Introduction: Essence

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Some examples of essentialist claims

- Socrates is essentially human – he could not have been the entity or person he is, if he weren't human
- Socrates essentially developed from a particular pair of gametes – if one of the two had differed, Socrates' would have been a different organism
- Coloured things essentially have spatial extension – it is impossible for a thing to have a colour and not be extended in space
- Sets are essentially such that they are identical if, and only if, they have the same elements – the consequent of this conditional states a condition an entity has to meet in order to be a set
- Composite objects essentially have their proper parts – a composite object couldn't be the same if it consisted of other parts
- It is essential to promising that if a person promises to perform a particular action, that person is obliged to perform it – an act wouldn't constitute a promise without the obligation it entails

Essence in philosophy

- Essentialist claims are ubiquitous in philosophy
- They are also highly controversial
- Essence is a notion of philosophical interest since it is non-trivial what we mean by it
- The notion of essence or (equivalently) nature is systematically connected to other important philosophical notions, such as modality, identity, and kind
- Essentiality appears to meet the rough-and-ready topic-neutrality criterion for formality – the crucial connection between essence, identity (an object's essential properties individuate the object), definition (an object is defined by its essence), and modality (essential properties are had necessarily) obtain independently of any particular object, properties, relations to objects, or truths involved in an essentialist claim

Motivation: why care about essence?

Rational picture of the world

- Traditional Aristotelian picture of an ideal completed science which is captured by an axiomatized theory
- Essential truths about objects, kinds, properties, etc. provide the axioms
- Science as representable by a deductive process of reasoning based on the axioms – particular events and objects find a place in a rationally comprehensible structure

Motivation: why care about essence?

Metaphysical (and other) applications of essence

- Essentialist reduction of modality (Fine (1994), Correia (2012))
- Essentialist definition of ontological dependence (Fine (1995c))
- Complements a three dimensionalist picture of persistence – the essence of an object is its modal and temporal core which is wholly present whenever the object is – Mel as a 5 and a 50 year old share the same individual essence
- Connection to understanding: essence can be used to spell our the difference between knowledge and understanding – to understand a subject, we need to grasp its essential core

Overview

1. Motivation: why care about essence?
2. A very brief history of essence
3. Modalism
4. Arguments against Modalism
5. Primitivism
6. Arguments against Primitivism
7. Two Varieties of Post-Primitivist Modalism

A very brief history of essence

- In a discussion of the definition of substance in Metaphysics book *Z.4*, Aristotle discusses the idea that substance can be defined in terms of something he calls the 'what it is to be'
- Aristotle connected this 'what it is to be' to the notion of definition in his *Topics 102a3*
- The term *essence* was coined by Aristotle's Roman translators, who were so puzzled by this form of words that they introduced a neologism for it

A very brief history of essence

- Unsurprisingly, given the importance of Aristotle at the time, the notion of essence, or as many philosophers equivalently call it 'nature', was widely discussed in medieval philosophy
- The context was often theological; e.g. as in Thomas Aquinas' 'Being and Existence' (Aquinas (1968))

A very brief history of essence

Skipping ahead to the 20th century – early phenomenology

- Essence played a major role in early Phenomenology
- Husserl and his followers (e.g. Ingarden, Pfänder, Reinach, Scheler, Stein) thought that we are able to a priori acquire knowledge of the essences of things and general laws of essence
- This is clearly expressed e.g. in Reinach's address 'Über Phänomenologie' (Reinach (1914))

A very brief history of essence

Skipping ahead to the 20th century – logical positivism

- The influence of the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle contributed substantially to shaping the standing of essence in 20th century analytic philosophy

- They rejected essence as part of their general critique of metaphysics, which they took to consist of nonsensical statements (essence is included in a list of nonsensical metaphysical terms in Carnap's programmatic paper 'The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language' (Carnap (1959)))

- Schlick's critique of the early Phenomenologists' notion of the material a priori, which in particular is supposed to apply to the laws of essence, (Schlick (2008)) further reflects the logical positivists negative attitude towards essence

A very brief history of essence
Skipping ahead to the 20th century – after logical positivism

- Quine did much to re-establish metaphysics in analytic philosophy (see especially 'On what there is' Quine (1948)), even though Quine himself was a staunch extensionalist and was against intensional notions like 'necessity' or 'essence'

- Important developments in the philosophy of language and in logic paved the way for essentialism's return into the analytic mainstream:

    - Direct reference, content externalism and rigid designation (Kripke (1980), Putnam (1975)) – modal approach to meaning, which provided semantic arguments for the necessity or contingency of certain statements and allowed for a clear distinction between necessity and logical truth (unlike in Carnap's work on modality) and room for an objective, language- and mind-independent notion of metaphysical modality

    - Development of possible worlds semantics for modal logics (Kripke, Hintikka, Kanger and others, see Goldblatt (2005)) – formal framework to make semantic sense of modalities like 'necessity', 'contingency', 'possibility', 'impossibility' and their logic

Modalism: the modal conception of essence

Essentiality as a defined notion

- The 'traditional' view post-Kripke: essentiality is definable in terms of metaphysical necessity

- Basic idea: essentially having a property is just necessarily having it

  MOD x is essentially F if and only if it is metaphysically necessary that if x exists, x is F.

- See e.g. Forbes (1985), Mackie (2006), Wiggins (1976) (equivalent formulation) and implicitly in Kripke (1980)

Modalism: the modal conception of essence

Why Modalism is attractive

- In modal logic, we have a very well-elaborated and -understood formal theory of necessity
- Modalism hence explains the seemingly mysterious notion of essence in terms of the very well-understood notion of necessity

Fine's objections to the modal definition of essentiality

Fine (1994)'s influential objections to MOD

- Fine argues against MOD by pointing of four implausible consequences of this definition:

  1. MOD entails that every object essentially exists (see also Wiggins (1976))
  2. MOD entails that every object is essentially such that any metaphysical necessity obtains (e.g. I am essentially such that even numbers are divisible by two) (see also Forbes (1986))
  3. MOD implies that Socrates is essentially distinct from the Eiffel Tower, even though Socrates is not essentially connected to the tower in any way
  4. MOD implies that it is essential to Socrates that he is an element of the singleton set {Socrates} (see also Dunn (1990))

Fine's objections to the modal definition of essentiality

A closer look at the Socrates/{Socrates}-objection

- It is necessarily the case that if Socrates exists, then Socrates is an element of {Socrates}

- This means that the modal definition (MOD) classifies 'being an element of {Socrates}' as an essential property of Socrates

- This is false, because Socrates is not essentially connected to {Socrates} – to know what Socrates's nature is, we need not know anything about {Socrates} (unless we e.g. think of Socrates as an Urelement, see Luporini (msc.))

- As a consequence, (MOD) cannot account for an intuitive asymmetry concerning the essence of Socrates and {Socrates}:
    - It is indeed essential to {Socrates} that *Socrates is its element*, since sets essentially have their elements
    - It is not essential to Socrates that *he is an element of* {Socrates}, since persons are not essentially connected in any way to their singleton sets

Fine's objections to the modal definition of essentiality

An even closer look at the Socrates/{*Socrates*}-objection I

- Some philosophers think that Fine's argument can be dismissed, because it is merely based on very particular intuitions which are not shared by everyone (cf. Cowling (2013), Wildman (2013))

- This may be the case, but in fact, there is systematic picture underlying these intuitions which cannot be so easily dismissed:

- Fine's counterexamples are motivated by a connection between essence and ontological dependence (see Fine (1995b)):

- *x* ontologically depends on *y* if(f) *y* is involved in an essential truth about *x*

Fine's objections to the modal definition of essentiality

An even closer look at the Socrates/{*Socrates*}-objection II

- Given this principle, the 'essential connection' in Fine's objections are relations of ontological dependence.
- This interpretation gives us an idea of the systematic view underlying three of four Fine's intuitions:
  1. Not every x is such that every metaphysical necessity obtains, because these necessities contain objects on which x does not ontologically depend (or more generally because x does not depend on these necessities)
  2. Socrates is not essentially distinct from the Eiffel Tower, because Socrates does not ontologically depend on the Eiffel Tower
  3. Socrates is not essentially an element of the singleton {Socrates}, because he does not ontologically depend on it
- According to this interpretation, Fine's accomplishment is not so much to raise these objections (which had been raised by other people), but rather to systematize them by bringing back a notion with an illustrious history in metaphysics

Reactions to Fine's objections

Essentialism and its discontents

- Some metaphysicians find the counterexamples to (MOD) convincing and the problems overwhelming

- This includes mostly those who are sympathetic to a broadly Neo-Aristotelian approach to metaphysics anyway

- Metaphysicians who work in a different framework (e.g. those working in a broadly Lewisian framework) have been hesitant to see Fine's argument as a refutation

- Some simply dispute the intuitions underlying Fine's counterexamples and take them to be perhaps bizarre, but ultimately harmless implications of the definition

- Others are more amiable to Fine's objections and take them as a motivation to formulate a refined version of the modal definition which aims to respect the underlying systematic picture (we'll come back to these proposals in the last part of the presentation)

Primitivism: Essentialism about Modality

Essentialism about modality

- Instead of defining the notion of essentiality in terms of metaphysical necessity, Fine (1994) suggests we should define metaphysical necessity in terms of essentiality

- Standard version of the Essentialist definition of metaphysical necessity

    ESS It is metaphysically necessary that p if, and only if there exists some objects xx, such that p is true in virtue of the nature of the xx.

- 'true in virtue of the nature of' is adopted as a primitive notion which is used to make essentialist claims

- This notion is read consequentially, so that any logical consequence of xx also expresses an essential truth about the xx

Primitivism: Essentialism about Modality

Essence as a primitive notion

- Fine suggests that essence should be adopted as a theoretical primitive
- This means that essence cannot be defined in terms of other notions
- It can however still be characterized in terms of systematic relations (falling short of definability) to them
- Two examples given in Fine (1994): essences give us objectual definitions; systematic parallels to analyticity – 'true in virtue of the nature of' and 'true in virtue of the meaning of'

Primitivism: Essentialism about Modality

Primitivism: some different notions of essence

- Fine's reliance on an essentialist sentential operator marks a departure from the traditional approach focusing on essential (and accidental) properties – essences correspond to sets of propositions instead of properties (cf. Fine (1995c))

- *Plural or collective essence*: essential truths about pluralities of objects, some of which cannot be explained in terms of the individual essences of these objects (e.g. the plurality of all singleton sets is essentially a proper class, even though no singleton in itself has this property)

- *Consequential/constitutive essence*: consequential essence includes consequences of essential truths, constitutive essence consists of essential truths which do not have this status due to being consequences of essential truths – corresponds to medieval distinction between essence and propria

Primitivism: Essentialism about Modality

The logic of essence

- A crucial step towards re-establishing modal notions like necessity in mainstream analytic philosophy was the development of a tractable and intuitively compelling interpretation of modal logic

- In the same vein, Fine (1995a) develops a formal logic for the essentialist operator '$\Box_F$' – 'true in virtue of the nature of the F's'

- The logic is intentionally designed to be similar to standard modal logic for the necessity operator '$\Box$'

- This extends to the semantics which modifies the standard possible worlds semantics for modal logic by adding an objectual notion of dependence

- Importantly, Fine proves that the standard system of modal logic S5 for metaphysical modality is a special case of his logic of essence: the metaphysical necessities are just the statements which are true in virtue of the nature of all objects in the logic of essence

Primitivism: Essentialism about Modality

Further developments of Primitivism

- Fine (1995c): definition of ontological dependence in terms of essence; ontological dependence can be argued to be the notion philosophers relying on supervenience had in mind in the first place

- Correia (2006): extension from the objectual notion of essence of Fine's early papers on essence to a generic notion (as in e.g. essential to *being an organism*)

- Correia (2012): extension of the Essentialist definition of metaphysical necessity to logical and conceptual necessity; distinction between brute and derivative plural essences

- Fine (2015): development of a unified framework for generic essence and ground which links them to necessary and sufficient conditions, respectively

Primitivism: Open Questions, Problems, and Objections

Epistemology of essence

- An important question about essence is how we are able to know essential truths

- Historically, this was a major point of disagreement between the logical positivists and the early phenomenologists: from an empiricist perspective, essences are highly dubious, since we can neither perceive or measure essentiality, nor verify essentialist claims; the phenomenologists on the other hand believed that we can, by applying certain techniques, discover laws of essence a priori via our imagination

- Nowadays, different proposals, but no standard approach: a priori knowledge of essence via knowledge of meaning plus (Hale (2013)), empirically informed approach (Tahko (2017)), Husserlian eidetic variation to attain objectual understanding of essence (Vaidya (2010))

Primitivism: Open Questions, Problems, and Objections

The excluding essences-objection (Wildman (2018))

- If there are entities whose essences exclude each other, this poses a problem for Primitivism
- Assume that Satan's and God's essence each includes that they are the single most powerful being in existence (and assume that both possibly exist)
- Since essentiality entails metaphysical necessity and metaphysical necessity entails truth, the assumption entails that each of Satan and God are the single most powerful being, which cannot be the case
- Wildman has other examples involving e.g. events which exclude each other

Primitivism: Open Questions, Problems, and Objections

Incompatibility with Contingentism (Teitel (2017))

- Necessitism is the view that necessarily, everything is necessarily exists (defended most notably in Williamson (2013))

- Many think that Necessitism is implausible and that it's negation, Contingentism, is true (i.e. that possibly, there are some things which possibly fail to exist)

- Teitel argues, based on a number of formal assumptions about essence and modality, the Essentialist reduction of metaphysical necessity is incompatible with the Contingentism

Primitivism: Open Questions, Problems, and Objections

Against the Essentialist reduction of modality

- Primitivists claim that Necessity can be reductively explained in terms of necessity

- This claim has been questions along different lines (cf. Leech (2018), Leech (2020), Mackie (2020), Romero (2019))

- One recurring theme in these arguments is that the explanation must at some point involve modal assumptions which are either inadmissible, since they presuppose the connection between essence and necessity which has to be argued for, or which cannot be explained in terms of essence

Three varieties of Post-Primitivist Modalism

Post-Primitivist Modalism (PPM)

- Post-Primitivist Modalists accept modal accounts of essence post Fine's objections against Modalism
- One can distinguish three varieties:
    1. Naive PPM: hold on to MOD without taking Fine's objections into account
    2. Sophisticated PPM: acknowledge Fine's objections and modify the modal definition in order to avoid them e.g. by introducing a further notion into MOD besides metaphysical necessity
    3. Deflationary PPM: embrace a modal account of essence, but deny the metaphysical importance of the notion

Three varieties of Post-Primitivist Modalism

Naive Post-Primitivist Modalism

- Naive PPM need not be literally naive; see e.g. Mackie (2006) for a sophisticated discussion of essentialism modally understood and the development of a particular variant called Minimal Essentialism

- Generally, not that often encountered in metaphysical discussions of essence given the currency Fine's objections have among metaphysicians

- Often encountered in contexts in which the subtle distinctions drawn by Fine do not necessarily matter, e.g. in the discussion of essentialist views about species in the philosophy of biology (cf. the next two sessions of the seminar!), or in scientific and dispositional essentialism (cf. e.g. Ellis (2004), Bird (2007))

Three varieties of Post-Primitivist Modalism

Sophisticated Post-Primitivist Modalism

- The basic idea of sophisticated PPM is to add a further condition to MOD

- This condition cannot be just another modal clause (cf. Torza (2015)), so usually it involves a second primitive notion distinct from necessity (and sometimes further machinery)

- Some candidate notions: intrinsicality (Denby (2014), and much improved: Bovey (2020)), sparseness (Wildman (2013)), naturalness (de Melo (2019)), incompatibility/Priorian strict implication (Correia (2007)), being a characteristic (Gorman (2005)), concreteness + encoding/exemplification-distinction (Zalta (2006)), ontological dependence (???)

Three varieties of Post-Primitivist Modalism

Deflationary Post-Primitivist Modalism

- This variety of PPM is based on the idea that we can understand essence in modal terms, but that the notion does not have a substantial role to play in metaphysics or philosophy

- Usually motivated by the idea that essence is a vague or highly context-sensitive notion:

  What are the essential attributes of, say, Dancer's Image? No doubt it will be counted essential that he is a horse and accidental that he was disqualified in this year's Kentucky Derby. But what of the attribute of being male, or of being a thoroughbred, or of not being a Clydesdale stallion? Here, I suppose, essentialists may disagree. Indeed, a reasonable essentialist might well take the position that these are hard cases that admit of no clear decision. (Cartwright (1968), p. 615.)

Three varieties of Post-Primitivist Modalism

Deflationary Post-Primitivist Modalism

- Deflationary PPM is rooted in David Lewis's approach to modality and in particular in counterpart theory (cf. Lewis (1968, 1986))

- Lewis denies that there is the absolute and context-indepedent notion of essence which both Modalists and Primitivists accept:

  I suggest that those philosophers who preach that origins are essential are absolutely right–in the context of their own preaching. They make themselves right: their preaching constitutes a context in which de re modality is governed by a way of representing (as I think, by a counterpart relation) that requires match of origins. 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, that makes equally good sense. I create a context that makes my question make sense, and to do so it has to be a context that makes origins not be essential. (Lewis (1986), p. 252.)

- For a less deflationary variant of DPPM, see Paul (2004, 2006)

Essence: For and Against

Lewis against essence:

> *I agree with my younger self, who proposed counterpart theory while a student of Quine's, that judgements of essence and potentiality are a fishy business, not governed by adequate standards of what's right and what's wrong. Could I have had different origins? Could I have been brought by a stork? – Say what you like! (Lewis (2020), letter 220.)*

Essence: For and Against

Lowe pro essence:

> [H]ow could there not be any fact of the matter as to our identities and the identities of our words and thoughts? Everything is, in Joseph Butler's memorable phrase, what it is and not another thing. That has sounded to many philosophers like a mere truism without significant content, as though it were just an affirmation of the reflexivity of the identity relation. But, in fact, Butler's dictum does not merely concern the identity relation but also identity in the sense of essence. It implies that there is a fact of the matter as what any particular thing is, its 'very being', in Locke's phrase. Its very being–its identity–is what makes it the thing that it is and thereby distinct from any other thing. (Lowe (2016), p. 8.)

Thank you!

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