

# 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 may be exemplified contingently. In favour of (i), I point out that modality is quantificational and representational in ways essence is not, and that we can put a non-modal notion of essence to good use in reconstructing the Lewis-Kripke dispute about transworld identity. With the help of such a notion, I distinguish two different conceptions of ontological dependence and argue that they could plausibly come apart. In favour of (ii), I argue that it is possible that wholes lack parts that they have essentially and that Kripke's famous 'proof' does at best establish the essentiality, but not the necessity of the origin and constitution of his Princeton lectern. To avoid an error theory about ordinary modal judgments and to make room for extrinsic essences, we should allow for at least the possibility of essential, but only contingently exemplified properties.

## The formal theory of essence

Some properties are intimately tied to their bearers. Socrates' being human, it has seemed to many, is not just any old fact about Socrates – Socrates could not be what he is if he were not human. Among my properties, the thought goes, there is a distinction between those I have only accidentally (by metaphysical accident, as it were) and those I have in virtue of being the thing I am. These are the features that would have to be mentioned if one were to give a real definition of me because they pertain not just to how, but to what I am. They determine the things I could be and the changes I could undergo: by making me the thing I am, my metaphysically important properties determine my modal and temporal persistence conditions.

Essences: not necessarily individuating, not context-, mind- or language-dependent; essences of individual things, identifiable entities designated by count nouns, things that are such that we may ask not just how, but what they are.

Two claims:

1. the concept of essence is a-modal – not usefully analysed as either implied by or as implying necessity;
2. the two concepts are two-way non-coextensional: not only are some necessary properties not essential (this I take to have been established by Fine), but there may be essential properties had contingently.

Plan:

1. to review of Kit Fine's well-known arguments against the modal account of essence, trying to identify the autonomous, a-modal concept of essence he wants to draw our attention to;
2. to criticise some reasons one may have to preserve the implication from essentiality to necessity, claiming that essences may ground necessary truths without implying them;
3. to clarify in what sense essence is an a-modal concept, reviewing (the history of) the Humphrey objection;
4. present three cases where I think it is useful to allow for contingent essences:
  - (a) contingent essences allow us to distinguish two kinds of ontological dependence that should be kept apart;
  - (b) mereological necessitarianism is much less plausible than mereological essentialism;
  - (c) on a combinatorialist account of intrinsicness, extrinsic essential properties (of the existence of which many have become convinced by Kripke) may well turn out to be contingent.

## The modal account of essence and its demise

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

$$(i) \quad a \text{ has } \phi \text{ essentially} \quad : \iff \quad \Box(a \text{ has } \phi)$$

It 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, (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.

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

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  $\{ \text{Socrates} \}$  exists, then, necessarily, so does the other. If both exist, it is necessary that  $\text{Socrates} \in \{ \text{Socrates} \}$ . So (2) and (3) entail that Socrates essentially is a member of  $\{ \text{Socrates} \}$  and that  $\{ \text{Socrates} \}$  essentially contains Socrates. While the latter may be right, the first is contra-intuitive.<sup>1</sup>
- (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 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.

Let us summarise these structural differences:

- (i) the notion of essence distinguishes between necessarily coexemplified properties;
- (ii) the notion of essence distinguishes between a relation and its converse;
- (iii) essential properties do, while necessary ‘properties’ do not, have to be relevant (or at least: about) their bearers;

Fine not just asserts the distinctness of the two concepts, but also offers a diagnosis: essentiality and necessity come apart in the above cases because, according to Fine, statements of essence not only concern the existence of necessary connections, but also their sources:

Each object, or selection of objects, makes its own contribution to the totality of necessary truths; and one can hardly expect to determine from the totality itself what the different contributions were. (Fine 1994: 9)

He analyses essence in terms of a relation of ontological dependence he takes as primitive: the essence of  $x$  is the set of exactly those propositions that are true in virtue of the nature (or: the identity) of  $x$ , where the latter notion is taken as “an unanalyzed relation between an object and a proposition” (Fine 1995: 273). Instead of viewing essence as a special case of metaphysical necessity, he invites us to conceive of the latter as a special case of the former: metaphysical necessities are true in virtue of the essences of all objects, essence “performs a similar function [to necessity] but with a finer mesh” (1994: 3). It is its sensitivity to source that makes the concept of essence “a highly refined version” of the concept of necessity.

How is this notion of “source” to be understood? Fine understands it in terms of what objects the essentially induced truth is “about”. This notion of aboutness is notoriously difficult to pin down, and there are some reasons to suspect that it ultimately will presuppose, rather than be able to elucidate, a concept of essence. It is not clear that appealing to the notion of source will help us making the distinctions we need: in what sense is “God created the world” more *about*. God than the world, such that we may hold (with Aquinas, *Sum. Th.* I, q. 17, a. 7) that it is essential to the world to have been created, while it is an accidental property of God to have created the world?

### 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 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

<sup>1</sup>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)

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.

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  $\phi$ ed”, we are sometimes talking about modality, sometimes about essence, and only context can decide whether “it is compatible with *a*’s nature to have  $\phi$ ed” or “the representation of *a* as having  $\phi$ ed is the representation of a possibility” is the more acceptable rendering.

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.

### **Varities of ontological dependence**

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.

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

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

(5)  $a$  existence-dependes on  $b$  :  $\Leftrightarrow \Box(a \text{ exists} \rightarrow b \text{ exists})$

While it has long been remarked that we should leave room for existence-dependence without identity-dependence (I existence-depend on many more things than I am identity-dependent on), I think we should also allow for identity-dependence without existence-dependence. For it seems, intuitively, that while I may be dependent on zygote  $Z$  for my identity (4), I could still be a substance in the sense of (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.

Correlative to the two notions of dependence, we have two notions of substance: an identity-independent thing has a self-standing essence as it were, independently of whether or not it may exist alone in a possible world (that Socrates is always accompanied by his singleton does not make him dependent on it for his identity). Counting only existence-independent things as substances strips this philosophical notion of much of its utility, both in independent philosophical theorizing and in interpreting its traditional uses.

But the converse also seems true: the idea that modally independent things depend on others for their identity seems coherent. Without their essential properties, they would not be the things they are, but this is not yet to say that they would not exist. Suppose, for example, that we interpret (5) as requiring of substances only that they do not existence-depend on other things that are wholly distinct, i.e. do not overlap them mereologically. We may still want to count some trope, e.g., as a non-substance on the grounds that it depends *for its identity* on its bearer, even though it does not require any *disjoint* thing for its existence. In the same vein, we may want to say that some processes depend on their bearers for their identity, even though they contain them as parts. Even without a restriction of (5) to non-overlapping things, we may allow for modally independent things that are essentially related to others: it seems plausible, for example, that my life could have existed without me, that someone else could have lived it, though it also seems that it would not then be *my* life, i.e. would be lacking a property that seems essential to it.<sup>2</sup> Those who believe in extrinsic final value (Rabinowicz, Ronnow-Rasmussen 2000), have other examples ready at hand: the value of Diana's dress, for example, is modally independent in the sense that it only existence-dependes on the dress (this is why it is a kind of final, non-instrumental value), but its identity stems from the external fact that its bearer was once worn by the Princess of Wales.

Whether or not these examples are convincing,<sup>3</sup> we should not rule them out by definition, and thus allow for existence-independent, but identity-dependent things.

### Mereological essentialism

This intimate relation I have to my parts does not just make them intrinsic, it seems that it makes some of them essential as well. Suppose, for example, that my arm is essentially alive. Plausibly, it will then be essential to *me* that I have a living arm: if my arm would die, it would cease to be what it is and, in virtue of having it as a part, so would I. This is the thesis of mereological essentialism, defended, most famously, by Chisholm:

Let us picture to ourselves a table, improvised from a stump and a board. Now one might have constructed a very similar table by using the same stump and a different board, or by using the same board and a different stump. But the only way of constructing precisely *that* table is to use that particular stump and that particular board. (Chisholm 1976: 146, the Kripkean italics are in the original)

God could have created the stump without creating the board; he could have created the board without creating the stump; and he could have created the stump and the board without creating

<sup>2</sup>Another, though plausibly related example is boundaries, that – according to Chisholm (1984: 86), at least – depend on what they are boundaries of for their essence and nature, but not for their existence: "Could God preserve any of the boundaries of a thing apart from the thing? We could say that, for any thing having boundaries, God could destroy the thing and preserve the boundaries – by destroying some part of the thing such that the part did not contain any of those boundaries."

<sup>3</sup>Some others, perhaps less convincing examples, may be found in the theory of modality itself: Plantinga's individual essences that do proxy for contingent existents in worlds where does do not exist, for example, look like such modally, but not essentially independent creatures. Plausibly, Ludovician concrete possible worlds also fall within this category. Yet other examples may come from non-identity theories of constitution: "To be the Shroud of Turin [...] a thing has to have everything it takes to be the associated piece of cloth, *and* it has to have enshrouded Jesus Christ." (Yablo 1987: 297-298)

the table. But he could not have created *that* particular table without using the stump and the board. (Chisholm 1973: 66, italics in the original)

Even though mereological essentialism may seem “obvious” (Chisholm 1976: 147), it also seems clearly false: Some properties I have in virtue of my parts seem clearly contingent. My parts change constantly, while I survive. When my garagiste signs a paper to give me back my car after he changed a tyre, he is certainly not promising to do the impossible. While my ‘parthood properties’, as we may call them, seem both intrinsic and essential, they are clearly contingent. How can they be?

In an attempt to reconcile the ‘strict and philosophical’ truth of mereological essentialism with the common-sense view that things can, and do, change their parts, Chisholm (1976: 92, 151) distinguishes two senses of “part”: 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) (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 (1976: 154).

But, we may insist, in a Kripkean vein, why should we accept this possibility as one of *this* car (stamp the foot, bang the table)? Because, we may retort with Lewis, this is what it takes for a possibility to represent this car (the only one I have) as lacking some part. 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. In this sense, we may both truly say that my car may lack some of its parts, and that it would then not be (quite) the thing it is.

### Extrinsic essential properties

A Kripkean may feel we let him down: there is *no* sense, he may insist, in which Socrates could lack an essential property of his. To think so, in his view, is to succumb to a modal illusion (or perhaps hallucination). As a case in point, he may recall to us the passage that convinced many of us of the essentiality of constitution:

Supposing this lectern is in fact made of wood, could this very lectern have been made from the very beginning of its existence from ice, say frozen from water in the Thames? [...] If one had done so, one would have made, of course, a *different* object. It would not have been *this very lectern*, and so one would not have a case in which this very lectern here was made of ice, or was made from water from the Thames. The question of whether it could afterward, say in a minute from now, turn into ice is something else. (Kripke 1971: 152)

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 of what Kripke and his exegetes say. The distinction is rather between modality and essence:

1. The table, *given*, it is what it is, could not turn out to have been made from ice, because then it would be a different, albeit perhaps a qualitatively identical table: “one cannot imagine that under certain circumstances it could have been made of ice” (Kripke 1971: 153) because this would not be imagining a situation according to which *it* were made of ice.
2. The table, however, 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 restriction on what we allow as a representation of the table may thus be overruled by other considerations: I may create a context in which my imagining this table to be made of ice makes sense,<sup>4</sup> or decide to speak loosely and

<sup>4</sup>This is Lewis’ version: “But if I ask how things would be if Saul Kripke had come from no sperm and egg but had been brought by a stork,

speak about possibilities qualitatively considered.<sup>5</sup>

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.

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). It is true, however, that the necessity of distinctness to which Kripke appeals in his famous “proof” in footnote 56 suffices, if at all, 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  $y$ ”, 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) Possibility principle:  $\Diamond \exists x(T(B, A) \wedge T(x, C) \wedge x \neq B)$ .

(K-4) Sufficiency of origin:  $\forall x, y(\Diamond T(x, y) \rightarrow \Box \forall z(T(z, y) \rightarrow x = z))$ .

(K-5) Hence,  $\Box \forall x(T(x, C) \rightarrow x = B)$ , 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 of 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.

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.

It is because the step from (R-2) to (R-3) amounts to the assumption that “the other table that would be made out of this wood” is a rigid designator, that Kripke’s famous “proof” shows at best the essentiality, but not the necessity of origin: while we may be in agreement with Kripke that the counterfactual table made out of this very same block of wood would be a different kind of thing, i.e. would differ in essence from the table that is in fact made out of this wood, their necessary distinctness follows only under the assumption of the necessity of the modal account: it is only if we restrict admissible counterpart relations by essential properties that we can draw the further conclusion that it is metaphysically impossible for  $B$  to be this different table made out of this very same hunk of wood.

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 its being what it is is compatible with  $A$ ’s being available for the construction of some other table  $D$ .

that makes equally good sense. I create a context that make my question make sense, and to do so it has to be a context that makes origins not be essential.” (Lewis 1986: 252)

<sup>5</sup>This is explicitly allowed for by Kripke: “The situation [in the second case] is thus akin to the one which inspired the counterpart theorists; when I speak of the possibility of the table turning out to be made of various things, I am speaking loosely: This table itself could not have had an origin different from the one it in fact had, but in a situation qualitatively identical to this one with respect to all evidence I had in advance, the room could have contained a table made of ice in place of this one. Something like counterpart theory is thus applicable to the situation, but it applies only because we are not interested in what might not be true of a table given certain evidence. It is precisely because it is not true that this table might have been made of ice from the Thames that we must turn here to qualitative descriptions and counterparts.” (Kripke 1980: 142) He adds that to do so would be “perverse” if we are concerned with “genuine de re modalities”, i.e. essences.