

# Problèmes de Métaphysique I et II

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“For example, someone might think that, whereas Socrates is essentially human, he is only necessarily Greek-or-not.”

(Yablo 1987: 297, fn. 6)

## Recap

Aim: to articulate the view that essentiality is a genuine second-order property, but that 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.

Policy:

...any account of the various notions of existential dependence should be compatible with any viable, i.e. non-absurd, i.e. dialectically possible metaphysical view. (Correia 2002: 10)

What I mean by ‘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.

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 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) (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.

## Contingent essence: extrinsic essences

By accepting the necessity of the modal criterion, Fine makes Socrates ontologically depend on the existence of all those things he is essentially related to. If Socrates is essentially related to some  $x$ , then it will be necessary that if Socrates exists, then so does  $x$  – Socrates will be unable to exist in the absence of  $x$ . Many of these relations are extrinsic to Socrates:

- (i) essentiality of origin
- (ii) essentiality of (some cases of) causation
- (iii) essentiality of constitution
- (iv) essentiality of shape
- (v) essentiality of location
- (vi) essentiality of reference
- (vii) essentiality of involvement

In all these cases, we will have ontological dependence stemming from essential relations – a counter-intuitive result. To avoid it, I think we should consider the idea that essential properties might be exemplified contingently.

## Contingent essence: essentiality of constitution

Let us focus, as an example, on 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.

## Contingent essence: Kripke's argument

It is not clear whether it is at all legitimate to read into this passage an argument for the essentiality of constitution (as opposed to origin).<sup>1</sup> It is true, however, that the necessity of distinctness to which Kripke appeals in the appended footnote 56 suffices to prove both. The argument, in both cases, is simply that we cannot imagine some thing  $x$  to be identical in some other world to some different object  $y$  (which has a different origin or constitution):

“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)

Using  $T(x, y)$  for “ $x$  is a table that was originally constructed entirely from all of hunk  $y$ ” (Salmon 2004: 204), we can formalise the argument as follows:

- (K-1) In the actual world,  $T(B, A)$ .
- (K-2) Suppose, for reductio, that  $\diamond(T(B, C) \wedge C \neq A)$ .
- (K-3) Compossibility principle:  $\diamond \exists x(T(B, A) \wedge T(x, C) \wedge x \neq B)$ .
- (K-4) Sufficiency of origin:  $\forall x, y(\diamond T(x, y) \rightarrow \square \forall z(T(z, y) \rightarrow x = z))$ .
- (K-5) Hence,  $\square \forall x(T(x, C) \rightarrow x = B)$ , which contradicts (K-3).

There are several problems with the argument:

- (i) The sufficiency of origin principle is very strong and is intuitively less plausible than necessity of origin. Necessity of origin does not entail sufficiency, for even if every table necessarily comes from the wood it actually comes from, different things could come from the same wood.
- (ii) The necessity of distinctness does not play a role in the argument.
- (iii)  $D$  does not play a role in the argument.

(ii) and (iii) are more relevant than one might at first time think. Here is an alternative reconstruction:

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

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<sup>1</sup>The observation is Dunn's: “Kripke slides back and forth between the locutions “made from” and “made of”. To my ear, the first smacks of origins and the second of composition, and these locutions might as well have been artfully chosen so as to disguise the underlying complexity of distinctions.” (Dunn 1990: 19)

The step from (R-1) and (R-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 (R-2). It is the step from (R-2) and (R-3) which is problematic, for it requires that “the table made out of this 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.

I think that 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 *D*.

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