

# (Aristotelian) Essences

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## 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 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 fide* 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>1</sup>

Both the ‘unified’ account of Fine (2015) and the ‘generalised identity’ account of Correia & Skiles (2019) 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*.

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 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*, the morning star, ... } may just talk about Venus. But what about the question: “what is it to be identical to the set {*a*, the morning star, ... }?” This question, but not the first, may be asked e.g. about e.g. {*a*, the evening star, ... }. 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.

1. 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”.

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>2</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 it is 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 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

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2. 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)?”.

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>3</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:

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3. 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.

**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.

## Bringing them together

Existentialism, in our sense, provides for an interesting and in my view theoretically fruitful conceptual possibility: to individuate essences more fine-grainedly than existents. It has often been noted that, on a certain conception of essence at least, answers to the question what it is to be the morning star may not themselves answer the question what it is to be the evening star, that what it is to be water may be taken to diverge from what it is to be  $H_2O$ , that the question what it is to be the tallest person in the room is not even addressed by pointing out what it is to be Sam and that what it is to be the (conjunctive) fact that  $p \wedge p$  is richer than what it is to be just the fact that  $p$ . The usual theoretical moves have been made: modes of presentations have been introduced (first case), properties individuated hyperintensionally (second), non-rigid designators banned from essence questions (third), essence (and grounding) statements interpreted as distinguishing between ‘factually equivalent’ propositions (fourth). All four usual moves share the important drawback of changing the subject-matter: what we are interested in is the essence of Venus (the very planet), not of its mode of presentations, of the joint-carving property, not of our different ways of picking it out. Whether or not a designator is rigid (i.e. referentially invariant across possibilities) is not to be settled *prior* to questions about the essence of its designatum, but will often depend on them.<sup>4</sup> ‘Representational’ grounding, as I will argue below, is no grounding at all.

Once we abandon the property-cluster model of essence, however, a more unified and satisfying answer is possible: there is no presumption that the question what it is to be an  $F$  should receive the same answer than the question what it is to be a  $G$ , even if the  $F$  is the  $G$ , or all and only  $F$ s are  $G$ s or  $F$  and  $G$  are the same property. What it is to be an  $F$  is a question about what it takes to qualify as an  $F$ , either in context or absolutely, what conditions something must satisfy to be an  $F$ , what forms the satisfaction of such conditions can take. Such conditions may differ between necessarily coextensive properties and different rigid designators for the very same thing.

For at least some  $x$ , inquiries into its production, its foundation and its essence respectively ask different questions:

- how does  $x$  come about? what is  $x$  due to? where does  $x$  come from?
- how is it that  $x$  is? in virtue of what is  $x$ ? what does  $x$ 's existence require of the world?
- what is  $x$ ? what is it to be  $x$ ?

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4. This, I think, remains true even with respect to so-called ‘de iure’ rigid designators (which, by stipulation, do not ‘result’ from some rigidification operation): even this category is not a purely syntactical one – there just cannot be any *syntactical* test for semantic constancy.

These being different questions, they may receive different answers. Take an occurrent episode of fear. Different questions may characterise it quite differently:

- as a negative appraisal of a perceptually given lion (asking about its production);
- as an emotional (rather than cognitive or behavioural) reaction to a feeling of danger (asking about its foundation);
- as a representation, in the emotion mode, of the lion as dangerous (asking about its essence).

That the three questions are different does not, of course, mean that their answers are not connected and that answering one cannot help answering any of the others.

The perhaps closest connection between our three families of notions are between foundation and essence. On some conceptions, this connection is mediated by the notion of ontological dependence. On others, the link is forged by parthood. Foundation, in some, but of course not all respects, is similar to parthood, or rather to some species of parthood, if we accept [Fine \(2010\)](#)'s pluralism. The dependency we get from the relation between a set and its members is due much more to its being a relation of foundation than to its being a relation of production. The production side of set-membership is trivial, so to say: the members produce the set without further input, and pure sets are *null*-produced. That the identity and existence of the set is determined by the members is not itself a result of the way in which the set is produced from them. Foundation thus explains 'mereological' (and set-theoretical) essentialism, in those case where the latter is true.

Production may also explain, to some extent, some essential truths: if colours really are essentially response-dependent, then this is because they are produced, in part, by how they are seen. This does not, however, entail that they are founded upon our responses: they may still be properties of objectively existing visibles, and entirely founded in their dispositions to reflect light of certain wave-lengths, but, being 'out there', they are still co-produced by us. This fact about the way they come about may be taken to be reflected in their ontological status, more particularly in their being less than fully objective or mind-independent.

The explanatory potential of essence for questions of production and foundation is perhaps best brought out by considering a question that has received some attention in the grounding literature. If the fact that  $p$  grounds the fact that  $q$ , it has been asked, what grounds this grounding fact? Different answers have been proposed: the fact that  $p$ , the fact that  $q$ , none, both, and sometimes the one and sometimes the other. How should we go about answering this question? Here is a start.

Suppose you find it intuitive to claim that the fact that  $y$  grounds  $x$  is grounded in  $y$ . You may then think of the first-order grounding as a type of emanation:  $y$ , all by itself, not only grounds  $x$  but grounds its grounding of  $x$  as well. Emanation of this type may be grounded in  $y$ 's essence: it may be part of what it is to be  $y$  to produce not just  $x$  but its production as well. It does not have to be this way, however:  $y$ 's power to self-produce  $x$  may also be bestowed on it, by something else, and even accidentally so.

Suppose you find it intuitive to claim that the fact that  $y$  grounds  $x$  is grounded in  $x$ . You may then think of the first-order grounding as a type of manifestation:  $x$ , all by itself, provides for its own grounding. Manifestation of this type may be grounded in  $x$ 's essence: it may be part of what it is to be  $x$  that it is a manifestation of the precise ground it is grounded in, and of nothing else. It does not have to be this way, however:  $x$ 's power to provide for its own grounding may be unspecific as to what particular ground is required.

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