

Contingent essence

Philipp Keller

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. 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.

A conceptual distinction

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 "possibly" to be modifications of the copula.

Two key differences:

- Modality is 'quantificational', essence is not.
- Modality is 'representational', essence is not.

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 Humphrey objection

...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, n. 13)

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.

$$a \text{ identity-depends on } b \quad :\Leftrightarrow \quad \exists R(\text{ it is essential to } a \text{ that } aRb) \quad (1)$$

$$a \text{ existence-depends on } b \quad :\Leftrightarrow \quad \Box(a \text{ exists} \rightarrow b \text{ exists}) \quad (2)$$

We intuitively recognise a difference between modal covariation with respect to existence (2) and "identity-dependence" (1) (Lowe 1998). 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).

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.

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)

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.

Kripke’s “something like a proof”:

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:

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.

References

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