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 modality. 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 it actually is. I conclude with some general observations about illusions of possibility and conceivability arguments.

1. Can we analyse essence in terms of modality? The simplest modal account of essence would go like this:

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

It 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 (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.

At least, we have to conditionalise our modal account.

2. 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 (1), (2) and (3):

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

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

Against the right-to-left direction 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.[1]

 (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.

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[1] Cf.: "...it is an essential property of Queen Elizabeth II that she had the parents she had. This has the asymmetric feature that while it is an essential property of QE II that she had the parents she had, it is presumably not an essential property of those particular individuals that they had QE II as a daughter." (Dunn 1990: 14)

(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 an essential property of Socrates and in any case should not be entailed by a definition of "essence".

Fine establishes a conceptual independence claim: we should not built into the very definition of an essential property that necessary properties are essential.

3. 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 essences:

> "...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)

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). This latter 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. Particular humans may all – individually – be essentially descended from – different – zygotes without humans being essentially descended from any particular zygote.

4. Modality can be grounded in essence without being identical to it. Essentiality is an 'a-modal' concept, neither to be analysed in terms of nor to be used in analysis of modality. 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. It may be that all essential properties are exemplified necessarily, but this is a substantial claim about both these notions, not to be decided in the definition of either. Just to say, of a, that it is essentially F, is not yet to say anything about the modal status of "Fa". The notion of essence makes finer distinctions than the notion of modality: it distinguishes necessary coexemplified properties and between a relation and its converse. Essential properties do, while necessary properties do not, have to be relevant (or at least: about) their bearers; necessary properties are, while essential properties are not, closed under strict implication. To make a conceptual distinction between essence and modality does not commit one to the (very dubious) claim that de re modal idioms are systematically ambiguous: when we utter sentences like "a could have ϕed", we are sometimes talking about modality, sometimes about essence, and only context can decide whether "it is compatible with a's nature to have ϕed" or "the representation of a as having ϕed is the representation of a possibility" is the more acceptable rendering.

5. In particular, modality is not to be analysed in terms of essence. It is quantificational and representational, whereas essence is not. It is quantificational in the sense that the necessary features of an object are those that have to be attributed to it with respect to *all* possibilities in which it exists. The range of this universal quantifier is subject to combinatorial principles. What configurations an object can exist in, however, is not just a matter of what it itself is – it also depends on the general shape and structure of modal space. Modality is representational in the sense that what enters these possible configurations is not the object itself, but rather some representation of it. 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. This is why Humphrey does not care about whether he may be consistently represented as winning:

> "...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)

What Humphrey cares about after losing the election is whether it was essential to him to have done so. He thinks that nothing in his nature determined his defeat, that he could be as he is and still have won. What Kripke and Lewis disagree about is how this representation of himself as winning is to be accounted for:

> "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." (Lewis 1986: 196)

In other words: the thing that wins is not Humphrey, but something representing Humphrey. Humphrey does not care about how he may be represented to be, but about how he essentially is. The representation of Humphrey as winning, on the other hand, does (and must) include other things than (losing) Humphrey. Lewis is right about modality, but Kripke is right about essence.

6. If we agree that essence is an a-modal concept, we may ask whether some essential properties may be exemplified contingently. There are three reasons to allow for this theoretical possibility: (i) it allows us to make a principled distinction between two very different kinds of ontological dependence; (ii) it allows for extrinsic essences; (iii) it allows us to accommodate the intuitive motivations for mereological essentialism without committing us to an error theory of ordinary persons' modal judgments.

7. We intuitively recognise a difference between modal covariation with respect to existence (5) and "identity-dependence" (Lowe 1998) (4):

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

By distinguishing between the subject of an essentialist predication and the source of its truth, Fine allows himself to make an essentialist distinction between Socrates and its singleton. By accepting the necessity of the modal criterion, however, he makes Socrates ontologically depend on the existence of all those things he is essentially related to. If all essential properties are had necessarily, then I will depend for my existence (5) upon everything on which I depend for my identity (4) is. Moreover, the existence-dependence will be symmetric: but not only do we intuitively recognise the asymmetry of the relation between Socrates and his singleton, but also an asymmetrical existence with respect to their existence. Fine cannot do so: if it is essential to the singleton to contain Socrates, then it will be a necessary truth that Socrates $\in$ {Socrates}. And this implies their *mutual* existence-dependence.

8. This is readily generalised to all extrinsic essential properties. 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). Kripke famously argued for the essentiality of origin. Suppose that it is essential to me to be descended from a particular zygote Z. Nothing could be me without being descended from this particular zygote. As I am writing these words, however, the zygote has long gone out of existence: it?s existence, intuitively, does not concern the way I am by myself. I could have a perfect doppelgâ□°nger sharing all my intrinsic properties who did not descend of this particular zygote, but came into being by cloning or in some other way. A plausible reply to this worry is simply to accept the extrinsicality of existence: my essentially being related to something else, it may be said, is just what it takes to make my existence extrinsic, more than just a matter of how I am by myself. The problem with this reply is that extrinsic essences may be more widespread than we would like to think they are: if I am essentially human, for example, and being human is essentially a matter of tracing a certain evolutionary lineage back in time, then I am essentially related to all my (human) ancestors. Take only one of them out, and I pop out of existence. Another reply appeals to the theoretical rôle the notions of essence and of ontological dependence are supposed to play: traditionally, an ontologically dependent entity is taken to be an accident, a modification of something else, rather than a substance in its own right. It seems undeniable, however, that I am a substance.

9. Consider 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 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. Being made out of this block of wood is an essential property of this table, but not a necessary one. Something that is not made out of this block of wood can still represent a way this table might be.

10. A reconstruction of Kripke's "something like a proof":[2]

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[2]"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)

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.

11. My last argument concerns 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. "x could have y as a part at t" in the 'loose and popular sense' iff 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) (Chisholm 1973: 593). 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. By allowing for contingent essences, we avoid the error theory Chisholm is compelled to give for our ordinary modal judgments and still accommodate the intuitions that motivated his mereological essentialism.