

A Counterfactual Account of Essence

Berit Brogaard
University of Missouri
brogaardb@gmail.com

&

Joe Salerno
Saint Louis University
knowability@gmail.com

July 10, 2007

Kit Fine (1994. “Essence and Modality”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 8: 1-16) argues that the standard modal account of essence as de re modality is ‘fundamentally misguided’ (p. 3). We agree with his critique and suggest an alternative counterfactual analysis of essence. As a corollary, our counterfactual account lends support to non-vacuism the thesis that counterpossibles (i.e., counterfactual conditionals with impossible antecedents) are not always vacuously true.

Explicitly modal accounts of essence are rather recent. Moore (1917-1918) offers an account of essence in terms of entailment: a property F is essential (or *internal*) to x iff ‘ $x = a$ ’ entails ‘ Fx ’ (p. 293). Since the emergence of modal logic, essential properties are typically equated with de re necessities. But, as Fine notes, the presumption that there is ‘nothing special about the modal character of essentialist claims beyond their being de re’ is mistaken (p. 3). While Kripke’s wooden table, Tabby, is necessarily a member of the set {Tabby}, it is not essential to Tabby that it be a member of that set. Nor is it essential to Tabby that seven is prime or that it be such that it’s either raining or not. The properties: being a member of the set {Tabby}, being such that seven is prime, and being such that it’s either raining or not seem irrelevant to the question of what it is to be Tabby. By contrast, the wood of which Tabby is composed seems relevant to Tabby’s essence.

In the *Reasoner* 1(1), we offered the following counterfactual explanation of said intuitions: if there hadn’t been sets (or if seven hadn’t been prime,), then Tabby might still have existed. Tabby exists at some (or all) closest impossible

worlds at which there are no sets (or numbers, etc.). By contrast, Tabby does not exist at closest worlds where there is no wood.

This sort of explanation requires, for its non-triviality and informativeness, that some counterpossibles be non-trivial and informative, or more specifically, that their truth-values be affected by the truth-values of their consequents. For this reason we take impossible worlds to be *non-deductively closed* sets of sentences. We leave classical logic and one's favored modal logic intact for non-counterpossible modal discourse. We don't have space to discuss closeness of impossible worlds. We simply aim to show that non-trivial counterpossibles make a modal analysis of essences possible. x is essentially F iff if nothing had been F , then x would not have existed.

However, our right-to-left is curious. Thanks to Mike Almeida and Jim Stone for noticing. If Mafia Mike hadn't protected Joey Baddabing, then Joey wouldn't exist. Yet, one might argue, Joey is not essentially protected by Mike. After all, it is not metaphysically necessary that Mike protects him. Worse than this *problem of contingent essences* is the problem of actually *uninstantiated essences*. If there were no medical doctors, I wouldn't exist. But I am not a medical doctor. A fortiori, I'm not essentially a medical doctor.

We might modify thus: x is essentially F iff (i) necessarily, if x exists then x is F , and (ii) if nothing had been F , x wouldn't have existed. This modification has the benefit of distinguishing the essential from the necessary while ruling out the essential but contingent (and uninstantiated). On this account an essential property is a metaphysically necessary property that one wouldn't live without. That is, it is a property that x has in every metaphysically possible world in which x exists, and a property such that x does not exist in the closest worlds (possible or impossible) where that property is not instantiated.

We prefer tolerance for contingent essences, and recommend a technical modification to deal with the problem of uninstantiated essences: there being F s is essential to x iff if there were no F s then x wouldn't exist. This gets around the problem of actually uninstantiated essences: if there were no doctors, indeed, I would fail to exist. By the above account, there being doctors is (contingently) essential to my existence. But this does not imply that I am a doctor.

The contingent nature of essence is justified by common uses of 'essential'. Consider:

- (1) It is essential to your team's success to advertise your website.
- (2) It is essential to your work to back up your hard drive.

Here 'essential' does not mean what it typically means in recent philosophical literature. (1) doesn't say that there is no world in which you don't advertise your website but your team is successful, and (2) doesn't say that there is no world in

which you fail to back up your hard drive but still produce the same work. It's rather something like: holding fixed relevant background conditions, if you don't advertise your website, your team will not be very successful. And holding fixed relevant conditions, if the hard drive is not backed up, your work will eventually suffer. It is natural, then, to understand ordinary essence claims as counterfactuals.

Notice the difference between saying ' x is essentially F ' and saying ' F is essential to x '. Your team's success is not essentially such that your website be advertised, but rather said advertising is essential to your team's success. Mafia Mike's protection is essential to Joey's existence, but Joey is not essentially protected by Mike. Doctors are essential to my existence, but I am not essentially a doctor. Whenever x is essentially F , F is essential to x ; but sometimes F is essentially to x without x being essentially F . This is just what our proposed analyses predict: ' x is necessarily F , and if there were no F s, x wouldn't exist' obviously entails 'if there were no F s, x wouldn't exist'.

In conclusion, if one recognizes non-trivial counterpossibles and distinguishes 'is essentially F ' from ' F is essential to', one can offer a perfectly general account of 'essential'—an account that captures the philosophical sense and entails the ordinary sense of the term.