Relativized Essentialism about Modalities

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Abstract

On what I call *absolutist essentialism* about modality (AE), the metaphysical necessities are the propositions that are true in virtue of the essence (i.e. Aristotelian, absolute essence) of some entities. Other kinds of necessity can then be defined by *restriction*—e.g. the conceptual necessities are the propositions that are true in virtue of the essence of *conceptual* entities specifically. As an account of metaphysical modality and some other kinds (e.g. logical, conceptual), AE may have important virtues. However, when it comes to accounting for *further* important kinds, like natural or normative necessity, it faces a challenge. Three main options have been defended: treat those kinds as further *restricted* forms of metaphysical necessity; define them as *conditional* forms of metaphysical necessity; treat them as *primitive* kinds. In this paper, I propose a new option, which combines the main idea of AE (reducing necessities to essences) with an idea which has been developed largely independently: that of *relative* essence. On the proposed view, those kinds (e.g. natural necessity) that cannot be grounded in the essences (i.e. absolute essences) of the relevant entities (e.g. natural entities) may be grounded in their *relative* essences instead. Thus, I propose a generalized, or extended, version of AE, which I call *relativized essentialism* about modality (RE). In particular, RE offers prospects for a general framework for kinds of modality which is flexible enough to cover a large range of kinds (both absolute and relative ones) while remaining parsimonious and unified.

Keywords: Essence, Modality, Relative essence, Relative necessity, Varieties of necessity.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed a revival of essentialism in metaphysics—with essence understood in the Aristotelian, *absolute* sense. One main way in which essence has been put to work is as a source[1] of modality (see e.g. Fine 1994;

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[1] Although the fine-grained distinctions between reducing necessity to essence, grounding necessity in essence, locating the source of necessity in essence, defining necessity in terms of essence, accounting for necessity in terms of essence, for instance, are an important philosophical debate of its own, they will not play a crucial role in the context of this paper

Lowe 2008; Hale 2013). On what I call *absolutist essentialism* about modality (AE), the metaphysical necessities are the propositions that are true in virtue of the essence (i.e. absolute essence) of some entities—e.g. <Socrates is human (if he exists)> is metaphysically necessary because it is true in virtue of the essence of an entity, namely Socrates. On that basis, other kinds of necessity may be defined by *restriction*—e.g. the conceptual necessities are the propositions that are true in virtue of the essence of *conceptual* entities specifically.

On the other hand, recent research on essence also includes various *relativist* views—with essence being understood as relative e.g. to contexts of utterance, to explanatory frameworks, or to our values and interests (see Quine 1960; Sveinsdóttir 2008; Sullivan 2016). Up to now, these two lines of philosophical inquiry have been undertaken largely independently from each other: to my knowledge, essentialist accounts of modality, and the kinds of modality, have been developed based exclusively on the absolute notion of essence; likewise, notions of relative essence have been developed without any explicit links to kinds of modality. This paper is as an attempt to put together these two main ideas (the idea of reducing modalities to essences and the idea of relative essences) as a way to provide a novel answer to a challenge faced by absolutist essentialism about modality (AE).

The challenge that I have in mind is briefly the following. As an account of metaphysical modality and some other, restricted kinds (e.g. conceptual necessity, logical necessity), AE may have important virtues—or so I will assume. However, when it comes to accounting for *further* important kinds, like natural or normative necessity, it may seem more problematic. There are three main common answers: just treat those kinds as further *restricted* forms of metaphysical necessity (like e.g. conceptual necessity); define them as *conditional* forms of metaphysical necessity; treat them as *primitive* kinds. All three options come with their own characteristics, which one may see either as virtues or drawbacks. My main aim in this paper is not to offer a critical assessment of these existing options, but rather to argue that—contrary to what Fine (2005) suggests—they are *not* the only possible options: I will propose a new option, whose core idea is to incorporate the notion of relative essence into AE—i.e. to *supplement* absolute essence with relative essence in order to cover a larger range of kinds of modality (both absolute *and* relative kinds). In a nutshell, those kinds which are plausibly absolute kinds of necessity, namely metaphysical necessity and its special cases (e.g. logical necessity), can simply be grounded in the *absolute* essences of the relevant entities (e.g. logical entities), just as they are on absolutist essentialism (AE). But if some kinds (e.g. perhaps natural necessity) cannot be grounded in the absolute essences of the relevant entities (e.g. natural entities), those kinds may instead be grounded in the *relative* essences of those entities—in a sense to be specified. Thus, I propose a relativized, or generalized, version of AE, which I call *relativized essentialism* (RE).

The paper is structured as follows. After presenting the challenge to AE and the existing options (§2), I present the core idea of RE as a novel alternative (§3). I then suggest one way in which RE may be developed into some more detail, in particular as regards the crucial notion of relative essentiality (§4-5). Finally, I

(as far as I can see); accordingly, I will remain neutral on that matter and allow myself to use the corresponding terms interchangeably.

consider some potential virtues and challenges for RE as general framework to account for kinds of modality (§6).

2. Motivation: A Challenge for Absolutist Essentialism

On standard, absolutist essentialism (AE) about modality, for a proposition to be metaphysically necessary is for it to be *true in virtue of the essence of* (for short: *essential to*) some plurality of (i.e. one or more) entities. (I will mainly follow Fine's (1994) approach in this paper; see also e.g. Shalkowski 1997; Lowe 2006, 2008; Correia 2006, 2012; Jubien 2009; Hale 2013; Leech 2020.[2]) In symbols,

(Necessity)

(1) $\Box p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \exists xx: \boxtimes_{xx} p$,

where $\Box$ is the metaphysical necessity operator, $\boxtimes_{xx}$ is the essentiality operator, with "xx" standing for a plurality of (i.e. one or more) entities.[3]

On that basis, Fine (1994, p. 10) suggests how we may account for other kinds— e.g. conceptual necessity and logical necessity.[4] The idea is to define those derivative kinds from the fundamental kind, metaphysical necessity, by entity restriction. For instance, the conceptual necessities are the propositions that are essential, not to some entities of any sort, but to some *conceptual* entities specifically. More generally, using "K-necessity" ("K" for "kind") as a generic term for any derivative kind of necessity (e.g. conceptual necessity) to be defined from the fundamental kind, and "K-entities" for the corresponding entities (e.g. conceptual entities), a K-necessity is a proposition that is essential to some K-entities. In symbols,

(Entity Restriction)

(3) $\Box_{KN} p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \Box_K p$,

where $\Box_{KN}$ is the K-necessity operator, and $\Box_K$ is the restriction of $\Box$ to K-entities, i.e. $\Box_K p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \exists xx(Kxx \wedge \boxtimes_{xx} p)$.

The resulting account of metaphysical necessity, namely absolutist essentialism (AE), including logical and conceptual necessities (and perhaps mathematical necessity) as restricted cases, may be quite appealing—or so I will assume in this paper.[5] For one thing, it covers some of the most important kinds of necessity in

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[2] For objections, see e.g. Gorman 2005; Correia 2007; Cameron 2010; Vetter 2011; Wildman 2021.

[3] $\boxtimes_{xx}$ is meant, not as a purely objectual essentiality operator (as in Fine 1994), but as a mixed, objectual-generic essentiality operator (see Correia 2006)—more on this in §3.

[4] See also Correia 2012; Hale 2013.

[5] One of the potential problems with this view is that it may seem to generate too many K-necessities. For example, assuming that <Rightness is a variably polyadic property> is true and indeed essential to rightness, that proposition will come out as a *normative* necessity on the view under consideration, which may not sound correct on pre-theoretical intuitions. Note that this problem is not specific to an extension of AE to e.g. normative or natural necessity; plausibly, it is already faced by standard AE, including its common restricted kinds of necessity, namely logical and conceptual necessity. For instance, assuming that <Conjunction is an abstract entity>, or <Conjunction is a logical concept>, is true and indeed essential to conjunction, standard AE entails that this proposition is a *logical* necessity, which one may find unintuitive. Discussing that problem for AE is beyond the scope of this paper—though I will briefly consider whether and how RE faces it in a later footnote (fn 18).

a way that is parsimonious, with metaphysical necessity as the only fundamental kind—which is an appealing feature on the assumption that parsimony, ceteris paribus, is a theoretical virtue. Relatedly, the account is unified, all these kinds being treated in a similar way, based on essence and relevant classes of entities. Again, this will be a virtue if unity is seen as a theoretical virtue in the first place. Yet, AE may seem more problematic when it comes to accounting for *further* important kinds of necessity, in particular natural necessity and normative necessity. There are three common ways for the friend of AE to meet that challenge. I will now briefly present them in turn, mentioning some of their potential virtues and drawbacks. My aim is *not* to properly discuss or argue against any of them, but rather to set up the background for the alternative option that I will propose later; in particular, this background should help make it clearer how RE is a distinct, novel option which may be worth considering seriously.

First, the friend of AE may simply extend her favourite account of modality to the problematic kind (e.g. natural or normative necessity), that is, treat it as a *further* restricted form of metaphysical necessity, using entity restriction: for instance, on such a view, the normative necessities are the propositions that are essential to some normative entities (e.g. goodness, rightness, or justice). This may seem like a convenient solution in some respects; in particular, the resulting overall view of modality would cover more kinds while remaining just as parsimonious and unified as original AE.

However, even an essentialist may have independent reasons to think that natural or normative necessity—unlike e.g. conceptual necessity—cannot be treated in that way. In general, it is not uncommon to think that laws of nature and other natural necessities, or normative laws and other normative necessities, are not (all) metaphysically necessary in the essentialist sense of (3)—or indeed not (all) metaphysically necessary in the first place.[6]

For instance, it may be plausible that *some* natural necessities are essential to (i.e. true in virtue of the essence of) the relevant natural entities, and hence metaphysically necessary: perhaps <Gold has atomic number 79> is essential to gold, and <Electrons are particles> is essential to electrons. But it seems less plausible for other ones: for instance, <Electrons repel when in proximity> looks like a typical natural necessity, but many would maintain that it is not true in virtue of the very essence of electrons, or of any other natural entity. Likewise, *some* normative necessities may be plausibly understood as metaphysically necessary in the essentialist sense of (3): perhaps <For any x, if x is right, then x is an action>[7], or <Rightness is a moral value>, is essential to rightness as a normative entity. Yet, in other cases, it looks less plausible: for instance, one could reasonably maintain that <Pain is bad>, a plausible candidate normative necessity, is not

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[6] On some views, often labelled 'dispositional essentialist', laws of nature, and natural necessities in general, *are* metaphysical necessities in roughly the sense of (3) (Shoemaker 1980; Swoyer 1982; Ellis 2001; Bird 2007); but they have often been attacked precisely on those grounds (see e.g. Fine 2005; Mumford & Anjum 2011). Indeed, views on which (at least some) natural necessities are metaphysically contingent are still quite common (see e.g. Lewis 1973: 72-77; Armstrong 1983; Tahko 2015). As regards normative necessities, some argue that they are not (all) metaphysically necessary in the precise sense of (3) (e.g. Enoch 2011; Leary 2017), while others indeed argue that they are simply not (all) metaphysically necessary (Fine 2005; Rosen 2020).

[7] See Leary 2017: §4.

true in virtue of the essence of badness, or goodness, or any other normative entity[8]; likewise, <Lying is wrong>, even if a normative necessity, may not be true in virtue of the essence of wrongness or any other normative entity.

A second common answer, for the friend of AE, is to adopt a hybrid view, where AE is mixed with another account of the kinds of necessity, which I call the *conditional account*. On the latter account, instead of starting with metaphysical necessity as the broadest kind and then derive stricter kinds from it by entity restriction (as on AE), one takes the strictest kind (typically, logical necessity) as fundamental and then derives broader kinds from it by set conditionalization: the K-necessities (e.g. normative necessities) are the propositions that are necessary (in the fundamental, or absolute, sense) *given* a relevant set of basic K-truths (e.g. normative truths)—i.e. the propositions that follow from this set as a matter of fundamental necessity. (See Smiley 1963; Hale 1996; Leech 2016; Rosen 2006.) In symbols,

(Set Conditionalization)

(4) $\Box_{KN}\, p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \Box(\wedge K \rightarrow p)$,

where $\Box_{KN}$ is the K-necessity operator, $\Box$ is the fundamental, or absolute, necessity operator (whether it is e.g. metaphysical necessity in the essentialist sense of (1), or metaphysical necessity understood differently, or logical necessity), K is a relevant set of basic K-truths, and "$\wedge K$" stands for the conjunction of K's members.[9]

For instance, if the fundamental necessity is logical necessity, we may define natural necessities as the propositions that follow, as a matter of logical necessity, from some appropriate set of basic natural truths—e.g. the laws of nature.

Now, the proponent of AE may mix her account with the conditionalization account as follows: whereas stricter kinds like logical or conceptual necessity are still defined by entity restriction from metaphysical necessity (using (3) above), broader kinds such as natural or normative necessity may be defined by set conditionalization from metaphysical (or logical) necessity.

The resulting hybrid account remains as parsimonious, in the sense that metaphysical necessity remains the only fundamental kind. Moreover, as set conditionalization defines broader kinds, it escapes the main drawback of the first option considered above: K-necessities (e.g. natural necessities) no longer need to be all metaphysically necessary.

However, one might still find that option unattractive. First, although still a parsimonious, indeed a monist one, the resulting overall account, defining various derivative kinds in two quite different ways (through entity restriction and set conditionalization), loses some unity—which again one might reasonably see as a disadvantage, ceteris paribus.

Second, although the kinds defined by entity restriction have their modal status clearly accounted for—conceptual necessities are *necessities* because they are *essential* to conceptual entities—it might be more disputable for the kinds defined by set conditionalization. The fact that, say, normative necessities follow, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, from a certain set S of basic normative truths

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[8] See Fine 2005: 251-52.
[9] For our present purposes, the simple formulation in (4) will suffice; but note that proponents of this view have offered refined versions to overcome some important objections to it (see Leech 2016; Hale & Leech 2017).

may indeed account for their *truth*, and perhaps for their being truths of a particular sort; but it may be more difficult to see how it really accounts for their being *necessities* (see Fine 2005, §3).

The third common option is to go pluralist: if some K-necessity cannot be derived from the fundamental kind (using e.g. entity restriction or set conditionalization), we may use the *primitivist strategy*—just treat K-necessity as a *sui generis* kind, unrelated to the initial fundamental kind (e.g. metaphysical necessity). (For some primitivist views of natural or normative necessity, see e.g. Armstrong 1983; Fine 2005; Mumford & Anjum 2011; Scanlon 2014, p. 41; Rosen 2020.)

On this strategy, a proposition p's being a K-necessity just amounts to this modally primitive fact:

(Primitivism)

(5) $\Box_{KN}$ p.

Again, the proponent of AE may keep his original account for metaphysical necessity and its usual restricted forms (e.g. conceptual necessity), but treat some K-necessity (e.g. natural necessity) as primitive. This option, defended by Fine (2005) himself for both natural necessity and normative necessity, might be found problematic as well.

In general, the resulting overall account of necessities, as a pluralist account, is less parsimonious. Moreover, one may reasonably think that K-necessity *in particular* should not be understood as primitive. First, natural or normative necessity—unlike e.g. metaphysical or logical necessity—might not intuitively look like a good candidate for a *fundamental* kind. Second, if natural or normative necessity is primitive, it is difficult to see how it may be substantially related to metaphysical or logical or conceptual necessity—unless the latter can be understood in terms of the former, which seems quite implausible in general, and anyway excluded on our currently assumed essentialist understanding of the latter. Yet, one might argue, it is quite natural to see some clear, intuitive similarity or continuity between, say, natural and metaphysical necessity, or normative and conceptual necessity, so that it may seem implausible that they turn out to have no substantial relation.

In sum, there are three common ways in which the friend of AE may account for further important kinds such as natural or normative necessity. Again, I do not claim to have provided any proper argument to the effect that these options should be rejected; my aim was rather to present some of the characteristic features of those accounts, some of which one *might* see as problematic. What I do want to argue is that these three options are not the only ones (contrary to what Fine 2005 suggests): *even if* the friend of AE does find them problematic, she is *not* doomed to face the resulting trilemma, and pick the lesser of three evils. Indeed, in what follows, I will propose a new option: a generalized version of AE, which I call *relativized essentialism* (RE), and which mainly relies on supplementing absolute essence with relative essence.

3. Relativized Essentialism (RE): The Basic Idea

Before I suggest one way of developing RE and discuss certain aspects of it in some more detail in later sections (§§4-6), it may be useful to first have the big picture of the view in mind, which is the main purpose of the following brief sketch.

The basic idea of RE is to put together two ideas: first, the idea at the core of AE, which is to reduce necessity to essence, and kinds of necessity to the essences of the corresponding classes of entities; second, the idea of relative essence, which I will use as a basis for defining a corresponding idea of relative necessity. These ideas themselves will not be argued for but largely assumed: I will neither provide a defence of AE, nor of the idea of relative essence (in the particular, of the claim that it makes sense). Rather, I will rely on those ideas, which have been defended independently in the literature, and show how they can be put together to get a new account of the kinds of modality.

In particular, the proposed view will offer a new solution to the challenge of accounting, not just for the restricted kinds commonly covered by AE (e.g. logical necessity), but for further kinds, such as natural or normative necessity. The suggestion will be to treat those further kinds as kinds of *relative* necessity, in the specific sense that they find their source in *relative* essences—with the consequence that necessities of such kinds need *not* (all) be metaphysical necessities.

The first basic element in the account, then, is inherited from AE: metaphysical necessity is understood in terms of essence, and other kinds of (absolute) necessity can be defined as special cases of it, through entity restriction. Thus, as we have seen ((3) above), any kind of (absolute) necessity, K-necessity (e.g. logical necessity), can be defined as follows: a proposition p is a *K-necessity* iff it is essential to some K-entities.

(K-necessity)

$\Box_K\, p \Leftrightarrow_{\text{def}} \exists xx(Kxx \wedge \boxtimes_{xx} p).$

The second step is to define a notion of relative necessity from a notion of relative essence—in roughly the same way as absolute necessity is defined from absolute essence in AE. More will be said about this later on (in particular in §5), but the basic idea is the following. The relative essence of a thing is the essence of that thing *relative to something else*, which is external to that thing itself. The various forms of relative essence will mainly depend on what the relativization basis is, namely what essence is supposed to be relative to—e.g. a context of utterance, a theory, an explanatory framework, our values and interests, a culture, a person's opinion (see e.g. Quine 1960; Lewis 1968; Sveinsdóttir 2008; Sullivan 2016). For instance, even if it is not absolutely essential to Socrates that he be a philosopher, his being a philosopher may be R-relatively essential to him, where R is, say, a particular context of utterance (where that feature of Socrates is particularly salient or crucial to him, where Socrates is mainly considered *qua* philosopher). Likewise, even if it is not absolutely essential to pain or badness (or goodness) that pain is bad, it might still be R-relatively essential to it, where R is a particular culture or moral theory on which it is indeed constitutive, or definitional, of pain or badness that pain is bad.

Based on the notion of R-relative essence, the idea is then to define a corresponding notion of R-relative necessity, as follows: A proposition p is *R-relatively necessary* iff it is R-relatively essential to some entities. In symbols,

(R-relative necessity)

$\Box^{\text{REL R}}\, p \Leftrightarrow_{\text{def}} \exists xx \boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL R}} p,$

where R is the relevant essence-relativization basis, $\Box^{\text{REL R}}$ is the R-relative necessity operator, and $\boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL R}}$ is the R-relative essentiality operator.

The third step consists in putting the above two steps (entity restriction and essence relativization, respectively) together to define a notion of R-relative K-necessity: p is an *R-relative K-necessity* iff p is R-relatively essential to some K-entities. In symbols,

(R-relative K-necessity)

$$\square_K^{REL\ R}\ p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \exists xx(Kxx \wedge \boxtimes_{xx}^{REL\ R}p)$$

Finally, on that basis, one can define *relativized essentialism* as the view on which each kind of necessity covered is defined as an R-relative K-necessity, for some appropriate parameters K and R:

(Relativized essentialism)

$$\square_{KN}\ p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \square_K^{REL\ R}\ p,$$

where $\square_{KN}$ is the necessity operator for the kind of necessity defined, K is the relevant entity-restriction parameter, and R is the relevant essence-relativization parameter.

For instance, metaphysical necessity is the special case where both K and R are trivial: metaphysical necessities are the propositions that are *non*-relatively, i.e. *absolutely*, essential to some entities belonging to *any* class of entities whatsoever. Conceptual necessity is the case where R is trivial and K is conceptual: conceptual necessities are the propositions which are *absolutely* essential to some *conceptual* entities. Assuming that at least some natural necessities are not absolute (i.e. not metaphysically necessary), natural necessity may be the case where K is natural and R is, say, our epistemic capacities and interests. On the resulting view, for instance, <Electrons repel when in proximity>, even if not *absolutely* essential to electrons, would be R-relatively essential to them: *relative* to our scientific capacities and interests, it is essential to electrons that they possess the dispositional property of repelling other electrons—to put it otherwise, in a final theory of the natural world reflecting those capacities and interests, the repulsion property would be constitutive, or definitional, of electrons. As a last example, normative necessity (assuming that not all normative necessities are metaphysical necessities) may be the case where K is normative, and R is, for instance, a moral theory, or a culture, or human nature (depending on what views one holds on normative matters in the first place).

Fixing parameters K and R for specific kinds of necessity on the RE framework will also determine the *relations* between those kinds. To illustrate, take two kinds of necessity, KN_1 and KN_2 (e.g. natural necessity and conceptual necessity). Their relations will partly be fixed by their respective entity restriction parameters K_1 and K_2, corresponding to the classes of entities whose essences ground them (e.g. the natural entities and the conceptual entities, respectively). Suppose, for instance, that the class of entities associated with KN_1 is not included in the class of entities associated with KN_2. Then, in particular, KN_1 will not be as strong as KN_2 on RE—i.e. not all necessities of kind KN_1 will be necessities of kind KN_2 (whatever their respective essence-relativization parameters R_1 and R_2 are). Likewise, suppose that a kind of necessity KN_1 (e.g. logical necessity) is wholly absolute (all its members are absolute necessities), so that the corresponding essence-relativization parameter R_1 is trivial. And suppose that another kind KN_2 (e.g. normative necessity) is partly relative (it has at least some members which are only relative necessities), so that the relevant essence-relativization parameter R_2 is non-trivial (e.g. R_2 is a theory or culture). Then it will follow, on RE, that the

latter kind of necessity is not as strong as the former—i.e. not all members of the latter kind can be members of the former kind.

It should already be clear from the above brief sketch that RE is a generalization of AE: AE is the special case of RE where essence-relativization is always trivial. Relatedly, unlike AE, RE is in principle capable of accounting for kinds that are intuitively weaker than metaphysical necessity, like perhaps natural or normative necessity, by treating them as kinds of relative necessity, having their sources in relative essences—thereby providing a novel answer to the challenge described above for the friend of AE.

Before I come back to the general RE framework just sketched and consider some of its main potential virtues and problems (§6), I will, in the next two sections (§§4-5), suggest one way in which it may be developed—not in a fully detailed way, but at least in some more detail. I do not claim that this is the only, or even the best, way. Rather, my main purpose, beyond suggesting one concrete direction for development, will be to illustrate RE itself as a general framework and help us better understand some of its core features.

4. One Way to Develop RE: From Absolutely Essential Features to Absolute Necessity

My proposed further development of RE will focus on one of its core elements, namely the relative essence operator mentioned in the above sketch ($\boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL R}}$). Instead of treating it as primitive (which would be an available option), I suggest to further explain it in terms of the relatively essential *features* of the entities involved (the xx). This is partly motivated by some metaphysical intuitions which I tend to share, according to which entities and their features are plausibly more fundamental than corresponding facts, or propositions. But more importantly, this specific understanding will illustrate one way in which RE may be developed, and help better understand some general aspects of the view as I mean it—in particular, which elements in the account are supposed to be relativized and which are not, and how relative essence is to be related to truth and to absolute essence.

Before addressing relative essence and necessity in the next section (§5), it will help to first treat the standard, absolute notions of essence and necessity in an analogous way—which is what I now turn to.

I mainly follow Fine (1994) in understanding essence in the Aristotelian way: the essence of an entity x is its *real* definition—that in virtue of which x is the thing that it is.[10] What Fine had in mind when talking about essence in this way, however, was mainly *objectual* essence, as opposed to *generic* essence (see Correia 2006; Fine 2015). Here, I suggest that we understand essence in an inclusive sense: as objectual or generic, depending on the sort of entity considered. Accordingly, I suggest that we use "entity" in a very broad sense, covering not only what we may call "objectual entities"—namely objects *sensu stricto* (e.g. an individual I) and objects *sensu lato* (e.g. a property F, a kind K)—but also what we may call "generic entities"—namely features (e.g. having property F, being of kind K, being identical to individual I). When considering objectual entities, essence will be objectual

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[10] See Aristotle, *Topics*, 101b38, 102a3; *Metaphysics*, 1031a12; Locke 1689, III, III, 15; Fine 1994, 1995a, 1995b,1995c; Correia 2000, 2006; Lowe 2006, 2008; Oderberg 2007; Koslicki 2018.

essence—what the object considered essentially consists in. When considering generic entities, namely features, essence will be generic essence—what having this feature essentially involves or consists in, that is, what it essentially is for something to have this feature.

To each plurality of entities xx (where a plurality is non-strict or strict, i.e. one or more), let us associate the class E(xx) of its essential features. When xx is a plurality of objectual entities, E(xx) is the class of features that xx essentially has (as a plurality)—the features whose possession by xx is that in virtue of which xx is the plurality of objects that it is. For instance, humanity, or being human, belongs to E(Socrates). When xx is generic, namely a plurality of features, E(xx) is the class of features that xx essentially involves or consists in—the features whose possession by any plurality of objects is that in virtue of which this plurality possesses xx. For instance, we may think that being rational belongs to E(being human).

On that basis, let us define, for any plurality of entities xx, the *essence* of xx as the plurality e(xx) of all the facts of type [yy has/involves F], where yy⊆xx (i.e. every one of the yy's is one of the xx's) and F∈E(yy). For instance, as humanity belongs to E(Socrates), the fact that Socrates is human—i.e. [Socrates is human]—belongs to Socrates's essence, e(Socrates).

To define what it is for a proposition to be essential to an entity (i.e. *true in virtue of* the essence of that entity), I will make use of the notion of metaphysical grounding[11]—as a way to capture the in-virtue-of part of the notion. I will assume that grounding is a relation between a fact (the grounded fact) and a plurality of facts (the grounding facts),[12] and that it comes in two versions: a factive one (requiring that the relevant facts obtain) and a non-factive one. We may take the non-factive notion to be primitive, and symbolise it with "$>^N$": for any (obtaining or non-obtaining) fact A and any plurality of (obtaining or non-obtaining) facts BB, A $>^N$ BB *iff* A is non-factively grounded in BB. Accordingly, I will use "$>^F$" for factive grounding, and define the notion simply as a special case of non-factive grounding: A $>^F$ BB *iff* A $>^N$ BB *and* A and the members of BB obtain.[13]

We can now suggest the following account of essentiality: for a proposition p to be *essential to* (i.e. *true in virtue of the essence of*) a plurality of entities xx is for the fact that p is true to be factively grounded—for short, grounded$_F$—in (some part of) xx's essence. For instance, if p is the proposition that Socrates is human (if he exists), p is essential to Socrates because [p is true] is grounded$_F$ in [Socrates is human], and {being human}⊆E(Socrates). The general definition may be formalised as follows:

(Essentiality)

(6) $\boxtimes_{xx} p \Leftrightarrow_{def}$ [p is true]$>^F$AA, for some AA⊆e(xx).

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[11] On metaphysical grounding, see e.g. Fine 2001, 2012; Correia 2005; Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010; Correia & Schnieder 2012; Audi 2012.

[12] On grounding as a relation between facts, see e.g. Rosen 2010, Audi 2012. On grounding as a sentential (*because*) connective, see e.g. Correia 2010, Fine 2012. This and similar fine-grained distinctions will not be crucial here.

[13] Nothing will crucially rely on non-factive ground being taken as more fundamental than factive ground; alternatively, we may have started with factive ground and defined non-factive ground roughly as *possible* factive ground (for discussion, see Fine 2012, §5.1.) Here, it should be enough if both notions are reasonably intuitive, and understood in such a way that factive implies non-factive ground.

Given the above, we can define, for any plurality of entities xx, the class ε(xx) of propositions that are essential to xx, and then define an *essential truth* as any proposition that is a member of ε(xx) for some xx. The standard, absolutist essentialist account of metaphysical necessity (AE), given by (1) above, amounts to defining a metaphysical necessity as an essential truth.[14]

5. One Way to Develop RE: From Relatively Essential Features to Relative Necessity

Let us now turn to the notions of *relative* essence and necessity. Various views of relative essence have been defended in the literature. Though different in some important respects, those views have one main underlying idea in common, which may be illustrated as follows: unlike the absolute essence of Aristotle, for instance, which corresponds to what he *himself* essentially is, independent of anything else, a relative essence of Aristotle corresponds to what he essentially is *relative to something else*—e.g. a context of utterance (as in e.g. Quine 1960, p. 198; Lewis 1968; Lewis 1986, ch. 4), our values and interests, as reflected in our use of concepts (Sveinsdóttir 2008), an explanatory framework (Sullivan 2016), a theory, a culture, a person's judgment. Thus, the core idea of relative essence is that, in contrast with absolute essence, something may be essential to an entity only relative to some parameter—the parameter which I called "R" (for "relativization basis") earlier. It is this common idea, and the thought that it can be made sense of, and do some useful work, which I will borrow from existing accounts of relative essence.

However, just as these accounts, beyond this common idea, differ in content and purpose among each other, my proposed account will also differ from (some of) them in a number of respects. First, most of these accounts are not only defending a notion of relative essence, but endorsing the view that (relative) essence is not prior to (relative) *de re* necessity: their notion of relative essence is in fact based on a corresponding notion of relative *de re* necessity (in terms of which relative essence is to be understood), or indeed they hold the view that essence *just is de re* necessity, so that their account of relative essence is at the same time an account of relative *de re* necessity. By contrast, my aim is to define a notion of relative essence, and then, on that basis, a notion of relative necessity: essence is prior to necessity on my proposed account, whether in the absolute case (as it was made clear in §4 above) or in the relative case. Still, ultimately, all these authors are defending the idea that something can be essential to some entity in a relative sense; and my proposed view is similar in that respect.

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[14] Essentiality is here to be understood broadly, including not only *direct*, but also *derivative* essentiality—with the direct/derivative distinction understood along the lines of Fine's (1995b) constitutive/consequential distinction, and Correia's (2012) basic/derivative distinction. This inclusive view is important if we want every metaphysical necessity to be an essential truth. (See Fine 1995b: §3, for a simple view of derivative essentiality in terms of logical consequence and some of its drawbacks; see Correia 2012 for an alternative view avoiding these problems). Given (6), if we want p's essentiality to xx to be indeed inclusive (i.e. direct *or* derivative), we have to assume that there is a similar sense in which p's truth is inclusively grounded$_F$ in xx's essence, and that the former inclusiveness will follow from the latter inclusiveness. I will not argue for that claim here, but it is at least *prima facie* plausible.

Second, the target of most of those philosophers is the general notion of essence (and correspondingly the general notion of *de re* necessity, namely metaphysical necessity). In other words, what they are proposing is mainly a relativist view of essence (and metaphysical necessity). As already mentioned, my target is different. On my proposed view, metaphysical necessity (and its special cases, such as e.g. logical necessity) is just as absolute as on standard absolutist essentialism (AE); and the essence in which it finds its source is just the standard notion of absolute essence. The way I want to use the idea of essence *relative* to a parameter is to account for *other* kinds of necessity: those which, unlike metaphysical necessity, may not be absolute but only relative kinds of necessity. Thus, I will rely on the idea of relative essence, but as a *supplement* to absolute essence, in order to account for further kinds of necessity, beyond metaphysical necessity and its special cases.

Third, each of the existing accounts of relative essence, as we have seen, proposes its own relativization parameter. On my proposed view, RE, there may be more than one relative kind of necessity, each coming with its own appropriate relativization parameter R. Some of these parameters may be (partly) similar to those proposed in previous accounts of relative essence (e.g. contexts of utterances, explanatory frameworks, values and interests); but RE is in principle also open to other choices (as illustrated earlier for the examples of natural necessity and normative necessity).

In sum, what RE will keep from previous accounts is the general idea that we can make sense of relative essence—something being essential to something only relative to some parameter—even if the content and purpose of my proposed account differs in other important respects.

With those preliminaries in place, let us get to our proposed development of the notion of relative essence, starting with the simple case of some feature being essential to some entity in a relative sense. For instance, arguably, Socrates is essentially human, but only accidentally a philosopher. However, we may say that, *relative* to a certain context R (where his being a philosopher is crucial), Socrates is essentially a philosopher. To give another example, that electrons repel might not be essential to them in the absolute sense, but it might still be essential to them *relative* to a physical theory—within that theory, that feature is constitutive, or definitional, of electrons.

More generally, for any plurality of entities xx and relativization basis R (e.g. a context, a theory), let us define RE(xx) as the class of features that are *R-relatively* essential to xx—i.e. the features that, relative to R, xx essentially has/involves. Note that RE(xx) may contain not only features that are not members of E(xx)— e.g. being a philosopher, in Socrates's case—but also features that are not even members of P(xx), namely the class of features that xx *actually* has/involves (whether accidentally or essentially). For instance, we may assume that being the best of all philosophers does not even belong to P(Socrates); but there may be an R (say, a context) such that this feature belongs to RE(Socrates).

Let us now define, for any plurality of entities xx and any relativization basis R, the *R-relative essence* of xx as the plurality Re(xx) of all the facts of type [yy has/involves F], where yy⊆xx and F∈RE(yy)—a plurality that, for reasons just mentioned, may contain non-obtaining facts. Accordingly, we will say that a proposition p is *R-relatively essential* to a plurality of entities xx just in case p's truth

is *non*-factively grounded—for short, grounded$_N$—in some part of x's R-relative essence. In symbols,

(R-relative Essentiality)

(7) $\boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL R}} p \Leftrightarrow_{\text{def}}$ [p is true]$>^N$AA, for some AA$\subseteq$Re(xx).

Defined in that way, R-relative essentiality distinguishes itself from other notions of relative essentiality that may come to mind. Importantly, it does not simply amount to an overall R-relativization of absolute essentiality as defined in (6):

(8) It is *not* the case that: for any p, $\boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL R}} p$ *iff* Relative to R, $\boxtimes_{xx} p$.

The crucial difference between the two notions concerns what exactly they R-relativize. R-relative essentiality as defined in (7) only relativizes the essence of xx—xx's absolute essence, e(xx), is replaced with xx's R-relative essence, Re(xx), in the definition. In particular, it does *not* relativize the grounding relation, namely the whole claim that *the fact that p is true is non-factively grounded in xx's R-relative essence*; that claim is not meant to be relative in any sense. By contrast, with an overall R-relativization of absolute essentiality, what is R-relativized is indeed the whole claim that p is absolutely essential to xx—i.e. ultimately, given (6), the whole claim that *the fact that p is true is factively grounded in xx's essence*.

To illustrate that distinction, let us consider an example. Let R be some relativization basis such that the following holds: relative to R, 2+2=4; moreover, relative to R, Socrates is essentially a philosopher—for simplicity, we may even assume that, relative to R, being a philosopher is Socrates's only essential feature. Now suppose further that R is a person's opinion and that this person holds unusual views about the grounding of mathematical truths, thinking in particular that 2+2=4 is true *because* Socrates is a philosopher. More precisely, relative to R, the fact that 2+2=4 is true is (factively) grounded in the fact that Socrates is a philosopher—i.e., relative to R, [<2+2=4> is true] is grounded$_F$ in [Socrates is a philosopher]. But recall that, relative to R, Socrates is *essentially* a philosopher—so that, according to R, [Socrates is a philosopher] belongs to Socrates's absolute essence, e(Socrates). As a consequence, given the definition of (absolute) essentiality in (6), we get that, according to R, the proposition that 2+2=4 is essential to Socrates—i.e. relative to R, $\boxtimes_{\text{Socrates}}$ <2+2=4>.

Now, is it also the case that the proposition that 2+2=4 is R-relatively essential to Socrates in the sense of our proposed definition, (7)? Given what we have assumed about R, it will certainly be the case that the fact that Socrates is a philosopher, [Socrates is a philosopher], belongs to Socrates's R-relative essence, namely Re(Socrates). However, unlike the notion of relative essentiality considered above (i.e. an overall R-relativization of absolute essentiality), the notion of R-essentiality proposed in (7) is in general insensitive to what grounds what *relative to R*—i.e., in the example considered, what grounds what *relative to our person's opinion*. It only takes into account what grounds what *tout court—absolutely*. In our example, most plausibly, the person considered is wrong to think that the fact that Socrates is a philosopher grounds the fact that the proposition that 2+2=4 is true: that grounding relation (whether factive or non-factive) does not hold. If so, in particular, it is *not* the case that the fact that the proposition that 2+2=4 is true is non-factively grounded in the fact that Socrates is a philosopher—i.e. [<2+2=4> is true] is *not* grounded$_N$ in [Socrates is a philosopher]. As a consequence, the proposition that 2+2=4 will not be R-relatively essential to Socrates in the sense of (7)—i.e. it will not be the case that $\boxtimes_{\text{Socrates}}^{\text{REL R}}$ <2+2=4>. Thus, the notion of

relative essentiality defined in (7) is distinct from a mere overall R-relativization of absolute essentiality.

This distinction being drawn, we can now define a corresponding notion of R-relative necessity: for a proposition to be *R-relatively necessary* is for it to be R-relatively essential to some plurality of entities. In symbols,

(R-relative Necessity)

(9) $\square^{\text{REL R}} p \Leftrightarrow_{\text{def}} \exists xx \boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL R}} p$.

Let us now briefly mention some basic features of the notion of relative necessity just defined. These will be particularly relevant when using the notion to define kinds of necessity, the relations between them, and the relations within hybrid kinds (kinds with both members which are absolute necessities and members which are not).

First, R-necessity has absolute necessity as a special case—the case where R is trivial:

(10) $\square p$ *iff* $\square^{\text{REL} \varnothing} p$.[15]

This feature was mentioned when first presenting relativized essentialism (RE) in §3, and it is important because it ensures that, indeed, any kind of necessity covered by RE, including absolute ones, can be defined as an R-relative K-necessity, for some parameters K and R (to recall, in symbols: $\square_{\text{KN}} p \Leftrightarrow_{\text{def}} \square_K^{\text{REL R}} p$).

Second, R-necessity will be *factive* (i.e. $\square^{\text{REL R}} p$ implies p) whenever R is such that, for any xx, all R-relatively essential features of xx are actual features of xx:

(11) **(Factivity)**

If $RE(xx) \subseteq P(xx)$ for any xx, then $\square^{\text{REL R}}$ is factive: for any p, if $\square^{\text{REL R}} p$, then p.[16]

For instance, if natural necessity is R-relative K-necessity, where K is natural and R is a final true scientific theory, then presumably R-relative necessity will be factive (even if not all R-relative necessities are absolute necessities, they will all be true propositions), and so will natural necessity. By contrast, with a notion of normative necessity where K is normative and R is a particular culture or moral theory, it might be that normative necessity is not factive. (Note that, if needed, factivity may be *imposed* on R-relative necessity, and hence on the kind of necessity to be defined from it, "by construction": ultimately, on the suggested development of RE based on features, by redefining RE(xx) as the *intersection* of the R-relatively essential features of xx (namely RE(xx) as previously defined) *with* the actual features of xx (namely P(xx)).)

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[15] "$\varnothing$" is an informal notation for "nothing"—R is not (always) strictly a set or class. "$\varnothing$-relative(ly)" is to be read as "non-relative(ly)", i.e. "absolutely". Let us now consider the equivalence in (10): $\square p$ *iff* $\square^{\text{REL} \varnothing} p$. Suppose first that $\square p$. By definition, $\exists xx$: [p is true]$>^F AA$, for some $AA \subseteq e(xx)$. With $R=\varnothing$, $RE(yy)=E(yy)$ for any yy, so that $Re(xx)=e(xx)$. Moreover, factive implies non-factive grounding (see §4). As a result, we get: [p is true]$>^N AA$, for some $AA \subseteq Re(xx)$—i.e. $\boxtimes_{xx}^{\text{REL} \varnothing} p$. Therefore, $\square^{\text{REL} \varnothing} p$. The converse may be proven in a similar way—relying on the further (plausible) assumption that any fact grounded$_N$ in *obtaining* facts does itself obtain.

[16] If $\square^{\text{REL R}} p$, then by definition $\exists xx$: [p is true]$>^N AA$, for some $AA \subseteq Re(xx)$. As by hypothesis $RE(yy) \subseteq P(yy)$ for any yy, $Re(xx)$ contains only obtaining facts, including AA. So [p is true] is grounded$_N$ in obtaining facts. On the plausible assumption that any fact grounded$_N$ in obtaining facts is itself obtaining, [p is true] obtains.

Finally, R-relative necessity will be *conservative* (i.e. absolute necessity implies R-relative necessity) whenever R is such that, for any xx, all the absolutely essential features of xx are among its R-relatively essential features:

(12) (**Conservativity**)

If $E(xx) \subseteq RE(xx)$ for any xx, then $\square^{REL\ R}$ is conservative: for any p, if $\square p$, then $\square^{REL\ R} p$.[17]

This will be particularly important when considering hybrid kinds of necessity and the relations within them on RE. For instance, if natural necessity is defined as R-relative K-necessity, where K is natural and R is non-trivial (i.e. some natural necessities are not metaphysically necessary), then R-relative necessity being conservative will ensure that natural necessity defined in that way indeed includes all the necessities that are intuitively natural, whether they are absolute, metaphysical necessities or not. (Note that, just as factivity, conservativity may be imposed on R-relative necessity by construction: ultimately, by redefining RE(xx) as the *union* of the R-relatively essential features of xx (i.e. RE(xx) as originally defined) with its absolutely essential features (E(xx)).[18])

In sum, the general framework for kinds of necessity proposed earlier (§3), namely RE, may be developed in such a way that relative necessity is ultimately understood in terms of relatively essential features of entities. As I said, this is only one option: for instance, one may just define relative necessity in terms of relative essentiality and take the latter notion as primitive, or understand that latter notion in terms of facts, as I did, but without the further step down to features of entities. One motivation for that last option may be the following: perhaps not all the facts in e(xx) are of the form [yy has/involves F], where $yy \subseteq xx$ and $F \in E(yy)$ (and similarly for the R-relative case). For instance, we may think that <If p&q, then p> is essential to conjunction because [If p&q, then p] is part of the essence of conjunction, but that this fact corresponds to a rule of inference, and is

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[17] Proof omitted (similar as for (11)).

[18] Note that, in certain cases, imposing conservativity by construction may also reintroduce a difficulty that is faced by standard AE and that RE is sometimes able to avoid, thanks to an appropriate choice of the relativization basis R. The difficulty is one that I mentioned in a previous footnote (see fn 5): defining K-necessity by simple entity restriction, as on AE, may seem to generate too many K-necessities—for instance, even assuming that <Rightness is variably polyadic> and <Conjunction is an abstract entity> are indeed (absolute) essential truths, and hence necessities, one may not think that they are specifically a *normative* and a *logical* necessity, respectively. Now, in certain cases, that difficulty may be avoided on RE, when accounting for a (partly) relative kind of necessity. For instance, one may define normative necessity as R-relative N-necessity, where N=normative and R is e.g. a moral theory such that <Rightness is variably polyadic> does *not* come out as a normative necessity. If one thinks that this is how things should be on pre-theoretical intuitions, but one *also* thinks that conservativity is a desirable property for a notion of relative necessity (and that conservativity should be imposed by construction if needed), then one finds oneself in front of a sort of dilemma: either make sure that normative necessity (as R-relative N-necessity) is conservative, but at the expense of extensional accuracy (e.g. <Rightness is variably polyadic> will come out as a normative necessity); or else avoid that extensional problem, but at the expense of conservativity. Of course, the way out of such dilemmas for RE would be to solve the problem for AE, namely for absolute necessities, in the first place: to amend or replace the usual entity restriction strategy for defining special cases of absolute, metaphysical necessity in such a way that it does not generate intuitively incorrect necessities. But this is beyond the scope of this paper.

not reducible to a fact of the form [conjunction has F], where F is a *feature* of conjunction. One potential way out would be to accept a sufficiently broader view of features—such that e.g. conjunction has the feature of *being such that it obeys the relevant rule of inference*.

Be that as it may, the above suggested one concrete way in which some aspects of RE, and in particular the relative necessity part of the account, may be made more precise; and it helped us better understand some aspects of RE as I see it—for instance, relative necessity should not just be an overall relativization of absolute necessity.

6. Potential Virtues, Problems and Further Developments

Let us come back to the basic RE framework presented in §3, and briefly consider some of its main characteristics, including potential virtues and challenges. My aim here is not to offer a proper defence of RE, or show that it is preferable to the three options considered in §2, but rather to show how RE distinguishes itself from rival views, and how it may reasonably be considered as a serious new option worth developing further.

To recall, relativized essentialism (RE) is the view on which any kind of necessity (at least most of the important kinds) is defined as an R-relative K-necessity, for some K (the entity restriction parameter) and some R (the essence relativization parameter):

(Relativized essentialism)

(13) $\Box_{KN}\, p \Leftrightarrow_{def} \Box_K^{REL\ R}\, p$,

where $\Box_{KN}$ is the operator for some kind of necessity, KN.

Let us now consider some aspects on which RE distinguishes itself, in particular from the three options considered in §2 for the friend of AE. To recall, those options were the following: just extend AE to any further kind to be defined (e.g. natural or normative necessity), i.e. keep using entity restriction alone (ER); use entity restriction supplemented with set conditionalization (ER+SC); use entity restriction supplemented with primitivism (ER+P).

First, the simple ER strategy entails that all the necessities defined are absolute essential truths, and hence metaphysical necessities. Clearly, this is a consequence that the proposed view can avoid. For instance, suppose that natural necessity cannot be defined as a special case of absolute metaphysical necessity, grounded in the absolute essences of natural entities (i.e. K=N (for natural) and R=∅) because, as many think, at least some natural necessities are metaphysically contingent. Then natural necessity, on the proposed view, may be grounded in the *R-relative* essences of natural entities, for an appropriate R (e.g. a final theory reflecting our scientific capacities and interests).

Similar remarks apply to normative necessity. For instance, even if <Pain is bad> is not absolutely essential to badness (or goodness), or <Lying is wrong> is not essential to wrongness (or rightness), it may be understood as R-relatively essential to it—for an appropriate R. Depending on how one understands the normative realm, in particular as objective or not, one may choose various relativization bases, having to do with e.g. the human species, specific human capacities or interests, some particular culture within humanity, some period of time within human history, or some normative theory. And the resulting notion of normative necessity will inherit the corresponding sort of relativity.

It should be emphasized that, for both the natural and the normative case, the proposed relativized essentialist framework still allows for views on which some (or indeed all) natural or normative necessities would be absolutely essential to the relevant entities, and thereby metaphysically necessary (perhaps <Gold has atomic number 79>, or <If something is right, then it is an action>). As a generalization of AE, RE is just more flexible in this respect, being able to accommodate a larger range of views.

At this point, it is worth mentioning a challenge to any further development of RE. For each specific kind to be accounted for within the proposed framework, it has to be determined which class of entities it should be associated with (parameter K), whether it is absolute or (partly) relative, and, in the latter case, which relativization basis may be most appropriate (parameter R). This will be crucial to get a precise account, not only of the specific kinds considered, but of the *relations* between those kinds, as noted previously. In particular, it should be shown that, for each (partly) relative kind, we can indeed plausibly find an appropriate relativization basis that makes for a satisfactory account of that specific kind.

On the one hand, the fact that RE is very flexible, in that it is virtually totally open as to which kinds should be absolute or relative, and as to what relativization bases should be chosen, may be seen as an advantage, both because it means that the framework may be attractive to a large variety of views about kinds of necessities (e.g. about whether natural or normative necessity is relative, and how), and relatedly because that lack of constraints allows for a wide range of possibilities, making it more plausible that at least one of them will be the appropriate one. Still, on the other hand, having a large range of possibilities does not guarantee that one of them will be satisfactory. Although I have made some brief suggestions for potential relativization bases for natural and normative necessities (assuming that they are (partly) relative), more work would be needed in this respect. Indeed, this might be one of the most important tasks for further developments of RE.

Another important feature of RE concerns how it accounts for kinds of necessity. As we have seen in §2, when a kind is defined by set conditionalization (the mixed ER+SC option), its modal status—why it counts as a kind of *necessity*—might not seem to be properly accounted for (this is of course disputable). As regards the mixed ER+P option, where the relevant kind is treated as primitive, it does not include, in itself, any (non-modal) account of its modal status. By contrast, just like the simple ER strategy, the proposed view includes a clear account of the modal status of the kinds defined: they are *(relative) necessities* because they are *(relatively) essential to* some entities. And we may add that, as those entities are *K*-entities, it is also clear why these necessities are (relative) *K*-necessities.

Moreover, the proposed strategy, unlike ER+P, does not make the kind to be defined a fundamental kind of necessity, or a kind which is unrelated to other important kinds, like metaphysical, logical or conceptual necessity—which, as I noted earlier, one might take as an intuitive result.

Finally, and relatedly, in terms of unity and parsimony, the proposed view is arguably preferable to the two mixed strategies, ER+SC and ER+P. Indeed, as it is a generalization of the simple ER strategy, the result of adding any new kind of necessity to standard AE amounts to a quite natural extension of it, with (13) above serving as a general definition for all kinds: metaphysical necessity itself is the special case where both entity restriction (parameter K) and essence relativi-

zation (parameter R) are trivial; its absolute restricted kinds (e.g. conceptual necessity) are special cases where only R is trivial; and any (non-purely absolute) additional kind is a case with non-trivial K and non-trivial R. The result is unified, as each kind is accounted for in an analogous way, in terms of the (absolute or relative) essences of the relevant entities. Likewise, it is parsimonious, as metaphysical necessity remains the only fundamental kind, from which all other kinds are derived.

To anticipate a potential worry, let me add a few remarks about the unity of RE, which I take to be an important potential virtue of the view. First, I do not mean to claim that RE remains *just as* unified as AE, for instance. Depending on the relativization bases needed to define the non-absolute kinds, the overall view might end up with kinds which are indeed very different from each other. And of course, the more important such differences, the less unified the overall account—this is not specific to RE, since no account of the kinds of necessities may be more unified than what the actual differences between the kinds allow for. However, what RE is able to do (arguably better than the two mixed accounts considered above) is precisely to maintain some form of unity *despite* those differences: even with huge differences between kinds, in particular between relative and absolute kinds, RE maintains at least a formal unity, which appears in the common definition for any kind of necessity covered by the view (13). Even if having that formal analogy were all there is to the RE's unity, it would already be something non-trivial.

Now, is that formal unity only artificial, or is there something more substantial behind it—in particular, are there some substantial relations between absolute and relative necessities? As a partial answer, let me suggest three ways in which one may understand the relation between absolute and relative necessity, and more fundamentally between absolute and relative essence, in RE—the three of which plausibly suggest at least *some* substantial link between the two. First, "relative essence" is not just an arbitrary name, but really a relativized version of absolute essence, the former being constructed based on the latter—as was made clear in the discussion in §5 in particular. And this seems like a reason to think that the two notions have some substantial link—just as, in general, a notion and a relativized version of it are usually taken to be substantially linked, beyond their names. Indeed, there might even be some intuitive sense in which they count as two species of the same genus—in our case, the general notion of essence as the common genus of absolute and relative essence. Second, as we have also seen, absolute essence (necessity) can be seen as a special, or limit, case of relative essence (necessity)—and again, in general, such a relation between two notions suggests that they bear some substantial relation. Perhaps one might even see relative essence as the common genus of both notions: non-trivial relative essence and trivial relative essence (i.e. absolute essence).

A third way to motivate the same point is to focus, not on the notion of essence or relative essence as the potential common genus, but on the notion of definition. Essentialists often understand essence in the Aristotelian sense of *real definition* (see e.g. Fine 1994). Assuming that the name is just not arbitrary, and that it indeed makes sense to take real definition and standard definition (verbal definition, definitions of words or concepts) to be substantially related as two species of the same genus (definition of things and definition of words or concepts), it may also motivate the idea that absolute and relative essence in RE bear that same sort of substantial relation. While absolute essence may be identified with

real definition, relative essence may be identified with (something more like) standard definition. For instance, if electrons R-relatively essentially repel each other, where R is a theory, we may say that this feature is part of the definition of electrons in that theory. Likewise, if R is moral theory or a culture, and serves as the relativization basis for normative necessity, we may say that the features which are R-relatively essential to goodness or rightness are the features which are part of the very definition of those notions in the relevant moral theory or culture.

The features just mentioned mainly distinguish RE from the three common options considered in §2, which all take AE as a basis. But there is a more general distinguishing feature of RE to be quickly mentioned. Unlike the main available accounts of the kinds of necessity and their relations that I am aware of (e.g. in Lewis 1986; Hale 1996; Fine 1994, 2005; Lange 2005)—whether essentialist or not, monist or pluralist, whether using entity restriction, set conditionalization, or any other tool to define derivative kinds—RE has the resources to clearly distinguish two intuitive dimensions of modal variety (two refinements of the usual, coarse-grained notion of *kind*): what we may call *domain* (the area, or scope, or specific source of a kind of necessity), which on RE is accounted for with entity restriction; and *strength* (or modal force), which on RE is independently accounted for with essence relativization. This allows for a particularly clear and precise account of the varieties of necessity and their relations—and may avoid some problems faced by the main available accounts (see Hirèche 2021).

7. Conclusion

In this paper, based on two major ideas in the literature about essence—first, the reduction of metaphysical necessity to essence and the definition of special cases through entity restriction, and second, the idea of relative essence—I have proposed a generalized version of absolutist essentialism (AE), which I call relativized essentialism (RE), as a general framework to account for kinds of modality—in particular, one which offers a new answer to an important challenge to AE. In order to illustrate and defend the proposed view, I have suggested one way in which it could be developed in some more detail, pointed out some of its potential advantages—especially with respect to standard, absolutist essentialism (AE), as well as accounts mixing AE with other common accounts of necessities—and briefly considered some potential challenges to it, and corresponding points on which it would need more development and argument.

Although I have not provided a detailed account, or a full defence of it, I hope to have established some useful bases for RE as a novel framework to account for kinds of modality, and shown that it may be worth developing and defending further, given some of its potential advantages. In particular, RE seems to offer good prospects for a general account of modalities with the following two features. Relying on various notions of essence, it is flexible enough to cover a large range of kinds of necessity—both absolute and relative. At the same time, treating all kinds in analogous ways, it remains, in some non-trivial sense at least, parsimonious and unified, accounting for the intuition that, however different,

whether stronger or weaker, all kinds of necessity still have, beyond just being called "necessities", something in common—essence, or definition.[19]

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