

# Essence and Existence

Philipp Blum, God in Ligerz, June 5, 2018

## Grounding: production and foundation

Even when distinguished from determination, essence and dependence, however, grounding is still said in many ways. Two such ways, for today, are production and foundation.<sup>1</sup>

Some things **produce** others, under certain circumstances, out of something:

- P-1 The sparkle and the dynamite produce an explosion.
- P-2 The builder and the bricks produce the house.
- P-3 The noise and my sensibility to it produce a headache.
- P-4 Some events in my brain produce a thought.
- P-5 Harvey Weinstein produces *Pulp Fiction*, an illegitimate child, and a scandal.
- P-6 The smile on Maria's face was produced by her amusement at Sam's joke.

Typically, the circumstances are contingent; but even when they are not, and thus production invariably happens, we have to distinguish necessarily obtaining conditions from *null* conditions. In the latter case, when production is *null*-conditional, we have production of a special type: the producer is then spontaneously active, a **generator** of its product all by itself. Typically, that out of which something is produced is external to the producer: when it is not, we have not just production, but **emanation**: out of itself, with no external input, the producer produces its product.

A certain conception of grounding applies to the case where generation and emanation intersect: when the production is both a generation and an emanation, the existence of the producer is sufficient for the existence of the product, and the latter is explainable in terms of the former and the fact that the product is produced by the producer, all by itself, and out of itself.

The match is not perfect, however. Some mixtures are both generated by their ingredients and emanate from them, but it does not always seem to be the case that they are grounded in them, at least not fully grounded. Mixtures emanate from their ingredients because this is what the ingredients are – the ingredients of this mixture. They are generated by their ingredients when these spontaneously mix, because the process of their mixing is not something additional to be added to the mixture and is not a way for the ingredients to be related to each other (for the ingredients no longer exist when the mixture does, except perhaps potentially). Are mixtures grounded in their ingredients? Not on a necessitarian picture of grounding: the existence of the mixture is not entailed by the existence of the ingredients. Even with

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1. Let me emphasise at the outset that I have no truck with the Grounding/grounding line of criticism – in fact, I am against capitalising quite generally and do not succumb to the belief that features of type-face ever make a semantic difference at all. I am neither claiming that “grounding” is ambiguous, nor that it has a focal meaning, but just drawing a distinction I find theoretically fruitful.

contingent grounding, if there is such a thing, the answer is less than clear-cut: certainly, the mixture is something over and above its ingredients, it does not owe its existence to just them, they do not make it exist (but perhaps the mixer does, or their natural coming together, or something else).

Necessitarian grounding differs from self-sufficient and spontaneous production (i.e. production which is both generation and emanation) also with respect to its dependency on *ceteris absentibus* clauses: if “*p*” stands for the conjunction of all positive atomic facts (if there is such a thing), then the fact that there are no unicorns (or their absence) is both generated by and emanates from the fact that *p* – the atomic facts, all by themselves, generate this absence (by not including any positive atomic fact about unicorns), and the absence emanates from them, because the totality fact, whatever this is, is neither positive nor atomic. The absence of unicorns is not grounded in the positive facts, however, because it is something over and above them and is not explainable in terms of them. The positive facts alone do not exclude unicorns, only their totality fact does.

Both generation and emanation are relations that may hold between different things and between a thing and itself. The butterfly emanates from the caterpillar, but they are not identical. The fire generates the smoke, but it is not it. We also have cases of self-generation and self-emanation, however. The fresh apple generates the rotten apple, but they are one and the same. The steam emanates from the boiling water, but is not numerically distinct from it.

When restricted to facts, “make it the case” seems appropriate to express cases of production that are both generations and emanations: the fact that *p* makes it the case that (there is a fact that)  $p \vee q$ ; the fact that *p* makes it the case that it is true that *p*; and so on. Even production which is both generation and emanation does not suffice for dependence: The step from *p* to  $p \vee q$  does not require more truthmakers (those for *p* will still do), but it allows for more truthmaking possibilities – it does not depend on its ground from which it emanates.

Phenomena of production are sometimes aptly described in terms of priority, levels and fundamentality: the producer is prior to, at a lower level, more fundamental than the product, the product is posterior, emergent, derivative. This by itself, I think, does not give us a reason to believe that production is or entails or should be modelled by a strict partial order. Suppose Sam believes, as some neoplatonists Christians do, that the entire world is an emanation of the mind of God, out of which it was produced spontaneously and entirely, without external cause or ingredient. Is this, by itself, enough to ensure that Sam is not a pantheist, or might he be a panentheist instead? Clearly, more has to be said, and it will depend on these additional theory elements what (and possibly: who) is at stake.

Even when under circumstances and out of something, production is quite different from another relation which is also, in some sense of this word, ‘generative’. Some things **found** others, under certain circumstances, ‘underlie’ them as foundations, as something on which the founded thing is built:

F-1 The basement founds the building, it is its foundation.

F-2 The soil founds the plant, it nourishes it and the plant arises from it.

F-3 The Swiss National Science foundation funds, and founds, our research; our careers are built on it.

F-4 The fundament, e.g. Maria’s face, founds the moment, e.g. Maria’s smile.

F-5 Socrates’ snub is founded in his nose, his snubnosedness in his having the particular nose he has.

F-6 The amorality of this act is founded in its consequences.

The founding of something *a* by something else *b* may be full or partial: it is partial, if *a* also has a foundation different from *b*, and it is full if *b* is its only foundation. Socrates’ snubnosedness is fully founded in his having a concave nose, i.e. in his nosedness and the shape of his nose, but only partially founded in his nosedness. The founding of something *a* by something else *b* may be transparent or opaque: it is transparent if *a* wears its being founded on *b* ‘on its sleeve’ as it were, and opaque if not. The foundation of *x* on *y* is transparent iff the very existence of *x* entails that it is founded on something like *y*, i.e. when *x*

by itself determines the foundation it needs. Someone's bachelorhood, we may perhaps assume (excluding the pope, transgender cases and a lot more), is transparently founded in his being an adult unmarried male, whereas someone's knowledge, if at all, is certainly not transparently founded in her justified true belief.

Full foundation may be called "basing": what fully founds a thing is its **basis**, it that on which something is based. A basis or a full foundation provides all the elements needed for the founded thing to 'arise', though it will of course not always necessitate it (cf. below). It provides for the possibility, not the actuality of the founded thing: only in cases of production which is both generation and emanation do things 'grow out' of their basis.

Transparent founding may be called "**manifestation**", and the founded thing an "aspect" of its foundation. Sometimes, transparency comes about because the connection is conceptual: the (primary) concept of the founded thing already characterises it as founded in a certain way on something else. Maria's smile (the one only Maria can have) is such a manifestation: knowing it fully tells you everything about its foundation.

Founding that is both a basing and a manifestation gives rise to self-revealing aspects, aspects that manifest their basis and nothing else, that allow for a 'road back' to the thing they are founded in. Perhaps this is the notion closest to Husserl's use of "foundation" in the Third *Logical Investigation*, where he explicates a generic notion of  $F$  being founded upon  $G$  as it's being a law of essence that an  $F$  as such cannot exist except in a more comprehensive unity which connects it with a  $G$ .

Both full foundation and transparent foundation may hold between different things, and between a thing and itself. Full self-foundation is the mark of well-constructed foundations: they hold themselves up and do not need further propping to stand. Such self-foundation need not be transparent: something may be a foundation, even a full foundation, of itself, but only accidentally so; sometimes foundations may be, and even need to be, further founded by other foundations. Transparent self-foundation is the mark of the obvious cases of foundation: the truth that  $p \wedge p$  is founded in the truth that  $p$ , and obviously so, by conjunction-elimination and conjunction-introduction. But neither full nor transparent foundation are reflexive: the building is not its foundation, even though it is both fully and transparently founded in it.

Foundation and production may occur together, of course. A certain disease, a biological condition of my body or a virus, may both found and produce the rash spreading over it: it underlies the rash because the rash is a symptom of it, and produces it – both causally and metaphysically, perhaps even spontaneously so and without further ingredients. Even when they coincide together, one of the generative relations may wear more of the trousers: Some foundings are also productions: the soil, including the seed, founds and also produces the plant. Some productions are also foundings: the scandal was not just produced by Weinstein's behaviour, but also founded on it.

Conceptually, being-built-out-of (production) and being-built-on (foundation) are two very different things: you can, of course, be built out of (produced by) something that is entirely in the past, but you cannot be built on and stand on something that is no longer there; you can be built on (founded in) something that cannot be itself be input to some building, because, for example, it is unchangeable or even immutable. There are other important differences: foundation, but not production can be backwards, logically and temporally. The amorality of a certain act may be founded in, due to, explainable in terms of its consequences, even if these are not even simultaneous, but perhaps much later than the act.

Even when something is both founded and produced, it may stand to different things in these two relations. Take the aesthetic properties of some painting, say its beauty. The beauty of the painting is founded on its visible features: because it is a painting (rather than e.g. a symphony), its beauty is there to be seen. It is, however, produced by many other things besides, inter alia the way it represents Jesus quite differently than is normally done in the Caravagesque tradition. That this is a one-franc piece is founded in its having

the right material properties and its being accepted as currency, but it is produced by the national bank that had the legal title to issue it.

Sometimes, it seems to me, foundation and production may even hold between the same relata, but in converse directions. The intrinsic profile of my body is produced (and ‘grounded’), in part, by the intrinsic profile of my hand, at least as long as my hand is part of me. Suppose that it is intrinsic to my right hand that it is alive. The intrinsic profile of my body then includes the property of having a living right hand, hence necessitates the fact that my hand is alive. Plausibly, foundation holds in the other direction, top-down, from my body to my hand: my hand is alive in virtue of being appropriately connected to my body, it is alive insofar as it is my hand, i.e. one of the hands of my body.

Sometimes, perhaps always, questions of production and of founding are difficult, and often also philosophically tricky. We may suppose, e.g., that Maria’s smile was miraculously painted over her face by her sense of amusement and hence produced by it. Suppose that she was rightly amused, in context, and that Sam’s joke, in context, was objectively funny (if there is such a thing). Is the smile then also produced by the joke? Is the smile not just produced by, but also founded in her sense of amusement (as well as founded in her temperament, her bodily constitution, her sense of humour)? Such questions may depend on our theory of smiles: are they outer signs, manifestations, of inner conditions and states or are they (perhaps unconscious) actions or (perhaps uncontrollable) reflexes? The pure theories of production and of foundation will not decide such questions.

A number of important features of all relations discussed – of production, generation, emanation, foundation, basing and manifestation – should be noted.

All six relations hold between existents: the non-existent does not need to be and cannot be produced or founded. It cannot be generally the case that what is produced or founded has less reality than what produces or founds it, because both relations may hold between a thing and itself. In general, we certainly cannot say that what is produced or founded is ‘nothing over and above’ what produces or founds it. What foundation and production ‘add’ are very different things: production explains present existence by showing where it comes from, both logically and temporally and also in the order of dependence; foundation explains present existence by showing what it consists in, what its present preconditions are. There may be cases where no such things are added: cases where something is produced out of and by nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) and cases where something is founded upon nothing. In addition to self-production and self-foundation, we may allow for such zero-production (not *null*) and zero-foundation. Clearly, then the ‘nothing but’ and ‘nothing over and above’ locutions are inappropiate. As has been said *ad nauseam*, there are no free lunches to be had.

All six relations are contingent. Clearly, even if  $x$  has been produced by  $y$ , it is possible, at least in principle, that it be produced by some  $z$ , different from  $y$ . This holds even if the production was spontaneous (generation) and out of  $y$  itself (emanation), and if  $y$  exists. In the same way,  $x$ ’s being founded upon  $y$  does not exclude the possibility that there be some  $z$  different from  $y$  that founds  $x$  (and that  $y$  exists), even when  $y$  already is a full foundation and thus a base. Not even transparent foundations allows for a “route back”: when  $x$  is the manifestation of  $y$ , knowledge of  $x$  will give us some knowledge of  $y$ , but only of a general sort, as knowledge of things (relevantly) like  $x$ .

At least without further restrictions, all six relations are left-side monotonous: if  $y$  produces / generates / emanates / founds / bases or manifests  $x$ , everything containing  $y$  will do as well. Further elements may be redundant (though only in the case of basing are they guaranteed to be), but redundancy does not undo

what has already been achieved.<sup>2</sup> You do not make buildings crumble just by adding to their foundations, you do not undo your thought just by having more C-fibre firing going on concurrently.

What is more: At least logically, all six relations are also many-one. Nothing in the nature of the relations makes it impossible that something could be produced by, generated out of, emanating from, founded in, based upon or manifesting more than one thing, concurrently and separately. This has the important consequence that none of the relations discussed is a relation of dependence, even when it itself holds with necessity. As many have noted, the confusion of determination and dependence is endemic in the grounding literature. It seems that people just cannot help thinking that, if  $y$  is the ground of  $x$ , then  $x$  ‘needs’  $y$ , ‘relies’ on  $y$  or is in some other way dependent on  $y$ . The discussion of multiple realisability should have taught us already fifty years ago how wrong this thought is, and that the fact that  $p \vee q$  is fully grounded in either disjunct may remind us of this.<sup>3</sup>

It is a natural and attractive thought to explain the confusing of determination with dependence as a sub-type of the equally endemic confusing of sufficient with necessary conditions. If he does  $\phi$  in order to  $\psi$ , then certainly, if he  $\psi$ s, he must have  $\phi$ ed! Determination, on this picture, provides for sufficiency, dependence accounts for necessity. If we think of ‘grounding’ generally (production and foundation) on the model of providing sufficient conditions, then it is natural to look for the dual: what provides necessary conditions? the answer, it has seemed to many, is: essence.

## Essence: What is it to be $x$ ?

Asking about some thing’s essence is asking about which ones, among the many properties it has, make it the thing it is, determine its identity or nature. The essential properties of a thing are those that matter, esp. when it comes to that thing’s existence, identity, nature or being. The question has to be further refined, however: in one sense, *each one* of its properties makes the thing the thing it is (i.e. the thing with these properties). We need not only to restrict, however, but also to broaden: what makes the thing the thing it is does not have to be a property. *Prima facie*, at least, it could come from a wide range of ontological categories: what makes Socrates the thing (or man) he is, we may think, is his humanity, that he taught Plato, the fertilised egg that grow into him, his very particular method of questioning, his Socratising or his death of hemlock in 399 BC at the hand of the Athenian democrats.

It is difficult to satisfy both desiderata at the same time:

- If we restrict the range of properties by requiring them to be had necessarily, or to be had necessarily if had at all, we make a thing’s existence, identity, nature or being necessary to it, turn relational essences (essential relations of Socrates to Plato, e.g., or to the egg that became him) into necessary connections between distinct existences and make counter-essential counterfactuals vacuously true. Furthermore, we have to decide whether essential properties are to be necessary just for the things they are essential to, or for everyone that has them. In the first case, we face an explanatory regress (the necessity of their exemplification is not explainable in terms of the property, nor of the thing by themselves, but by their belonging to the essence, something which was supposed to be explained in part by their being exemplified necessarily); in the second, we rule out that some properties may be contingently had by some things, and still be essential to others.
- If we restrict the range of properties by requiring them to be part of a real definition, we either need to assume (and make plausible) that there can be only one real definition of any thing that

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2. Certainly more controversially, the same seems to me true of explanation in general: if you have given an explanation (a sufficiently good, or acceptable one, in context or depending on the type of explanation), why should you undo what is achieved by just continuing to talk? I do know, however, that my intuition is not widely shared and I will not press this point further.

3. Co-production and co-foundation are not just logical possibilities, but theoretically interesting concepts: two shooting may co-produce one death, and be singularly sufficient for it, and two Siamese organisms can co-found a smile, and be singularly sufficient for it.

has an essence or else accept things with two, perhaps mutually incompatible identities, natures and beings. Furthermore, we have to say much more about what real definitions are, in what sense they are real and in what sense they are definitions: could they e.g. ‘include’ (and if so, in what sense) non-predicative entities, such as facts or even entirely distinct individuals (Plato, the egg)?

Both these (families of) attempts have in common that they restrict first and broaden later, adopting a ‘property-centric’ model of essence (as essential properties) and then forcing essences of other types into the predicational mould. I think it is worthwhile to explore the possibility that essences are not to be identified with essentially exemplified properties. Essences are not (sets, pluralities, conjunctions of) properties at all, but answers to the Aristotelian question what it is to be a certain thing (*to ti en einai*). Such answers exhibit a wide variety, both of content and of form, and there is no unified account to be had of what ‘the’ essence of a certain thing is.

As it may comprise elements of different categories, there is often no clear answer to the question how ‘complete’, ‘full’, ‘constitutive’ a given answer to a *to ti en einai* question is. “To be a man”, we may suppose, is an acceptable answer to the question “what is it to be Socrates?” / “what is it for Socrates to be?”. This answer, and the considerations that justify it, leave it entirely open whether there is, or might be, another answer to the same question, either in competition with the one given or ‘complementing’ it.

As we will see below, statements of essence will quite often be partial, and not just for reasons of ignorance. It is certainly metaphysically possible that even *bona fida* things, kinds, properties fail to have individuating essences. This is a common drawback of both supposedly unifying accounts of ground and essence that have recently been proposed: they both very closely tie essence to identity.<sup>4</sup> Both the ‘unified’ account of Fine (2015) and the ‘generalised identity’ account of Correia (forthcoming) straightforwardly imply that whenever it is true to say, of some thing *a*, that it is essentially such that *p*, there is an essence that fully defines *a*, either in the sense that or in the sense that it is true that to be *a* is to *F* and to be such that *p* (where “to be *a*” may be substituted for “to *F*”).<sup>5</sup>

My main objection to both these accounts of essence is that they very tightly link it to identity, and thus to existence, whereas I would rather link it with being. Generalising his earlier, operator conception of essence to the sententialist form, Fine says:

If I ask ‘what is the null set?’, for example, I am in effect asking what it is for an arbitrary object *x* to be the null set, and if I answer ‘the null set is essentially a set with no members’, then I am in effect saying that it is essential to *x*’s being the null-set that *x* be a set with no members – something that might be symbolized as:  $\text{Set}(x) \wedge \neg \exists (y \in x) \leftarrow_x x = \emptyset$ ; and, generally, the previous objectual statement of essence  $\Box_t \phi(t)$  – to the effect that *t* essentially  $\phi$ ’s [sic] – might now be expressed in the form:  $\phi(x) \leftarrow_x x = t$ . (Fine 2015: 300)

The harmless appearance of this (reformulations of questions, ‘possibilities’ of symbolisation) is deceptive: to say that to say that it is essential to *a* to  $\phi$  is to say that, (i) for an arbitrary or any individual, (ii) to be identical to *a*, (iii) it is essential for it to  $\phi$  is to make a very substantial, and in my view implausible claim. Let us just mark three main differences: Whereas “*a* essentially  $\phi$ s” is only about *a*, the reformulation is about any or an arbitrary individual (i). “*a* essentially  $\phi$ s” is an answer to a question about the status  $\phi$  has among *a*’s properties. The reformulation, instead, is a claim about the relative importance  $\phi$  has

4. So do Lowe and many others. Lowe (2008: 35) even says, quite incredibly, that “the essence of something, *X* is *what X is*, or *what it is to be X*” is just “another locution” for the claim that “*X*’s essence is the very *identity* of *X*” (his italics). Yablo (1987: 297) said that the essential properties of a thing are those “in virtue of which [the thing] is the entity in question”.

5. In the case of Correia (forthcoming), this is mirrored in the fact that statements of generalised identity are symmetric – if  $\phi$  is to  $\psi$  then to  $\psi$  is to  $\phi$  –, but statements of essence are not, or at least not always. Even if *F* includes all and only the essential properties of *x* and we may say that to be *x* is to be the *F*, the converse, that to be the *F* is to be *x* does not follow: even objectual essences, as we will see below, do not need to be individuating.

among all properties whatsoever when it comes to determine identity-statements involving  $a$  (ii). Thirdly, the essentiality claim itself is now general: what  $\phi$ -ing is said to be essential to is no longer the specific  $a$ , but the arbitrary individual  $x$ : to say of  $a$  what is essential to it requires making sense of anything whatsoever not just having that same property but having it essentially too.

I think this methodological objection can be sharpened somewhat: the questions Fine's formalisation allows us to ask are *not* questions about essence. Suppose we inquire into the essence of Venus, the morning star. Essences, in Fine as with us, are 'wordly': what is or is not essential to some thing does not depend on how that thing is given to us. Consider now a set containing Venus: again, its nature does not depend on how it is given to us, and is determined, in part, by its members, but not by how these are given to us. While questions about essence do not, questions about identity may, however, depend on such modes of presentation? A full answer to the question what it is to be the set  $\{a, \text{the morning star}, \dots\}$  may just talk about Venus. But what about the question: "what is it to be identical to the set  $\{a, \text{the morning star}, \dots\}$ ?" This question, but not the first, may be asked e.g. about e.g.  $\{a, \text{the evening star}, \dots\}$ . Its answer will then concern what it is for the morning star to be (identical to) the evening star, a consideration alien to the question of Venus' essence.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the 'generalised identity' account, to achieve uniformity between objectual and 'generic' essence (more on the latter below) the so-called "haecceity predicate 'is  $a$ '" (Correia 2006: 764) and counts these as "features"  $\phi$  subscribable to the essentialist " $\Box_{\phi} p$ ", read as "it is true in virtue of what it is to  $\phi$  that  $p$ ".

While Fine's focus on identity makes the resulting notion of essence too restrictive, the 'generalised identity' account is in danger of making it too broad. Many generalised identity statements are neither statements of grounding nor of essence: to be red is to be of my favourite colour, suppose, but colour-preferences and colours do not share grounds nor are involved in each others' essences.<sup>7</sup>

What is it to be Socrates? A difficult question, but here is a start: to be a human being. What else? To be a man? Perhaps not, not even in the sex sense, if he could have survived a certain type of operation. To have a certain body, or a body at all? Perhaps not, if it really is Socrates who populates Dante's limbo. Different conceptions of Socrates will answer questions about his essence very differently, not just in content, but in form as well.

Will the answer to the question what it is to be Socrates be different from the answer to the question what it is to be Plato? It may or it may not. In any case, however, the answer to this question is very different from the answer to the question what is it to be Socrates rather than Plato? This latter question may be readily answered: it is to be married to Xanthippe rather than to be a bachelor, for example. Even the latter question is not always answerable, however: there is no good answer to the question what it is to be this rather than that electron in the orbit of a helium atom, for example.

What is it to be a human being, a set, a British royal, a work of art? Here again, answers may be very diverse: to be a rational animal, to have members or being the empty set, to have a certain ancestry. Note that these answers are very imperfect: the first is intrinsically vague (human vegetables, human angels, humanoid robots?), the second uninformative because "set" reoccurs both in "empty set" and in "standing in the set-membership relation", the third is objectively indeterminate, because there is no fact of the matter who is a royal and who is not and the fourth is dis-unified: what it is to be a work of art is a possibly open-ended

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6. This worry is different from the circularity – and, more generally, impredicativity – worry addressed by Fine (2015: 301). For reasons mentioned in fn. 5, Correia (forthcoming) are not bothered about this.

7. I should stress that the question I take to be definitive of inquiry into essences – "what is it to be  $x$ " – is *not* just an instance of the supposedly more general question "what is it to  $F$ ". Even if perhaps "many Aristot[e]lian-minded philosophers who hold that the essence of men consists in their being rational animals arguably intend their claim to provide an answer to a question of the type ["what is it to  $F$ "]" (Correia 2006: 754), they should not. "What is it to (be rational)?" admits of irrelevant answers ("sometimes quite hard", "to be what Aristotle thinks defines us", "to be a member of a certain set"), which are excluded by the different parsing "what is it to be (rational)?".

list, containing items at best related by some kind of family resemblance. Here, as in the objectual case, it is not to be expected that the best possible answer to essence questions will narrow down the range of candidates instantiating the kinds in question, or even those instantiating them essentially, to just one single member. Perhaps what it is to be a state of knowledge that  $p$  really is just what it is to be a justified true belief that  $p$  (and nothing else), but they are still not identical, as the paradox of analysis shows.

What is it to be white, walking, surprising? Here we may be asking about the nature, or real definition of a property (though we will probably have to ask back: phenomenal white or reflectance white? white for a surface or for a light beam?), for an account of an activity performable only under certain circumstances and by certain actors (if someone else moves your limbs, you are not walking, even though robots walk; you may be walking on a treadmill, without changing place, but you are not walking at the moment where you stand still to change direction), or an explanation of why some events have the features they have (this b-flat is surprising within this melody, but would not be so in another; it is surprising to classically habituated ears, but perhaps not to atonalists). Again, individuating essences are not to be expected: even if to be white is to reflect, or to be disposed to reflect, light of a certain type of wave-lengths, it seems possible for colours to be differently realised – in light or on surfaces, for example.

The question what it is to know that  $p$ , what it is to be a knower that  $p$  is thus different from the question what it is to be a state of knowledge, as Fine (2015: 298) has urged (his answers being “to believe that  $p$  on the basis of its truth” and “a mental state” respectively), and we may even, if we want, take the first to be equivalent to the question what it is *for an arbitrary individual* to know that  $p$ , though I do not see why the extra qualification would be needed or helpful.

What is it to be the fact that  $p$ , the fact that  $q \wedge q$  and the fact that there is a fact? As long as not more is said about what facts are, there is no good answer to these questions. If facts are true propositions, the answer is simple and unhelpful: to be a proposition (perhaps a possible object of belief?) that so-and-so and to be true. If facts are states of affairs, predicationally and logically complex ‘combinations’ of particulars and universals, then they presumably have their intrinsic structure essentially. If facts are requirements on reality, answers will depend on the ‘fact-content’, i.e. on the requirement imposed. Perhaps what it is to be the fact that  $p$  will then be what it is to make it true that  $p$ , and what it is to be the fact that  $p$  will be the very same thing as what it is to be the fact that  $p \wedge p$  and also be the very same thing as what it is to be the fact that  $p \vee p$ .

## Essence and existence

“What is it to be  $x$ ” questions often contain an indexical or demonstrative element in the way they pick out  $x$  or the  $X$ s about the essence of which they inquire. In these cases, even a full answer will not provide us with a ‘blueprint’ of, or a recipe for, either  $x$  or the  $X$ s: essences are not ideas in God’s mind, or slots in a fully determinate matrix of possibilities, which only have to be realised or filled for the things to exist. It is in this sense that my notion of essence is existentialist in Prior’s and Plantinga’s sense: existence is prior to essence, because existence is presupposed in the very project of determining essence. To ask what it is to be  $a$  is a way of asking what  $a$  is and we cannot ask such a question about  $a$  if  $a$  does not exist. We may, of course, ask what it is to be something like  $a$  which is a way of asking what  $a$  is like and this question can be answered even in  $a$ ’s utter absence. But it is not the question about  $a$ ’s existence.

Kit Fine (1995, 2005) and E.J. Lowe (2008) have argued, to the contrary, that essence precedes existence. Fine’s motivation, as far as I see, stems from his concern with ontological dependence and his early claim that questions about what things exist in virtue of other things are questions about whether these things essentially stand in relations. Such a conception of ontological dependence, it seems to me, confounds production with foundation. Ontologically dependent ‘lesser’ things such as shadows and holes may be founded, and even essentially so, but still maintain their identity across different ways of being produced:



a given hole in a bit of cheese is ontologically dependent on the bit of cheese within which it is a hole, but it may be produced by all of a series of successively bigger portions of cheese including the original bit.

Lowe's argument is roughly as follows: existence is quantificational, a matter of being identical to some thing; identity judgments are applications of identity criteria; identity criteria are essentialist; hence, to say of something that it exists is to say of it what it is to be identical to that thing, i.e. to some claim about its essence. The weakest, albeit implicit, premise is in my view the first one. It may well be that singular existence claims are best expressed in terms of the identity relation, i.e. as  $\exists x(x = \dots)$ , where "... " stands for a singular term; it is quite another thing to say that in order to make existence judgements we have to judge identity claims. Quite plainly, we do not.<sup>8</sup>

Even if existence presupposed essence, this would be a synthetic a priori truth, if a truth at all. It may also be an a posteriori falsehood if among the really elementary particles we find things which do not have essences at all. That essence presupposes existence, on the other hand, is analytic: if *a* does not exist, there just *is* nothing, and could not be anything it is to be *a* (there could be, of course, but there is not). That essence and existence come apart does not mean that we cannot learn about the one from the other. Here are some connections:

**impossibility:** if there is no answer to the question what it is to be an *F*, we may reasonably conclude that there are no *F*s and that there could not be any: round squares are impossible *because* there is no answer what it is to be a round square;

**category mistakes:** if there is no answer to the question what it is, for an *F*, to be a *G*, we may reasonably conclude that no *F*s are, or could be *G*: coloured things cannot be unextended and Caesar is neither odd nor even *because* there is no way for unextended things to be coloured, there is no way for Caesar to be odd and there is no way for him to be even;

**non-existence:** if every answer to the question what it is to be an *F* is incompatible with the existence of *F*s, we may reasonably conclude that there are no *F*s: Pegasus does not exist and there are no unicorn *because* part of what it is to be Pegasus or a unicorn is to be a mythical creature.

**existence-entailment:** if every answer to the question what it is to be an *F* gives rise to the question what it is to be a *G*, then nothing could be *F* without something being *G*: stars depend for their existence on some public *because* part of what it is to be a star is to be popular and part of what it is to be popular is to be well-liked by some public.

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8. Moreover, even if we granted that point, it would not suffice to make Lowe's point, as it established only an epistemic, perhaps anthropological, order of dependence, and nothing of the metaphysical sort.