

Essence and Knowledge

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Abstract

In this paper I will attempt to show that there are some essential connections between essence and knowledge, and to clarify their nature. I start by showing how the standard Finean counterexamples to a purely modal conception of essence suggest that, among necessary properties, those that are counted as essential have a strong epistemic value. I will then propose a “modal-epistemic” account of essence that takes the essential properties of an object to be precisely the sub-set of its necessary properties that constitute a significant source of knowledge about it. I will then argue that this view is supported by an inference to the best explanation that starts from some uncontroversial, although sometimes neglected, epistemic roles essences should play.

Keywords: Essence, Definition, Explanation, Kit Fine.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will defend the thesis that the essence of something just is a set of cognitively significant properties with a certain modal profile. More precisely, an essential property of x is a necessary property of x which constitutes a significant source of knowledge about x . And the essence of x is a set of essential properties, ideally sufficient for individuating x , which is as far as possible simple and informative. Because the picture I want to draw is very ample, I will often have to paint with a very broad brush. But the connections I wish to highlight only emerge at this very general level, and I believe this is the reason why they are too easily missed.

The plan of the paper is as follows. In the first section, I will introduce the relevant notion of essence, and I will discuss some widely accepted arguments that show that the notion of essence cannot be reduced to purely modal notions. I will argue that the same arguments already show that essences have a high degree of interest from the epistemic point of view, and I will sketch a view on which this high degree of epistemic interest is part of the definition of essence. In the second section I will look more specifically at various epistemic roles that essences play. The notion of essence is assumed by most theorists to have close connections which notions such as explanation, individuation, and definition (and sometimes induction), and these

are epistemic notions (or so I will claim). I will argue that my view is supported by an inference from the best explanation based on these connections.

2. Essence and Necessity

What is essence? A definition of essence is not often offered, presumably because the notion is supposed to be primitive. Yet, there are a few things that are often said to introduce the notion. The essence of a thing, we are told, is its nature, or, following Locke, “the being of any thing whereby it is what it is”. Essence is also etymologically linked to being, since it comes from Latin *essentia*, which can be translated as ‘being’ or ‘beingness’, and was introduced in the philosophical jargon to translate some Aristotelian expressions also derived from the Greek verb which expresses being.¹ Sometimes essences are also linked to real definitions: the definition of a thing, as opposed to definition of words. There could be some room, if one wished to, for complaining that we do not really understand any of these notions, and even that they do not have meaning outside the Aristotelian context where they originated. I used to make this sort of complaint. But I now think my complaint was, although not entirely unmotivated, short-sighted and, in the end, a little bit dishonest. For, after all, I can quite well understand and use the English word ‘essence’ and its adverbial form ‘essentially’. For example, I can say that I made my complaint because my philosophical outlook is essentially the product of a twentieth-century education. Consider also some claims I found on the internet, like “the essence of true friendship is to make allowance for another’s little lapses”, or “the essence of government is force”, as well as “egg yolks are essential for carbonara” and “water is essential to life”. While I am not sure these claims are true, I do not seem to have trouble understanding them. Of course, it is not trivial that the common notion of essence employed in those claims is the same notion philosophers are interested in. But I now think that the relation between the philosophical notion and the everyday notion is not so different from the relation between the everyday (non-epistemic) use of the notions of possibility and necessity and their (non-epistemic) philosophical use.² It might be that the notions are identical, or that the philosophical notions are a limiting case of the everyday notions, or some sort of rigorous development or Carnapian “explication” of them. Attention to the ordinary usage of the notion does not imply that the aim of philosophical theory is just, or even mainly, an account of the ordinary notion. Be that as it may, I am only claiming that our understanding of the ordinary usage of the notion of essence is sufficient to provide some grasp of the philosophical usage, and we cannot reject the notion altogether as if it were some obscure technical notion of Aristotelian logic or medieval scholastic philosophy. I will come back at the end of this section to the relation between modality and essence and to the role of ordinary language (and thinking) in theorizing about those notions.

¹ An interesting historical complication is that *essentia* was originally introduced to translate the term we now translate as ‘substance’ (*ousia*), and only later used to translate the complex expression we now translate as ‘essence’ (*ti ti ên einai*). But both are clearly related to *einai*.

² Livingston-Banks (2017) is one of the few authors that I know of to explicitly discuss the issue, and he takes a different view, on which “essence” is a theoretical notion, with a loser relation to ordinary usage. But surely *metaphysical modality* is also a theoretical notion, even if some of our ordinary modal talk expresses metaphysical modality. I think the issue therefore should at least not be prejudged. If a notion of essence close to the ordinary usage can be developed that makes sense of philosophical claims as well, that certainly counts in its favor.

Because my philosophical outlook is, however, essentially the product of my twentieth-century education, the view of essence I will propose does not make it a metaphysical primitive. It also does not support some fairly popular philosophical views about the relationships between essence and some other metaphysical notion. For example, my view of essence does not support the idea that the notion of essence helps us to make sense of other metaphysical notions such as “grounding”, “fundamentality”, or “ontological dependence”. It also does not support the view that essence grounds or explains metaphysical modality; in fact, it seems to be incompatible with the latter claim, because it defines essence using modal (although not only modal) notions.³ If one however thinks that essence is instead a metaphysical primitive, it should be stressed that most of what I say here about the epistemic role of essence is independent of this issue.

I will start with at least one assumption about the relation between essence and modality, one that is fairly uncontroversial in the contemporary debate. If something has a property essentially, then it has that property necessarily. An essential property, in other words, is one which an object could not fail to have. Importantly, I will also assume (again, this is relatively uncontroversial nowadays) that there are conclusive reasons to think the reverse entailment does not hold: it is not always the case that a necessary property of something is an essential property. Most theorists who write on this matter have been convinced of the latter claim—if they did not accept it already—by Fine (1994). I suppose it is likely that anyone reading this paper is already familiar with the arguments in the by now classic paper by Fine.⁴ However, I need to briefly rehearse those arguments, because I will claim that, as well as establishing their intended conclusion, Fine’s counterexamples to the identification between essentiality and necessity of properties also support a further conclusion, namely that essential properties are necessary properties which have a special epistemic importance. It is worth pointing out immediately that this is not at all something Fine would want to deny. Anyone who thinks that some, and only some, necessary properties are essential, will probably think that whatever metaphysical feature marks the essential properties also provides them with epistemic interest. If essential properties form “the structure of the world”, it is interesting to know what they are, and, presumably, this is potentially the source of much further knowledge. The alternative suggestion I wish to spell out is that the explanatory order can be reversed: necessary properties which present a high epistemic interest get singled out as essential.

Let us consider, to begin with, three counterexamples that Fine provided to the view that all necessary properties are also essential.

- (1) Socrates is necessarily a member of the singleton {Socrates}, but he is not essentially a member of that set.
- (2) Socrates is necessarily distinct from the Eiffel tower, but he is not essentially distinct from the Eiffel tower.
- (3) Socrates is necessarily such that $2+2=4$, but he is not essentially such that $2+2=4$.

³ Rayo (2013) on the other hand offers a metaphysical and semantic framework in which an epistemic notion of essence could be employed, or at least housed.

⁴ It is not however uncontroversial that Fine’s objection cannot be met by some modification of the simple modal view that identifies necessity and essentiality. In fact there is a growing number of accounts that attempt that. See e.g. Wildman 2013, 2016, Torza 2015, De 2020.

These claims seem very plausible. They are even more plausible if we put the second conjunct slightly differently, in terms of the relevant property being part of Socrates' essence. For we see immediately that if properties of the sort mentioned in (1), (2) or (3) were part of his essence, many more of the same kind would be, and his essence would then be a very complex and messy sort of construction. But why are these claims plausible? One distracting feature of the claims is that it is obvious that Socrates has these properties. Consider a variant of case (3): Socrates is such that Fermat's theorem is true. This is also necessarily true, and it is in a sense not at all obvious. But we still do not find plausible that it be part of Socrates' essence to be such that Fermat's theorem is true. A more interesting thought that applies to cases (2) and (3) is that the relevant properties are shared by everything, as in the case of (3), or almost everything, as in the case of (2). However, I mention a property that only Socrates possesses, so this cannot be the crux of the matter.⁵ The general feature of the properties involved is that they do not tell us something very interesting about Socrates. This is well illustrated by the asymmetrical relation between Socrates and his singleton. While it is not essential to Socrates that he is a member of {Socrates}, it is essential to {Socrates} that it has Socrates as a member. Being a set that contains Socrates as the sole member is a very good candidate for being the essence of {Socrates}. Not only this feature uniquely identifies the set, but it seems to be pretty much everything there is to know about it. On the other hand, although Socrates is uniquely identified by the property of being the sole member of {Socrates}, there is lot more about him that one could want to know.

A further epicycle of the discussion is worth considering, although I will only be able to scratch the surface. A property such as being human seems a good candidate to be a necessary and essential property of Socrates, or any other human being. But now suppose, as it is standard, that it is possible for Socrates not to exist. Suppose also that if he did not exist, he would not be human (after all, being human seems to imply being a concrete being). He is possibly not human then. One way of solving this problem is neutral with respect to the distinction between necessity and essence, and it allows that Socrates is human even when not existing. In possible worlds language, 'Socrates is human' would be true *at* worlds in which he does not exist, although not true *in* those worlds, while 'Socrates exists' would not be true in or even at those worlds (see Adams 1981 and Fine 1985). A different reply consists in allowing a claim of the form 'a is necessarily F' to be true just in case a is F whenever it exists. This seems to be in line with the intuitive thought that an object has a necessary or essential property just in case the object could not exist without that property. However, while this solution allows us to say that Socrates is necessarily human, it also makes existence a necessary property (assuming it is a property) of Socrates, and anything else at all, because everything exists whenever it exists. Williamson (2013) has defended the view that everything necessarily exists on independent grounds, without denying that being human, or, more generally, having any property, requires existing, and without appealing to the distinction between *true at* and *true in*. On his view, Socrates does not have the property of being human necessarily, but he does

⁵ Sometimes properties shared by absolutely everything are called "trivial". Della Rocca (1996) would perhaps count as trivial, in a distinct but related sense, also the property mentioned in (1), as a consequence (for Socrates) of a trivial property in the stricter sense. But the one mentioned in (2) is not trivial in its sense (Della Rocca 1996: 3).

possess a conditional property, that of being human whenever he is concrete—that is, as we might put it, whenever he exists spatio-temporally. So there are some views on which existence is a necessary property of absolutely everything. But, as Fine notes, existence does not seem essential to Socrates. It also does not seem essential to most other things. To make this vivid, consider that even if one holds the Williamsonian view on which existence is a necessary property of everything, one might want to say that there are some things for which it is worth asking whether existence is *also* essential to them, such as God or the whole universe, or in general that it is a separate question whether some things exist essentially (if one allows for this distinction, the view that everything exists necessarily might look less implausible). What is crucial for our present purposes is that, once again, our judgements about essentiality correlate with our judgements about epistemic interest. Supposing that there are no non-existent things, knowing of something that it exists does not tell us anything at all about that thing. It does not allow one to deduce, or otherwise infer, any further property whatsoever of what we are talking about. But if there is a being that has existence among its essential properties, then this is a crucial piece of knowledge about it.

So here is a view about what makes a property essential that seems to be not only compatible with, but indeed suggested by, Fine's arguments:

Essential-Property-Definition (EPD): a property of an object is essential just in case it is necessary that the object has that property and the fact that the object has that property is a significant source of knowledge about the object.⁶

On this view, because what is a significant source of knowledge depends on what cognitive capacities we have, whether a property is essential partly depends on the nature of human beings; and it could also be argued that the view makes what properties qualify as essential depend on specific contexts.⁷ In this sense, the view might be counted as an anti-realist or deflationary conception of essence, although it certainly does not make possible for us to stipulate essences into existence. I am not assuming any precise account of knowledge, but I am assuming that knowledge requires at least true belief and some connection between belief and truth, so a broadly externalist or "anti-Gettier" component.⁸ Therefore, there are objective facts about what, given one's epistemic position, is conducive to further knowledge.

EPD might be paired in various ways with a definition of essence, as opposed to essential property. For the sake of this paper, I will work, when needed, with the following:

Essence Definition (ED): The essence of X is a set of properties such that 1) Each property in the set is essential to X, 2) The set specifies sufficient conditions for being X, 3) Where there is more than one set satisfying 1 and 2, the set has the

⁶ What it means for knowledge to be *about* something is a good question. But it is not a problem for my definition, unless we assume we cannot have beliefs about something without knowing its essence, a view I find very implausible, and I argued against in Sgaravatti 2016.

⁷ See Paul 2004. Lewis 1986 may also be counted as presenting a contextualist account of essence.

⁸ I mean this requirement to be compatible with the "knowledge-first" view in epistemology, although on that view there is no way to spell out the requirement without appealing to the notion of knowledge.

best ratio of simplicity to capacity to provide knowledge about X (where more than a set satisfies the 3 conditions, each of them can be called an essence of X).⁹

Conditions 1 and 2 are, I believe, one natural way to move from essential property to essence. Condition 3 will receive some attention below.

Supposing one is not opposed to the idea that there is an epistemic element in the notion of essence (an idea that will be defended and made more precise in subsequent sections), it could be asked why we need a modal element at all in our notion. In some ordinary contexts, “essential” might seem to mean simply very interesting or very important. It might be that this is one meaning of the term. But first, I believe there clearly is a sense of “essence” in which there is a connection between essence and existence, in ordinary contexts as well. Looking at the examples cited above, if the essence of government is force, then a government completely separated from force cannot exist, and if egg yolks are essential to carbonara, then you cannot cook carbonara without eggs.¹⁰ One could object to a claim like “water is essential to life” that we can imagine alien or artificial forms of life that do not rely on water; but it seems to me that this is equally an objection to “water is necessary to life” and to “water is essential to life”.

In the next section, I will focus on the epistemic role of essence, but the connection between essence and modality will again emerge very clearly.

3. The Epistemic Roles of Essences

In this section I will look at several more specific ways in which grasping essential properties is connected to gaining knowledge about the object possessing the property. As noted above, this is not something defenders of essence as a metaphysical primitive, or anyway defenders of essence as a purely metaphysical notion, want to deny. My strategy in general will be this. To explain a certain epistemic role of essences, my opponent has to postulate a) that there is a metaphysical juncture well represented through essence-talk, and b) that our minds, our cognitive faculties anyway, are attuned to those fundamental metaphysical facts. On the other hand, my view has no extra explanatory work at all, because the view is that we single out necessary properties as essential precisely when they can play an epistemic role.

Here is a list of epistemic roles of essence (I will discuss them in some more detail below) that constitute the evidence my view is supposed to explain:

a) Definition

The connection between definition and essence goes back at least to Aristotle, and Fine sees it as the main alternative to the modal conception of essence in the history of Western philosophy. However, like explanations, definitions are supposed to provide understanding; in the case of real, as opposed to nominal, definitions, understanding of the object or phenomenon defined.

b) Explanation

The essence of a thing, which is also natural to call its “nature” in this connection, is supposed to have the potential to explain some or, together with other facts, all of the thing’s other features. Some theorists have put this feature of

⁹ I am assuming it is always possible to satisfy condition 2, for we may include being identical to X, or some similar condition, in the essence. If one thinks these are not real properties, or wants to rule them out, condition 2 could be omitted altogether.

¹⁰ This would imply that “vegan” is a non-intersective adjective; cfr. “vegan steak”. At any rate, I am not committed to the truth of those ordinary claims, only to their intelligibility.

essence at the center of their accounts of essence (e.g. Gorman 2005, Kment 2014, Sullivan 2017). While the notion of explanation is itself controversial, and one reason for that is precisely that it can be read in a more metaphysical or a more epistemic way, it clearly has a connection with understanding, which is itself an epistemic notion. Grasping the essence of something is supposed to provide understanding, and to explain, something about the object or kind.

c) Recognition/individuation

Lowe has a very interesting “transcendental” argument for the conclusion that we have knowledge, or anyhow some grasp, of essence. Without some such knowledge, he claims, we would not have a capacity for recognition across time, we would not be able to tell whether an object is the same we encountered before (see Lowe 2008: 27-28).¹¹ For example we could not know whether a certain dog is the same we encountered yesterday if we did not have some grasp of what is essential to an object of its kind.¹² Whether or not the argument is sound, it points to further interesting epistemic role for essence: essences are supposed to help us recognizing things and kinds through time and space.

d) Epistemology of modality

This point will need some more discussion below, because it apparently presents a disadvantage for my view. It might seem that understanding an essential property as an epistemically interesting necessary property makes knowing that a property is necessary a precondition for knowing that the property is essential, and therefore makes it impossible to use the notion of essence in the epistemology of modality. And yet, many authors have claimed that essences have a crucial role in the epistemology of modality (e.g. Lowe 2012, Hale 2013, Kment 2014, Mallozzi 2021).

I will argue however that my view is capable of doing justice to the epistemic role of essences in the epistemology of modality too, and in fact it can do that better than other views.¹³

For reasons of space, I will obviously not be able to cover all topics in detail. I will however go through the list in the order in which I anticipated them.

A. Definition

As noted above, there is a long philosophical tradition that links definitions in this sense, sometimes called *real* definitions, to essences.¹⁴ The real definition of something is not just a description that applies to what is defined, but rather some

¹¹ Lowe also offered a different argument for the same conclusion, based on transcendental considerations on the possibility of thought. Unfortunately, that argument does not stand scrutiny, or so I have argued in [author’s reference removed].

¹² This argument is neutral, as I understand it at least, on the issue whether a judgement of this kind is an identity judgment. Wiggins (1980; 2001), takes that view. I am inclined to believe that those judgements are not, strictly speaking, identity judgements. For a systematic development and defence of this kind of view see for example Fara 2008 and 2012.

¹³ A further epistemic role of essence could connect essences and induction, so that an induction is stronger (or even only acceptable at all) when the predicates involved express essential properties. I am not convinced about this strategy, which anyway involves very complex issues. But it is worth noting that my list of epistemic roles of essence is not meant to be exhaustive.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VII, 1031a12: Obviously interpreters have dwelled on Aristotle’s account of essence (and definition). See e.g., Kung 1977.

description which captures the nature of the thing, helps us to predict the other properties of the thing and explains, together with other, perhaps contingent, facts why the thing has those properties. Now, supposing this notion of definition makes sense, we could explain it in terms of essence. Real definitions will answer the “What is it?” question about the definiendum, thereby giving its nature or essence. I believe there are several reasons to think this will not work. Before explaining why, let me digress, by looking at some remarks from a time when the notion of real definition was taken to completely hopeless (back in the twentieth century). In what is still, in this author’s view, a useful book on the subject of definitions, Robinson (1954) writes in connection to his scepticism about real definitions that the expression “what is x?” is “the vaguest of all forms of question except an inarticulate grunt” (p. 190). I disagree. I see no vagueness at all in the question. However, it is true that “what” is context-sensitive. In different contexts, different answers (or sets of answers) will be admissible. If one thinks attributions of essential properties are not similarly context-sensitive, this is a problem. Plausibly the solution would be to isolate a context, or class of contexts, in which the appropriate answer to the “what is x?” question will be a specification of its essence. This exactly holds for my view, except that the appropriate answer has to specify the essence of x in the epistemic context where the question is asked.¹⁵ Moreover, it has to be noted that to reject real definition as a useful category, one has to withhold the analytic/synthetic distinction. Only if we can isolate facts about the meaning of, say, “water”, we can isolate the definition of the term from the more general endeavour of communicating interesting facts about water. I am not arguing for this view here of course, but I do not adhere to the theory that statements can be usefully categorized as synthetic or analytic. I will therefore from now on talk about definitions without qualifications (with the caveat that insofar as the distinction makes sense, I am talking about real definitions).

So I agree that definitions, at least sometimes, succeed by expressing the essence of the definiendum. However, *definition*, although this is not always acknowledged, is an epistemic category, or something near enough. Definitions have the purpose of providing understanding; and understanding is an epistemic category. In other words, definitions essentially have an epistemic function. Real definitions express essences only when they are successful. In order to be successful, however, a definition must not only be extensionally correct. It should also be illuminating, or in other terms it should serve the purpose of allowing someone who grasps it to have some understanding of what is defined. This is often expressed, in scientific contexts, by saying that definitions should be *fruitful*. The fruit they bear is of course a successful scientific discipline, which certainly means (among other things) an increase in our knowledge of its subject matter.

I will consider two ways in which definitions aim to go beyond extensional adequacy. Definitions, among other things, should be simple. To illustrate, consider this example from Lowe:

(E1) An ellipse is the locus of a point moving continuously in a plane in such a fashion that the sum of the distances between it and two other fixed points remains constant [...]

¹⁵ The same answer however can be appropriate in a multitude of contexts.

(E2) An ellipse is the closed curve of intersection between a cone and a plane cutting it at an oblique angle to its axis greater than that of the cone's side (Lowe 2012: 936).

Lowe thinks E1 expresses the essence of an ellipse, while E2 merely expresses a necessary property (so E2 is also a further counterexample to the simple identification of essential properties with necessary ones). I do not disagree. E1 is a much better definition. It is also, not coincidentally, a much better source of knowledge, mostly in virtue of its greater simplicity. The latter comparison, however, holds for beings similar to us with respect to mathematical thinking. We can easily imagine alien beings, or even divine beings, that are extremely different from us in that respect. For a (mathematically) omniscient being, there would presumably be no difference in usefulness between E1 and E2. We may also imagine alien beings for which E2 would be simpler to understand than E1. What would beings of this kind claim about the essentiality of the complex properties expressed by E1 and E2? Of course one could insist that such beings would still believe that E1 is the correct definition, while E2 is not, despite the fact that there is no difference for them in terms of usefulness or epistemic value. I do not see why they should. I know of no ontological theory of geometrical entities that would suggest that, independently of our sense that E1 is a simpler, more fruitful, and more useful definition.

A related issue about definitions is the following: definitions shouldn't be circular. Saying that an ellipse is an ellipse, or water is water, is not a good definition, and in fact one is tempted to say these are not even attempts at a definition. Why is that, however? My view has a very straightforward answer. It is not helpful to tell someone that an ellipse is an ellipse. It does not represent any possible source of further knowledge or understanding. Similarly, it is not helpful, in most contexts at least, to be said that ellipses are elliptical figures, or that water is the watery substance.

At this point I must consider an objection based on the notion of haecceitas, or thisness.¹⁶ Some theorists think that the essence of an individual is constitutively related to its numerical identity, and nothing more. On this view, the essence of Socrates, or at least part of it, is being Socrates, *simpliciter*. So if an exact duplicate of Socrates had been created, it would nonetheless have failed to be Socrates, despite having all his other intrinsic properties, because he would have lacked Socrates' thisness. Now such an essence, or essential property, would seem to be a counterexample to my view. If I expressed Socrates' essence, or his real definition, saying that Socrates is Socrates, this wouldn't lead to any understanding or further knowledge; but I would be nonetheless correct. However, the view on which Socrates' essence just is his haecceitas does not pose a very worrying problem. The property is necessary and sufficient for being Socrates, and there is no more informative property that can play that role, on the view under discussion. So condition 2 in ED is satisfied, and condition 3 also, although vacuously. But would that be an essential property at all? There is a sense in which thisness represents a source of knowledge about Socrates, namely the knowledge of which individuals he is identical or different to in different modal circumstances. If it is true that Socrates could be a fried egg, then I can only know that if I somehow see that the possible circumstances in which this happens are relevant to the

¹⁶ Thanks to Maria Scarpati for pressing me on this issue.

evaluation of the claim, and I can do that only if I have some grasp of the thinness of Socrates' essence.

So my definition of essence (ED) predicts that Socrates' haecceitas is his essence (if there are no further essential properties), despite its lack of epistemic power.¹⁷ Once we see this, it is also easy to see how that property can be part of Socrates' essence even if he has further essential properties in my sense. The essence must be sufficient to individuate Socrates. It gets therefore to be added to the set of properties constituting the essence.

B. Explanation

Many examples we have already seen make it clear that there are links between essence and explanation, links that are also traditionally accepted. There is also little doubt, it seems to me, that explanation is either an epistemic notion, or one that has itself strong ties to epistemic notions. For example, it seems plausible that to have (the) an explanation of a fact *F* is to know (the) an answer to the question of why *F* is the case. I will not dwell on these points here. I will further illustrate instead the connection between explanation and essence taking the chance to compare my account to one that is very similar in spirit (or so I believe), the view proposed in Sullivan 2017 (all quotes in this section are from that paper). Sullivan at some points characterizes her view as a sort of eliminativism about essence, "anti-essentialism", or the view that there are no essential properties; but she also calls it "explanation-relative essentialism" (59-60). I believe the latter is a much better characterization, insofar as her view does not aim to eliminate talk of "essence" and related expressions from our vocabulary and grants the truth (in a context) of some attributions of essential properties.

Explanation-relative essentialism claims that "an essence ascription is true relative to an explanatory framework if and only if an object is ascribed that property in any good explanation of that type, and there are objective norms governing explanatory frameworks in that domain" (56). Physics, metaphysics and economics are offered as three distinct examples of explanatory frameworks that allow true essence ascriptions, while astrology is offered as an example of an explanatory framework that lacks objective norms and therefore does not allow true essence ascriptions. I agree with these judgements (although it should be noted that one the three disciplines cited as positive cases is more dubious than the other two, being often based on extremely abstract esoteric principles that do not clearly relate to our ordinary experience; I am talking about economics of course). The view I sketched above predicts these judgements as well, insofar as explanations relative to each one of these frameworks are useful epistemically. I believe this is an advantage. It provides a basis for our judgements that is more solid, arguably, than the idea of the "objectivity" of the norms involved in an explanatory framework, which is simply (although not unreasonably) assumed by Sullivan. A further obvious difference between her account and the one proposed here is that the latter posits an explicit modal element in the definition of essence, while Sullivan's is, assuming explanation is an epistemic notion, a purely epistemic account. Perhaps Sullivan relies on the idea that *all* explanations in a certain domain have

¹⁷ Haecceitas might also be seen as a limiting case, a sort of zero grade of essence, in which one might equally well say that, in a sense at least, Socrates has no essence. Furthermore, it might be correct in some contexts to indicate the haecceitas as a minimal essence and in other contexts to say that the individual has no essence.

to attribute a property to an object to provide a connection to necessity. I believe this connection to necessity is at risk of being too weak, but I will not discuss the matter here. The usefulness of the modal element in my account is to be discussed shortly, directly in connection to the epistemology of modality.

Leaving aside the comparison between Sullivan's proposal and the present one, we can note (again) that the connection between essence and explanation seems to be rather uncontroversial. Of course essential properties are *also* such that if something possesses one of them it could not exist while failing to possess it. But Fine's counterexamples to the modal view precisely show that this is not all there is to essence. And having some explanatory power seems to be an excellent candidate to supplement the modal profile.

C. Recognition/Individuation and D. Epistemology of Modality

Another traditional, arguably Aristotelian, idea about essences is their connection to the distinction between substances and qualities. Substances, in this philosophical sense of the term, are typically individuals; they fall under countable nouns. If you can talk about two dogs then they are distinct substances in this sense.

As I mentioned above, in the recent literature, the connection between this metaphysical role of essence and an epistemic role has been discussed by Lowe (2008; 2012). Recognizing an object, possibly presenting different properties, as something we encountered at a previous time in perception or thought, seems to require some grasp of what the object is, or at least some grasp of what it takes for an object of that kind to continue existing. I will get back to this point shortly.

Essences are supposed to help us "recognizing" things and kinds not only through time and space, but through the space of possible worlds as well. "Recognizing" is in scare quotes because it might suggest that I am committing to the view that we have a problem of identifying objects across possible worlds. I am friendly instead to the Kripkean view that this is a misleading way to put things. A false possibility claim, such as (suppose) "Socrates could have been a dog", it's still a claim about Socrates. It's not like we are talking about a dog in some possible world and falsely saying he is Socrates. But this is compatible with the claim that essences play a crucial role in allowing us to correctly judge which modal claims are true of an object. David Wiggins puts the point very clearly, I believe:

The general idea [is] that the essential properties of a thing are part and parcel with what it takes for that very thing to be singled out from the rest of reality, and all of a piece with the necessary conditions for one who conceives the thing under a variety of counterfactual circumstances not to lose hold of that very thing while seeking to conceive it under this or that variation from its actual circumstances (Wiggins 2016: 165).

Here it is important though to stress the distinction between an essence and an essential property. An essential property in my sense is a necessary property with a particular interest. However, from the fact that something has a necessary property, however interesting, not much can be directly inferred about other properties the object possibly has.¹⁸ One might think that an object possibly has all the properties that are not incompatible with any necessary property the same object

¹⁸ It can be inferred of course that the object possibly has the same property, and any other entailed by it.

has, and so, if the necessary properties are those entailed by the essential properties, then we have a way to ascertain the truth of a possibility claim based on a complete list of the object's essential properties. Whatever the merits of this picture from a metaphysical point of view, however, it seems unlikely that we have the cognitive resources to use it, and if we do, it seems unlikely that we employ them in coming to know ordinary possibility claims. Consider a specific knife, call it Kenny, which is distinctively yellow. Could Kenny be red? I judge possible a situation in which the material object which is actually coincident with Kenny is painted red. But this would not be enough, by itself, to reasonably judge that Kenny could be red. After all, I judge possible a situation in which the material object which is actually coincident with Kenny is melted and reshaped as a fork. But that does not lead me to judge that Kenny could be a fork. In the former case, by contrast, my conception of Kenny, applied to the imaginary situation, yields a clear verdict. Spatiotemporal continuity and a continuity in function are sufficient to individuate the object. Something in that situation is Kenny, and it is red. It seems that I will, and should, be inclined to judge so just in case I would be able to recognize the object as being the same knife in case I actually decided to paint it red. My cognitive capacities are, as it were, prepared to track Kenny through various changes, and while the simulation of these changes perhaps requires an additional cognitive capacity for hypothetical thought, the ability to recognize the object seems to work in exactly the same way. Our cognitive capacities are limited. It wouldn't make sense to employ two different sets of criteria to judge that the object could change its colour and to judge that it is the same object, even though it changed its colour.

The foregoing should explain why I am discussing in a single section the roles of essence in connection to recognition and the epistemology of modality. It also should explain why, in my view, we need a modal-epistemic notion, which is what the notion of essence represents in my view. We may well be able to recognize objects through some of their accidental properties, and we often do. Lowe does not give us sufficient reasons to rule this possibility out. However, the properties involved should at least be modally robust enough to track the object through changes that are likely to occur in the actual circumstances. It is therefore natural that the same capacity may be employed, in hypothetical thought ("offline", to use Williamson's (Williamson 2007 expression), to reach modal judgements about that object. In theory, any set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be identical to a certain *x* will be able to play both roles. But, again, our cognitive capacities are limited. Other things being equal, we would like to have a simple and yet informative way to track *x*. We may name this way to track something our "conception" of that object. I use this term to mean whatever mechanisms guide our application of concepts. Conceptions can consist in explicit beliefs, implicit beliefs, or even non-propositional capacities.¹⁹ A conception is adequate, roughly, when it yields mostly correct judgements.²⁰ Having adequate conceptions of the objects of our thought is a primary epistemic good.

¹⁹ I take the notion from Millikan 2000. See also Wiggins 1980 (in particular "Preamble" and fn. 2 on p. 79, both also present in his 2001).

²⁰ Lowe (2012) uses the notion of adequacy of a concept in a similar way (944-47). The view I defend could also be formulated in terms of the idea defended in Vaidya 2010 that our grasp of essence is to be spelled out in terms of *understanding*.

What about necessary properties, one could ask? Surely my account, a possible objection would go, cannot give essences any role in our knowledge of (de re) necessities, since it defines “essential” in terms of necessary (plus something else). This would be too hasty. We must distinguish the epistemic and the metaphysical levels. It is possible that in the cognitive development of the individual the notion of necessity only comes after the notion of essentiality (like we may acquire the concept of a sibling after the concepts of sister and/or brother). We do not learn by definition, but rather by example. It is true, however, that the epistemology of modality in my view cannot at its core have the notion of essence. I believe there are several promising alternatives, but there is no space here to explore the issue further (see Mallozzi et al. 2021). I do accept that the view I am defending has the consequence that there must be some way of knowing modal truths independently of essences.

We now have sufficient material to build the inference to the best explanation in favour of EPD an ED. It is fairly uncontroversial, as I noted numerous times, that essence is supposed to play the epistemic roles I described. If the notion of essence, however, did not contain an epistemic element, explaining this phenomenon would be a rather difficult task, one which I think contemporary defenders of the notion of essence have not even attempted, by and large. We need to assume, or argue, that there are in the structure of the world junctures that individuate different objects, substances and kinds, and our cognitive capacities are capable to track these junctures. We must, in other words, be able to single out among the properties of an object those that are essential, and, moreover, be able to employ our knowledge of these essential properties in extending our knowledge through fruitful definitions, informative explanations, judgements of sameness and difference, and modal judgements. My view is instead, that we search for properties that can play these roles, and we call them essential.

I will close by considering an objection. The objection is closely related to the one I briefly discussed for the epistemology of modality, but it also concerns the metaphysics of modality. I already noted that my view must posit some way of knowing modal truths independently of essences. The view must also assume that modal truths are, so to speak, not grounded in essential truths. As for the case of epistemology, there are of course alternatives. The objection now is, though, that a certain form of essentialism offers a simpler explanation of the epistemic role of essences because it puts them at the center of both the epistemology and the metaphysics of modality. There are I believe, other views that allow for a similar unification (see e.g. Vetter 2015, 2016, 2020). What I am claiming however, is that the advantage of simplicity is not so clear in this case. The alignment of metaphysics and epistemology, so to speak, calls for a further explanation; one that, in the case of essence, really seems not be available outside an Aristotelian framework.

4. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to clarify some connections which exist, and in my view are crucial, between essence and knowledge.

In the first section, I discussed Fine’s objection against purely modal accounts of essence, which are, as far as I know, accepted by all theorist. I did not argue against modified or hybrid modal accounts, but I argue that Fine’s counter-examples themselves seem to point toward a hybrid modal-epistemic account.

Having sketched such an account, I moved in the section 2 to argue that it is supported by an inference to the best explanation, where the explanandum is constituted by a number of epistemic roles essence plays.²¹

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²¹ For comments on previous versions of this material I would like to warmly thank the audiences at the *Argumenta* workshop on the Epistemology of Metaphysics in Padova and at the Sixth Italian Conference in Analytic Metaphysics and Ontology in L'Aquila.

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