Essence and Necessity

Distinct Distinctions

TWO DISTINCTIONS

- Essentialism Motivated
- Essentialism Clarified
- Challenges to Essentialism
- Approaches to Necessity: a Prospect of Reduction

ESSENTIALISM MOTIVATED

- Two categories of properties: deep and shallow.
  - Some features S might well lose while continuing to exist.
    - For instance, Socrates would continue to exist if he lost his pallor by spending the day at the beach.
    - Call these *shallow properties*.
- Some features are such that should S lose them, S would cease to exist.
  - For instance, Socrates would cease to exist if he were put into a compactor and forged into a doorknob. Along the way, he would lose, for instance, the property being human, since no doorknob is a human being.
  - Call these *deep properties*.
- The difference between deep and shallow properties has traditionally thought to approximate a distinction between *essence* and *accident*.

ESSENCE AND MODALITY

- One proposal: essential properties are just those a subject has *necessarily*.

  - Let us call this the *modal theory of essence* (MTE):

    - ϕ is an essential property of x $=_{df}$ necessarily, x is ϕ.

      - This is just to say, then, that x cannot exist without being ϕ.

    - ϕ is an accidental property of x $=_{df}$ (i) x is ϕ; and (ii) possibly, x is not-ϕ.

MTE REJECTED

- Various properties are trivially true of everything that exists:
  - logical and categorial properties
    - (i) being red or not-red; (ii) being identical with the number nine or not
  - set theoretic properties
    - Socrates is necessarily a member of the singleton set {Socrates}.
- These properties do not tell us *what* their bearer is.
- Further, some properties stand in asymmetric dependency relations to others, even though they are equally necessary.
  - The deeper properties here are candidates for being essential.

ARISTOTELIAN ESSENTIALISM (AE)

- As traditionally conceived, philosophical definitions (seek to) reveal the essence-specifying features of things; essences constitute the natures of their bearers.

- So, e.g., Socrates is essentially rational.

  - He is also necessarily capable of grammar, though an account of his grammatically asymmetrically depends upon an account of his rationality.

  - This remains so even though: Necessarily, Socrates is rational iff Socrates is capable of grammar.

- AE: ϕ is an essential property of x $=_{df}$ (i) necessarily, x is ϕ; and (ii) ϕ is in an objective sense an explanatorily basic feature of x.

QUINE'S CHALLENGE

1. Mathematicians are necessarily rational, but not necessarily two-legged.

2. Cyclists are necessarily two-legged, but not necessarily rational.

3. There is at least one cycling mathematician, namely Ricky.

4. If (1), Ricky is necessarily rational; if (2) Ricky is not necessarily rational.

5. If (2), Ricky is necessarily two-legged; if (1), Ricky is not necessarily two-legged.

6. So, Ricky is and is not necessarily rational; and Ricky is and is not necessarily two-legged.

7. If (1) and (2), as arbitrarily selected examples of necessary and contingent properties, lead to such flagrant contradictions, then the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

8. So, the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

DE DICTO AND DE RE

- Necessity *de dicto* and *de re*
  - Necessity *de dicto*: a proposition (*dictum*) has the property of being necessarily true.
    - It is necessary that all bachelors are unmarried.
    - It is necessary that nine is greater than five.
  - Necessity *de re*: some entity (*res*) has a property necessarily.
    - Ricky is necessarily rational.
    - This square is necessarily four-sided.

APPLIED TO QUINE'S CHALLENGE

- (1) and (2) may each be taken either *de re* or *de dicto.* Thus:
  - Taken *de dicto*, we have:
  - (1_{dd}) It is necessarily true that mathematicians are rational.
  - (2_{dd}) It is necessarily true that cyclists are two-legged.
- Taken *de re*, we have:
  - (1_{dr}) Every mathematician has the property of being necessarily rational.
  - (2_{dr}) Every cyclist has the property of being necessarily two-legged.
- Taken *de dicto*, then (1) and (2), as (1_{dd}) and (2_{dd}), are unobjectionable. But then we cannot accept (4) and (5) and the subsequent inference to (6).
- Taken *de re*, as (2_{dr}), (2) is false. (It is not the case that every cyclist has the property of being necessarily two-legged.) So, (4), (5), and (6) cannot be derived.

QUINE'S BAFFLEMENT

1. Mathematicians are necessarily rational, but not necessarily two-legged.

2. Cyclists are necessarily two-legged, but not necessarily rational.

3. There is at least one cycling mathematician, namely Ricky.

4. If (1), Ricky is necessarily rational; if (2) Ricky is not necessarily rational.

5. If (2), Ricky is necessarily two-legged; if (1), Ricky is not necessarily two-legged.

6. So, Ricky is and is not necessarily rational; and Ricky is and is not necessarily two-legged.

7. If (1) and (2), as arbitrarily selected examples of necessary and contingent properties, lead to such flagrant contradictions, then the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

8. So, the necessary/contingent distinction (and with it, the essential/accidental distinction) is untenable and must be rejected.

THE PURPORT

- These contentions do not undermine the traditional more-than-merely-modal distinction into essence and accident.

- So far, then, the intuitive distinction between shallow and deep properties, explicated as Aristotelian Essentialism, remains unscathed.

- So, the distinction between essential and accidental properties remains viable.

AN ANALYSIS OF NECESSITY?

- Two claims:
  - The necessary/contingent distinction is distinct from the essence/accident distinction. (They are not even co-extensive.)
    - Still, Aristotelian Essentialism is partly *defined* in terms of *de re* necessity.
      - Perhaps this is a case explaining the *obscurum per obscurius*?
- Our question:
  - What is necessity?

NECESSITY IS A MODE OF TRUTH

- Some true propositions:
  - . . .are *necessarily* true: Blue is a colour.
  - . . .are *contingently* true: One word in this sentence is blue.
- Some false propositions:
  - . . .are *contingently* false: One word in this sentence is red.
  - . . .are *necessarily* false, which is to say *impossible*: The word ‘sentence’ is blue but not coloured.
- p is necessarily true (or, necessary) iff p is not possibly false (or, it is not possible that not-p)
- p is possibly true (or, possible) iff p is not necessarily false (or, it is not necessary that not-p)
- p is contingently true (or, contingent) iff p is possible but not necessary

GRADES OF MODALITY

- Here philosophers begin to diverge, but we may think of degrees of modality as given by expanding domains of quantification:

  - Physical possibility:

    - It it possible that a lecturer walk about, but not possible that she levitate and lecture seated in the air. Still, if the laws of nature are contingent, this is metaphysically or logically possible.

  - Metaphysical possibility:

    - It is not possible that the lecturer be a sofa, or that a circle be square. Still, these are not logical impossibilities—they are not contradictions.

  - Logical possibility:

    - Nothing is both a lecturer or not a lecturer, or both circular and not circular.

LEIBNIZEAN BICONDITIONALS

- A proposition is necessary iff it is true in all possible worlds.
- A proposition is possible iff it is true in at least one possible world.
- A possible world is a complete history of some universe.
  - One possible world, ours, is actual.
    - The others are merely possible worlds—ways things might have been but are not.

REDUCTIVE DEFINITIONS?

- The Leibnizean Biconditionals may be offered as reductive definitions of modality—as accounts of modality in terms of truth.

- N.b. that this will be non-circular only if we have available a non-modal definition of a possible world.

  - One possibility (Lewis): x is a possible world iff (i) x is a maximal spatio-temporally interrelated whole; and (ii) anything spatio-temporally related to any part of x is a part of x.

TWO CONCERNS

- Actualism
  - What exists is co-extensive with what is actual: there are no mere *possibilia*.
- Circularity

- A survey of modal space demands truth-makers for *all* possibilities.
  - The account must be both genuinely reductive and materially adequate.
    - The worry is that its being materially adequate challenges its status as genuinely reductive.
      - Any guarantee that there be a truth-making world for each possibility and no truth-making world for any impossibility evidently requires an implicit appeal to the very modal notions targeted for reduction.
        - Without the benefit of reduction, there seems no reason to abandon the comforts of actualism.

ALTOGETHER THEN. . .

- The Leibnizean Biconditionals may be accepted as correct without being taken as reductive.

- One may speak of possible worlds consistent with a commitment to actualism (. . .properties are actual).

- They are ways things might have been—but are not.