provided that necessarily, only one table is made out of this hunk of wood, so that "the table made out of this wood" has a unique reference in the possibility envisaged in (2). It is the step from (2) to (3) which is problematic, for it requires that "the table made out of this hunk of wood" not only has a referent in the possibility envisaged, but that it has the same reference than it actually has, i.e. is a rigid designator.

By allowing for contingent essences, we can salvage Kripke's essentialist intuitions: In the world in which something else than B is made out of this hunk of wood A (from which B is actually made), this something else would not be this table (by assumption). If the table B could be what it is and be made from another hunk of wood C, then it's being what it is is compatible with A's being available for the construction of some other table.

Two morals

There is no counterfactual stamping the foot, banging the table: Our modal reasoning identifies possible situations only up to indiscernability.

As always, it's better to avoid an error theory if you are able to do so: whenever an appearance of possibility persists under scrutiny, it is better the accommodate it than to diagnose it as an illusion of possibility.

References

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