

## Essences of Individuals <sup>i</sup>

*published in:*

Koslicki, K. & Raven, M. (2024): *The Routledge Handbook of Essence in Philosophy*. Routledge

Penultimate draft, please cite [published version](#)

### Abstract

A common distinction is the one drawn between individuals and kinds. On the one hand, individuals are entities such as the chair where I am now sitting, my cat Aristotle, the particles that compose the chair and my cat, and the 2023 Rugby World Cup, that is, particular objects or events. On the other hand, kinds are entities such as *chairs*, *cats*, and *world-cup finals*, that is, roughly, groupings of particular objects or events. Granting this distinction and the assumption that at least some entities have at least some essential properties, one faces two distinct types of questions: (1) what is essential to an individual? (2) what is essential to a kind? After giving a short discussion of the difference between individuals and kinds, this chapter will tackle the first question and consider various possibilities of what may count as essential to an individual.

### Biographical Note

Marco Marabello is a doctoral assistant at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

**Word count: 6805 (without abstract, further readings, and references)**

### I. Individuals, Kinds, and Essentialism

A common distinction is the one drawn between individuals and kinds. On the one hand, individuals are entities such as the chair where I am now sitting, my cat Aristotle, the particles that compose the chair and my cat, and the 2023 Rugby World Cup, that is, particular objects or events (cf. Adams 1979). On the other hand, kinds are entities such as *chairs*, *cats*, and *world-cup finals*,<sup>ii</sup> that is, groupings of particular objects or events.

Essentialism is usually characterized as the thesis that, for at least some objects, the properties those objects have can be divided between essential and accidental ones, between properties that an object couldn't lack and properties that it could lack or, alternatively, properties that are definitive of the object's nature and properties that aren't. Furthermore, it is customary to use the term "essence" to denote the property or properties essential to a certain entity. This is a mild version of essentialism, and although there are others (cf. Robertson Ishii and Atkins 2022), here I will just assume this characterization as it is, by and large, the most common. For the present purposes, I also won't discuss the question of what an essential property is. Whether the concept must be analyzed by means of modality or otherwise taken as primitive is an interesting question in its own but one that I will not tackle here (for more on this see Correia, this volume and Torza, this volume). When this is necessary, I will refer to these two conceptions of essence as "modal conception" and "non-modal conception" respectively. I will talk, though, of possible worlds, but this is meant just as a useful heuristic rather than an endorsement of the modal conception on my part.

Now, granting the distinction between individuals and kinds, and that at least some objects have at least some essential properties, one faces two distinct types of questions: (1) what is essential to an individual? (2) what is essential to a kind? That is, what makes a certain individual, be

that my cat, Socrates, or what have you, the individual it is? And what makes a certain kind, be that the kind *chairs*, the kind *cats*, or what have you, the kind it is?

This chapter will survey various answers to the first question (cf. Plantinga 1974: ch. IV §10), while setting aside the second (see Tahko, this volume; Brigandt, this volume, for some answers to the second question). However, before plunging into these answers, a few remarks – on the individual/kind distinction – are in order.

First, as examples of an individual, I mentioned only concrete entities, however, an individual may also be abstract, e.g., sets (cf. Forbes 1985: 99) and propositions. In this chapter, I won't be concerned with what is essential to abstract individuals, although some of the answers to be discussed could very well apply to them. Second, I used the term “particular” to gloss what an individual is. It is important to notice that one could use the two terms “particular” and “individual” to refer to different things. Lowe (2009: ch 1), for instance, uses the term “particular” to refer to a class of entities which includes tropes or property instances. According to him, these latter entities are examples of particulars which are not individuals. Third, the distinction between individuals and kinds has nothing to say about which one, if any, is more fundamental than the other. One could reasonably hold that individuals are not fundamental (Dasgupta 2009), but even in this case, one can ask what is essential to an individual, for the question of how a certain individual might have been would (arguably) still arise. Finally, the existence of two distinct questions, (1) and (2) above, depends on what one takes a kind to be. For one could take a kind to be just an individual. For instance, Hawley and Bird (2011: 206) maintain that there are three possibilities about the metaphysical status of kinds, either they are universals, or particulars, or *sui generis* entities (neither universals nor particulars). Under the second of these three possibilities falls the thesis according to which kinds are just individuals

(see Brigandt, this volume, about species). More precisely, under this conception, kinds are spatio-temporal extended entities whose parts are the kind's members. Clearly, if this is the correct metaphysics of kinds, there would be no reason to maintain that (2) is a distinct question from (1).

Be that as it may, I will now turn to possible answers to question (1). In this chapter, I will just consider two answers: that individual essences (Section II) and sortals (Section III) are essential to individuals. Another answer, namely, that an individual's origins are essential to it, is discussed in a separate chapter (see Robertson Ishii, this volume), and thus it won't be considered here.

## **II. Individual Essences**

A first answer to the question of what is essential to an individual is that its individual essence is. Proponents of this answer hold a thesis that one might call Individual Essentialism (IE), viz., that there are individual essences. But what is an individual essence? Roughly, an individual essence of an object is a property (or properties) that is necessarily unique to that object. Importantly, the uniqueness condition must hold across possible worlds, that is, no other individual *y*, actual or possible, could instantiate the individual essence of a distinct individual *x*. More precisely, an individual essence of an entity is, necessarily, a property (or properties) which is both necessary and sufficient for being that entity (cf. Plantinga 1974: ch. 5; Forbes 1985: 96; Mackie 2006: 19; Roca Royes 2011: 72). Some friends of possible worlds hold, moreover, that individual essences provide sufficient and necessary conditions for the trans-world identification of individuals. Now, granted that an individual essence is an essence of an individual, one faces two questions: first, what could play the role of an individual essence?

Second, what, if any, are the reasons to hold that (IE) is true? I will consider these questions in turn.

To begin with, Sean Connery's property of *being identical to Sean Connery* seems a perfect candidate for being an individual essence of Sean Connery. For, necessarily, Sean Connery has this property if he exists, and necessarily, if some individual has this property, then he is Sean Connery. But properties of this kind have been deemed trivial by many (Della Rocca 1995; Forbes 1985: 96; Mackie 2006: 20), and thus, not apt to play the role that individual essences are supposed to play. Examples of properties that may play the role of *non-trivial* individual essences are Plantinga (1974)'s world-indexed properties, primitive haecceities or thisnesses (Rosenkrantz 1993), and individual forms (Koslicki 2018; 2020).

First, world-indexed properties are properties with the following structure: *having P in w*, where *P* is a property and *w* a world. Roughly, they ascribe to an individual a feature *P* that the individual has in a certain world *w* (see Plantinga 1974: 63 for a precise characterization). For instance, Socrates' property of *being a citizen of Athens in @*. World-indexed properties clearly are essential properties, for at any world in which Socrates exists, necessarily he has the property of *being a citizen of Athens in @*. But world-indexed properties can also play the role of individual essences when the feature that they ascribe to an individual in a world is unique to that individual in that world. Take the world-indexed property of *being the protagonist of North by Northwest in @*. This is an individual essence of Cary Grant, for necessarily, if Cary Grant exists, then he has this property, and necessarily, anyone who has that property will be identical to Cary Grant (see Koslicki 2020 for a critique of world-indexed properties as individual essences).

Second, primitive haecceities or thisnesses could play the role of individual essences. The notion of a haecceity has a venerable pedigree in the history of philosophy and it is customary, but not uncontroversial (e.g., Plantinga 1976: 149), to credit John Duns Scotus as the first to introduce it in the philosophical debate (See Cross 2022 for more on the history of the notion). Although different authors understand different things by “thisness” or “haecceity”, if one understands a haecceity as an entity  $h$  that a certain individual  $a$  instantiates and that individuates that individual, then this entity  $h$  could play the role of an individual essence of  $a$ . For instance, Sean Connery, and only him, instantiates his haecceity, namely, *being Sean Connery* in every world in which he exists. However plausible, positing haecceities, at least if understood as necessarily existing entities à la Plantinga (1976), comes with a high ontological cost. Since it is usually assumed that all properties can be multiply instantiated and ground qualitative resemblances, haecceities cannot be grouped with other properties and thus they require accepting an additional ontological commitment (See Diekemper 2015 and Cowling 2022 for more on this). For these reasons, many are prone to reject them or to adopt a more lightweight characterization of haecceities (cf. Adams 1981). But besides their ontological cost, there is a real question of whether these haecceities could be essential, let alone individual essences. Certainly, according to some modal accounts of essence, this is not so. For instance, Denby (2014: 90) argues that for a property to be essential to an object, it must be a “core” and “central” property of that object, where a property is a core one when it is related to the “interesting features of things, such as their qualitative natures, their powers, and their causal relations to other things” (*ibid.*). But according to him, thisnesses aren’t “core” or “central” properties of objects in this sense, therefore they are not adequate candidates for essentiality. But then haecceities couldn’t play the role of individual essences either.

Finally, for those with hylomorphist sympathies, individual forms may play the role of individual essences for those individuals that are compounds of matter and form (Koslicki 2018, ch. 3.4; 2020: §3.5). If an individual  $x$  in a certain world  $w$  has a certain individual form  $f$ , then, at any world, having  $f$  will be both necessary and sufficient for being  $x$ . Since the numerical identity of individuals across worlds is determined by the identity of their individual forms, proponents of this strategy face a question: what grounds the identity of individual forms? Here, the friends of individual forms have two possibilities (Koslicki 2020: 132), namely, either (i) grounding facts about the identity of individual forms in facts about the identity of other entities or (ii) taking the identity of individual forms as primitive. Koslicki (2020) takes the latter route for the purposes of her discussion, however, she leaves open the possibility of taking the former (see Fine 2020 for a critique of Koslicki's position).

But why think that individuals have individual essences? That is, why think that (IE) is true? Although arguments in support of individual essences are put forward, amongst others, by Forbes (1985: chs. 5 and 6), Mackie (1987, 2006: ch. 2), and Plantinga (1974), for the present purposes I will just tackle Mackie (2006: ch. 2, §5)'s Indiscernibility Argument.

The argument proceeds from three assumptions:

- A1. There cannot be bare identities and non-identities.
- A2. Identities and non-identities cannot be extrinsically grounded.
- A3. The correct way to interpret *de re* modal claims is by means of transworld identity.

As they play a central role in the overall argument, let me comment on these three assumptions before proceeding with the rest of the argument. First, (A1), or as Mackie (1987: 180-181) calls it "The No Bare Identities Principle", holds that facts about identity and non-identity must

always be grounded. In other words, given a fact about the identity (or non-identity) of two objects  $x$  and  $y$ , this fact must be grounded in some features of  $x$  and  $y$  themselves. Second, (A2) restricts the facts that can ground identity (or non-identity) claims to facts about intrinsic features of the entities whose identity (or non-identity) is under discussion. Third, (A3) says that claims about *de re* necessity and possibility are rightly understood as claims about the transworld identity of those entities which figure in these claims, rather than as claims about their Lewisian counterparts. In other words, that Obama could have lost the 2008 election is rightly understood as a claim about an individual numerically identical to the actual Obama, rather than his counterpart, who in some world loses the 2008 election.

Keeping these three assumptions in mind, we can now proceed to put forward Mackie's Indiscernibility Argument whose primary goal is to lend plausibility to (IE). I will start by spelling out the argument in premise/conclusion form and then comment on each step.

P1. At least some individuals do not have an individual essence.

P2. For any two individuals  $x$  and  $y$  which do not have an individual essence, it is possible that  $x$  and  $y$  have the same essential properties but different accidental ones.

P3. Let  $c$  and  $d$  be individuals which do not have an individual essence (from P1).

C1. It is possible that  $c$  and  $d$  have the same essential properties but different accidental ones (from P2 and P3).

P4. Possibly, any difference between  $c$  and  $d$  is due entirely to their accidental properties (from C1).

P5. If it is possible that any difference between two individuals  $x$  and  $y$  is due entirely to their accidental properties, then it is possible that any way  $x$  could be is a way  $y$  could be.



C2. Any way  $c$  could be is a way  $d$  could be and any way  $d$  could be is a way  $c$  could be (from P4 and P5).

P6. If any way  $c$  could be is a way  $d$  could be and any way  $d$  could be is a way  $c$  could be, then it is possible that two worlds  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  are exactly alike in all respects except for the identities of  $c$  and  $d$ .

C3. It is possible that two worlds  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  are exactly alike in all respects except for the identities of  $c$  and  $d$ .

The argument is indeed complex and deserves careful consideration. To start with, it is important to notice that the argument constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum*. Since the argument's aim, as already hinted above, is to lend plausibility to (IE), Mackie supposes that some objects do not have individual essences (P1) and goes on to see what this entails.

If two individuals  $x$  and  $y$  do not have individual essences, then it is possible that those individuals  $x$  and  $y$  have exactly the same essential properties but different accidental properties (P2). This follows from the definition of an individual essence. Recall that an individual essence is an essential property (or properties) which is unique to a certain individual. If two individuals have no individual essence then, nothing forbids them from having the same essential properties.

Now, let's assume that, for instance, Cary Grant and Sean Connery are among those individuals which do not have an individual essence (P3). It is then possible that Cary Grant and Sean Connery have exactly the same essence, viz., the same essential properties (C1). Since they share all their essential properties, any actual difference between Cary Grant and Sean Connery will then be entirely due to their accidental properties (P4). For instance, taking the property of

*being a human being* as their only essential property, all differences between Cary Grant and Sean Connery is due to their accidental properties, for instance, the accidental property of *having played James Bond* that the second has but the first doesn't.

But if this is the case, then there are no ways Cary Grant could have been that Sean Connery could not have been (P5). In other words, and somewhat metaphorically, the possibilities open to one are the same as the possibilities open to the other: any way Cary Grant could be is a way Sean Connery could be. Less abstractly, if *being born in the United States* is a way Cary Grant could have been, then it is also a way Sean Connery could have been. This means that any sequence of events that could make up Cary Grant's life is a sequence of events that could make up Sean Connery's life (C2).<sup>iii</sup>

But then, consider Sean Connery's possible life in which he is a philosopher instead of an actor. Since any way Sean Connery's life could be is a way Cary Grant's life could be, the very same life is a possible life of Cary Grant (P6). Thus, consider two worlds  $w_1$  and  $w_2$ . These two worlds are *exactly alike*, except that in  $w_1$  Sean Connery is living his philosopher life while in  $w_2$  Cary Grant is (C3).

Since  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  differ only with respect to who is living the philosopher life, the two worlds differ only with respect to the identity of the individual who leads that life. There is no matter of fact as to whether the individual in  $w_1$  is Sean Connery or Cary Grant. And there is no matter of fact as to whether the individual in  $w_2$  is Cary Grant or Sean Connery. After all they share all their essential properties. This scenario delivers a case of a "bare difference" (Mackie 2006: 26) in the identities of Cary Grant and Sean Connery since the facts about their identity do not obtain in virtue of any other fact about their intrinsic features.

Therefore, by assuming (P1), we have derived a conclusion which is a case of bare non-identity, and this case contradicts our assumption (A1), that is, that there cannot be cases of bare identities and non-identities. Mackie pushes the argument further by pointing out that since, by assumption, Cary Grant and Sean Connery share all their essential properties, then any way Cary Grant could have been is a way Sean Connery could have been. But given that whatever is actual is possible (note that this is the dual of axiom T of modal propositional logic, viz., that whatever is necessary is actually the case), it follows that how Cary Grant actually is is a way Cary Grant could have been and thus, a way Sean Connery could have been.

Then, one can imagine a world  $w_1$  where there is an individual, call him q-Grant, who lives a life indistinguishable from that of Cary Grant but who is nevertheless identical to Sean Connery. Moreover, one can also imagine a world  $w_2$  where there is an individual, call him q-Connery, who lives a life indistinguishable from that of Sean Connery but who is nevertheless identical to Cary Grant. Surely though, one has no reason to think that these two worlds couldn't be one and the same. Therefore, we arrive at a world  $w_s$  completely indistinguishable from the actual one, except for the fact that Cary Grant and Sean Connery have switched their roles. Here again, we have a case of bare difference since there is no fact about the two individuals' intrinsic features in virtue of which Cary Grant in @ is identical to q-Connery in  $w_s$  and Sean Connery in @ is identical to q-Grant in  $w_s$  (Mackie 2006: 27-28; cf. Chisholm 1967 and Adams 1979).

In this case too, the assumption that some individuals do not have an individual essence entails that there are cases of bare identities and non-identities. But as we've seen, this contradicts the "No Bare Identities Principle" (A1).

There are four possible ways to react to the argument just given. To begin with, one may reject (P1), that is, that at least some individuals do not have individual essences. But since the argument proceeded from the three assumptions (A1), (A2), and (A3), one could also reject any of these assumptions to avoid the contradiction. In other words, one may argue that bare identities (and non-identities) aren't problematic, that identities (and non-identities) can be extrinsically grounded, or that transworld identity does not provide the correct interpretation of *de re* modal claims. Each of these possibilities seems to be a trade-off. Let's look at them in turn.

First, one can resist the argument by holding that all individuals have individual essences. But those sympathetic to this strategy should provide plausible candidates to play the role of (non-trivial) individual essences. Forbes (1985), for instance, argues that this is not possible for certain categories of objects and thus, he adopts a piecemeal solution to the puzzle. According to Forbes, for some categories of objects, namely biological organism, one can find plausible candidates to play the role of individual essences, while for other categories this is not possible. For the latter categories, one should adopt a counterpart model of *de re* modal claims instead of a transworld identity model. Mackie (2006: ch. 3) argues at length against Forbes' attempt to find (non-trivial) individual essences for such individuals, but also generalizes her argument to draw the conclusion that "the attempt to find such individual essences is doomed to failure" (Mackie 2006: 69). Here two points can be made respectively against Mackie's argument and Forbes' strategy. First, it is not clear why one must find plausible candidates for individual essences. After all, it may be sufficient to show, as Mackie's indiscernibility argument does, that rejecting individual essences has unpalatable consequences, while leaving it open what these individual essences are. Second, against Forbes' strategy, one could argue that there is no

reason to endorse a piecemeal solution. After all, it is not clear why one should not adopt a counterpart-theoretic approach across the board once it is accepted for certain entities.

A second possibility to resist the argument is to deny that bare identities and non-identities are problematic. This is indeed Mackie's preferred strategy to avoid the contradiction engendered by the argument. Mackie's choice follows from the exclusion of all other relevant possibilities rather than from a positive argument in favor of bare identities. Nevertheless, it is not clear what really supports (A1). As Forbes (1985: 125) writes: "It is difficult to find an irresistible argument for the principle that facts about identities and differences must be grounded in some way". Forbes (*ibid.*), though, holds that "it is part of our concept of identity, whether transworld or transtemporal, that there are no ungrounded facts about such identities", and supports this claim by presenting some cases which allegedly show the unintelligibility of bare identities. For instance, he considers the case of a world exactly like ours but where the famous steel tower in Paris is different from the actual one. But to make sense of this situation one cannot imagine, e.g., that the material from which the tower was made is plastic rather than steel, but only that the scenario differs in the identity of the tower. Forbes (1985: 125) concludes that the seeming unintelligibility of such scenario is a "measure of the plausibility of the view that transworld differences must be grounded".

As a third possible way out, one could reject the thesis that identities cannot be extrinsically grounded (cf. Forbes 2002 for more on the notion of identities that are extrinsically grounded). Indeed, that facts about identity can be extrinsically grounded is something accepted when discussing cases of identity over time. For instance, Parfit (1984) holds that whether an individual  $x$  at  $t_1$  is identical to an individual  $y$  at  $t_2$  depends on the absence of other candidates for the identity with  $x$ . Clearly, cases about identity over time are different from cases about

identity across possible worlds; however, Mackie (1989; 2006: ch. 4) argues against this way of resisting the argument because, according to her, to avoid conflict with the logic of identity, the friends of extrinsically grounded facts about identity must resort to bare identities.

Finally, as already pointed out, one could resist the argument by abandoning the transworld identity interpretation of *de re* modal claims and adopting a counterpart theoretic interpretation. According to this latter interpretation, individuals are world-bound, i.e., they exist only at one world. For example, that Socrates could have been a doctor, according to this approach, should be understood as claiming that at least one of his counterparts is a doctor. This interpretation of *de re* modal statements naturally goes together with a Lewisian picture of possible worlds, where possible worlds are worlds as concrete as ours, since it is otherwise difficult to imagine how one and the same individual could inhabit these many concrete possible worlds. However, as Mackie (2006: ch. 5) points out, for those without sympathy for Lewis' concrete modal realism, the solution seems unpalatable.

In sum, one can resist the Indiscernibility Argument in multiple ways, however, all these present tradeoffs. Mackie argues that accepting bare identities is the best possible solution, even if bare identities sound paradoxical since commitment to them forces us to accept “that the total history of the world, up to the time that a particular individual (you, for example) came into existence at a certain place was insufficient for the individual that then and there came into existence to be *that* individual, rather than something else” (Mackie 2006: 92).

### **III. Sortal Essentialism**

The biblical story of Lot's wife tells that, while fleeing Sodom, Lot's wife turned to look at the city and became a statue of salt. In *Die Verwandlung*, Kafka narrates that Gregor Samsa woke up one day to find himself turned into a vermin. J.K. Rowling's character Professor McGonagall is able to turn into a cat at will. If these cases defy your imagination, then you probably have the intuition that Lot's wife couldn't have turned into a statue of salt, Gregor Samsa couldn't have turned into vermin, and McGonagall couldn't turn into a cat at will. This is the position adopted by sortal essentialists.<sup>iv</sup> Sortal Essentialism (SE) is yet another answer to the question of what is essential to an individual. It is the thesis that some sortal to which the individual actually belongs is essential to it.

For the sake of clarity, some remarks over the use of the term "sortal" are in order. An important distinction to draw is that between sortal terms, sortal concepts, and sortals. First, sortal terms are terms such as "shark", "river", "carrot", etc... Second, sortal concepts are the concepts "expressed or conveyed" (Lowe 2007: 515) by sortal terms. Thus, the concept of a shark is conveyed by the sortal term "shark". Finally, sortals (also known as kinds) are the entities to which the sortal terms and concepts refer. Although determining what kind of entities sortals are is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will refer to sortals as properties to which individuals belong (note that this need not be the case, cf. Grandy and Freund 2020).

So, assuming that (SE) is true, if Lot's wife is a human being, then she couldn't have failed to be a human being. That is, necessarily, at any world in which Lot's wife exists, she is a human being. Or take the sword Excalibur, if it exists, then it is necessarily a sword (cf. Baker 2007: ch. 3; Passinsky, this volume for essentialism about artifacts). Similarly, one could hold that if a certain event belongs to a certain sort, then it is necessarily of that sort. For instance, assuming

that *being a killing* is a sort, Kennedy's killing is necessarily a killing (cf. Forbes 1985: ch. 8; Bennett 1988: ch. 4 for essentialism about events).

By and large, (SE) is regarded as a plausible thesis (but see Mackie 1994; 2006: chs. 7-8 for arguments against the view). But any friend of (SE) must answer three distinct, although related, questions. First, what is a sortal? Second, assuming that an individual may fall under different sortals, to which sortal does the individual essentially belong and to which sortals does it belong only accidentally? And third, why think at all that some sortals are essential properties of individuals? I will tackle these three questions in turn (cf. Mackie 2006: 119).

The notion of a sortal may be familiar to most; familiar as it may be, however, there is no characterization which is widely agreed upon. Nevertheless, how one characterizes the notion of a sortal is crucial: different characterizations will yield different results about which sortal, if any, is essential to a certain individual, at least if (SE) is not properly restricted. I will consider some ways of characterizing sortalhood, which however are not exhaustive (see also Feldman 1973 for a thorough discussion of some characterizations).

One way of characterizing sortal properties is to hold that sortal properties are those that provide an answer to *What is it?* questions. This characterization goes back at least to Aristotle's *Categories* (see Malink, this volume for more on this). Wiggins (2001: 8) seems to have something like this characterization in mind (cf. Grandy and Freund 2020; Feldman 1973: 269). But this criterion has at least one problem. Answers to *What is it?* questions may be provided by properties such as *kitten*, or *child*. But clearly one cannot hold that being a kitten is essential to a certain cat, since this would amount to holding that when the kitten grows up, it will be a different individual.



A second possible characterization is the mereological one (Feldman 1973: 273 and ff.). Roughly, a property is a sortal if and only if the property is not instantiated by proper parts of an object  $x$ , if the property is instantiated by  $x$ . This criterion should strike anyone as inadequate since there are clear counterexamples. Consider a subatomic particle which has other subatomic particles as proper parts. For instance, a proton which is composed by three quarks. If the mereological characterization is correct, then *being a subatomic particle* wouldn't count as a sortal. But this seems implausible. Furthermore, coupled with (SE), this characterization seems even more implausible. For one can reasonably hold that a particular subatomic particle, say a neutron, is not essentially a neutron. As a matter of fact, the phenomenon of beta minus decay consists in the transformation of a neutron into a proton together with an electron and an antineutrino (Khalidi 2013: 24, fn. 14). Since a neutron actually can turn into a proton, *a fortiori* a neutron could have been a proton. However, it seems plausible to hold that, while a neutron could have been a different kind of subatomic particle, it couldn't have been something different from a subatomic particle. That is, while a neutron is not essentially a neutron, a neutron is essentially a subatomic particle. But the mereological characterization of sortalhood does not allow this result.

A third way of characterizing sortalhood is by means of the notion of counting (Strawson 1959: 168; Wallace 1965: 9; Wiggins 1967: 1). According to this characterization, a property is a sortal just in case it provides a "criterion for counting" the entities that fall under that sortal (Wallace 1965: 9). The gist of the idea is that asking how many  $F$ s there are makes sense if and only if ' $F$ ' stands for a sortal property (see Feldman 1973 for different ways of cashing out this idea). Thus, since as you enter the seminar room on your first day of class, it makes sense to ask how many students there are, then *being a student* counts as a sortal property. Clearly though, if one

holds (SE) together with this extremely liberal characterization of a sortal property, then one should provide a way to differentiate those sortals that are essential from those that aren't, for properties like *being a student* cannot seriously be taken as essential.

The latter characterization is intertwined with the idea that sortals provide principles of individuation or criteria of identity (Mackie 2006: 120). Roughly, a criterion of identity is one that allows us to say if a certain individual  $x$  who belongs to sortal  $F$  is numerically identical to an individual  $y$  belonging to the same  $F$  (Lowe 2007: 515). Although the view that sortals are necessary to provide criteria of identity has been challenged (Ayers 1974), it seems plausible to hold that if sortals are supposed to give criteria for counting, they must provide criteria of identity. After all, how could you say how many cats are in the house if you cannot say whether the cat that was in the bedroom is the same as the one that is now in the kitchen? As Mackie (2006: 121) notes characterizing sortals as those properties that provide principles of individuation yields the result that, say, *being a red thing* is not a sortal while *being a human being* is (see Geach 1980: 63-64). Still, it seems that one could fall under different sortals if these provide the same criteria of identity (Lowe 2007). For instance, a particular cat falls under the sortal *being a cat* and *being a feline*. But then, if (SE) is true, which sortal – among those under which it actually falls – is essential to an individual?

It seems evident that no matter which characterization of sortalhood one chooses, problems arise when (SE) comes into the picture. The friend of (SE) here has two moves, which do not exclude each other, at her disposal: either to find a characterization of sortal property that does not yield implausible results when coupled with (SE), or to restrict (SE) in a plausible way. The latter move seems to be the most palatable. After all, there seems to be no reason to hold an

unrestricted version of (SE), that is, a thesis that holds that any sortal to which an individual belongs is essential to it. But which are the sortals that are essential to a certain individual?

A first try consists in distinguishing between *substance* and *phase* sortals. Phase sortals, viz., sortals to which an individual belongs only for a certain time of their existence, are sortals such as *being a kitten* or *being a child*. Substance sortals, on the other hand, are sortals to which an individual belongs for the whole duration of its existence. Using Mackie (2006: 121)'s slogan, for any substance sortal *F*: “once an *F*, always an *F*”.

Still, it should be clear that, although necessary, being a substance sortal is not sufficient for being an essential sortal. For there is no implication between the fact that an individual *x* was, is, and always will be an *F* and the fact that necessarily, if *x* exists, *x* falls under *F*. For instance, even if *being a human being* is a substance sortal of Socrates, this would rule out only Kafkian scenarios where Socrates is a human in 401 BCE and a gadfly (not in the metaphorical use of Plato) in 400 BCE, but not a scenario in which Socrates, at some other possible world, has been for the whole of his life a gadfly (Mackie 2006: 122). So, an essential sortal must meet some further condition (or conditions) that, together with being a substance sortal, jointly suffices for being an essential sortal.

David Wiggins argues that being an ultimate (or fundamental) sortal provides this further condition. According to Wiggins, ultimate or fundamental sortals are the most general sortals that correspond to a criterion of identity (cf. Mackie 2006: 132) who uses “principle of individuation” and “criterion of identity” interchangeably). For instance, *being a human being* is, for Wiggins, an instance of an ultimate sortal (Roca Royes 2011: 70), and thus, Mr. Samsa is essentially a human being. Wiggins' restriction of (SE) to ultimate sortals allows one to solve

puzzling cases such as the one presented above of a cat that falls under the sortal *being a cat* and *being a feline*. Although both these sortals provide the same criterion of identity, only one can wear the badge of ultimate sortal, namely *being feline*.

One question remains to be answered: why should one hold that certain sortals are essential to individuals? Both Brody (1980) and Wiggins (1980; 2001) provide some reason to hold (SE). Roughly, Brody's particular theory of counterfactual possibilities allows him to infer that substance sortals are essential sortals. Brody's proposal, in short, is to understand counterfactual possibilities in term of possible futures and possible pasts. Possible futures and pasts, in Brody's model, overlap (at some time) the actual life of an object. Since an individual who falls under a substance sortal at some time of its life, falls under it at all times of its life, it follows from the fact that possible futures and pasts overlap the actual life of the individual, that the individual will fall under that sortal in every possible future or past. Therefore, according to Brody, substance sortals are essential but this is in virtue of the model of counterfactuals possibilities that he endorses (Brody 1980: 123).

In the case of Wiggins, the heavy lifting is done by the notion of a criterion of identity. Wiggins (1980: 122)<sup>v</sup> explicitly holds that an individual could not have a different principle of individuation (criterion of identity) from its actual one. Mackie (2006: 131) calls this principle "Essentiality of a Principle of Individuation". Since Socrates' ultimate sortal is *being human*, being human determines his actual criterion of identity. At any other world  $w$ , where Socrates exists, Socrates has this same criterion of identity. But then Socrates couldn't fall under a different sortal since, e.g., the sortal *being a gadfly* provides a different criterion of identity that is incompatible with the one provided by *being human* (cf. Lowe 2007 who holds a similar view).

As already mentioned, there seems to be a widely shared endorsement of (SE), at least among those philosophers with essentialist sympathies. Indeed, few have argued against (SE), besides Mackie (2006: chs. 7-8), who was cited above. Examples of arguments against (SE) can be found in Wetzell (2000) and more recently in Grandjean (2022). But despite this wide consensus, it is not clear what would be lost if one were to reject (SE). For one, Forbes (2017: 886) argues that a rejection of (SE) entails a commitment to bare particulars, viz. propertyless substrata which can instantiate any property whatsoever. More precisely, Forbes points out that if (SE) were false, then that Socrates could be a gadfly (in a non-metaphorical sense) would be true. But this, according to him, does not represent a genuine possibility for Socrates. For Socrates to be a gadfly one should be able to conceive two different states of affairs in which one and the same thing, i.e., Socrates, is a human being and a gadfly respectively (Forbes: *ibid.*). But to make sense of this scenario, one has to commit to the bare particulars picture of objects. Clearly, determining whether bare particulars are themselves something to be avoided is beyond the scope of this chapter, but those who are not sympathetic to (SE) should be aware of the possible consequences of rejecting it.

Arguably, another advantage of (SE) is that it provides solutions to puzzles of material constitution such as the puzzle of Dion and Theon. To illustrate this well-known puzzle (see Scarpati, this volume for more on this), suppose that a man, Dion, has a proper part called “Theon” which coincides with Dion’s body minus his left leg. At a certain moment, Dion’s left leg is amputated. Apparently, now we have two distinct objects which are spatio-temporally coincident and constituted of the same matter. But this seems impossible. So, which one went out of existence? Burke (1994) argues that (SE) provides a straightforward and appealing answer: it is Theon who goes out of existence when Dion’s leg is amputated. By (SE), if

something is a person, it is essentially so. But this means that if something is not a person, it is essentially not a person too. Before the amputation of Dion's leg, Theon wasn't a person and essentially so. After the amputation, Dion's body minus the left leg is not numerically distinct from Theon even though it is qualitatively identical and spatiotemporally continuous with Theon, since Dion's body minus his left leg is now a person (Burke 1994: 134). Thus, rejecting (SE) could deprive one of some alleged solutions to material constitution's puzzles.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed various takes on what may be essential to individuals. First, I discussed the thesis that individual essences are essential to individuals and I presented Mackie's Indiscernibility Argument which makes a serious case for individual essences. Mackie herself rejects individual essences and holds that to resist the contradiction engendered by the argument, one has to commit to bare identities. However, despite Mackie's claim that attempts to find plausible candidates for individual essences are destined to fail, further work may potentially show that there are indeed plausible candidates to play this role. Second, I discussed the thesis known as Sortal Essentialism (SE). As already mentioned, (SE) is, by and large, regarded as a plausible thesis and few people have attacked it. Nevertheless, further work is needed to support the thesis, as its intuitive plausibility does not constitute a good enough reason to endorse it.

#### **Further Readings**

Forbes' *The Metaphysics of Modality* is an excellent starting point for reading about the issues discussed in this chapter. Although complex, the book is accessible as it provides the reader

with all the philosophical tools needed. The printed copy is unfortunately out of press, but Professor Forbes kindly shares a free .pdf of the book on his website (<https://spot.colorado.edu/~forbesg/metmodpage.html>).

It goes without saying that anyone interested in the topic treated in this chapter will find plenty of ideas in Penelope Mackie's works. Her excellent, clear and accessible, book *How Things Might Have Been* expands on many of her previous works and is highly recommended. The "Transworld Identity" entry of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which she co-wrote with Mark Jago, contains many useful references.

### **Related Topics**

Correia, Fabrice, "Non-Modal Conceptions of Essence"

Brigandt, Ingo, "Biological Species"

Malink, Marko, "Essence: Ancient"

Passinsky, Asya, "Artifacts, Artworks, and Social Objects"

Robertson Ishii, Teresa, "Origin Essentialism"

Scarpati, Maria, "Identity, Persistence, and Individuation"

Tahko, Tuomas, "Natural Kind Essentialism"

Torza, Alessandro, "Modal Conceptions of Essence"

### **References**

- Adams, R. M. (1979). Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 76(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025812>

Adams, R. M. (1981). Actualism and thisness. *Synthese*, 49(1), 3–41.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01063914>

Ayers, M. R. (1974). Individuals Without Sortals. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 4(1), 113–148.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1974.10716925>

Baker, L. R. (2007). *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism*. Cambridge University Press.

Bennett, J. (2002). *Events and Their Names* (Repr). Clarendon Pr.

Bird, A., & Tobin, E. (2022). Natural Kinds. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/natural-kinds/>

Bottani, A., Carrara, M., & Giaretta, P. (Eds.). (2002). *Individuals, Essence, and Identity: Themes of Analytic Metaphysics*. Kluwer Academic.

Brody, B. A. (2014). *Identity and Essence*. Princeton University Press.

Burke, M. B. (1994). Dion and theon: An essentialist solution to an ancient puzzle. *Journal of Philosophy*, 91(3), 129–139.

Chisholm, R. M. (1967). Identity through Possible Worlds: Some Questions. *Noûs*, 1(1), 1.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2214708>

Cowling, S. (2022). Haecceitism. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Cross, R. (2022). Medieval Theories of Haecceity. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Dasgupta, S. (2009). Individuals: An essay in revisionary metaphysics. *Philosophical Studies*, 145(1), 35–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9390-x>

Della Rocca, M. (1996). Essentialism: Part 1. *Philosophical Books*, 37(1), 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0149.1996.tb02508.x>

Denby, D. (2014). Essence and Intrinsicity. In R. M. Francescotti (Ed.), *Companion to Intrinsic Properties*. DE GRUYTER. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110292596.87>



- Diekemper, J. (2015). The Ontology of Thisness. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 90(1), 49–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12010>
- Feldman, F. (1973). Sortal Predicates. *Noûs*, 7(3), 268. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214351>
- Fine, K. (2020). Comments on Kathrin Koslicki's "Essence and Identity." In K. Fine, *Metaphysics, Meaning, and Modality* (pp. 429–434). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199652624.003.0026>
- Forbes, G. (1985). *The Metaphysics of Modality*. Clarendon Press.
- Forbes, G. (2002). Origins and Identities. In A. Bottani, M. Carrara, & P. Giaretta (Eds.), *Individuals, Essence, and Identity: Themes of Analytic Metaphysics* (pp. 319–340). Kluwer Academic.
- Forbes, G. (2017). Essentialism. In B. Hale, C. Wright, & A. Miller (Eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (pp. 881–901). Wiley.
- Geach, P. T. (1980). *Reference and Generality* (3d ed). Cornell University Press.
- Grandjean, V. (2022). The Bare Past. *Philosophia*, 50(5), 2523–2550.
- Grandy, R. E., & Freund, M. A. (2021). Sortals. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/sortals/>
- Hawley, K., & Bird, A. (2011). What are Natural Kinds? *Philosophical Perspectives*, 25(1), 205–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2011.00212.x>
- Khalidi, M. A. (2013). *Natural Categories and Human Kinds Classification in the Natural and Social Sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Koslicki, K. (2008). Natural Kinds and Natural Kind Terms. *Philosophy Compass*, 3(4), 789–802.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00157.x>
- Koslicki, K. (2018). *Form, Matter, Substance*. Oxford University Press.

- Koslicki, K. (2020). Essence and Identity. In K. Koslicki, *Metaphysics, Meaning, and Modality* (pp. 113–140). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199652624.003.0007>
- Lowe, E. J. (2007). Sortals and the Individuation of Objects. *Mind & Language*, 22(5), 514–533.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2007.00318.x>
- Lowe, E. J. (2009). *More kinds of being: A further study of individuation, identity, and the logic of sortal terms* (2nd ed). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Mackie, P. (1987). Essence, Origin and Bare Identity. *Mind*, XCVI(382), 173–201.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/XCVI.382.173>
- Mackie, P. (1989). Identity and Extrinsicness: Reply to Garrett. *Mind*, XCVIII(389), 105–117.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/XCVIII.389.105>
- Mackie, P. (1994). Sortal Concepts and Essential Properties. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 44(176), 311. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2219612>
- Mackie, P. (2006). *How things might have been: Individuals, kinds, and essential properties*. Clarendon Press ; Published in the United States by Oxford University Press.
- Mackie, P., & Jago, M. (2022). Transworld Identity. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-transworld/>
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons* (Issue 2, pp. 311–327). Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, A. (1974). *The Nature of Necessity*. Clarendon Press.
- Plantinga, A. (1976). Actualism and possible worlds. *Theoria*, 42(1–3), 139–160.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.1976.tb00681.x>
- Robertson Ishii, T., & Atkins, P. (2022). Essential vs. Accidental Properties. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/essential-accidental>

- Roca-Royes, S. (2011). Essential Properties and Individual Essences. *Philosophy Compass*, 6(1), 65–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2010.00364.x>
- Rosenkrantz, G. S. (1993). *Haecceity: An Ontological Essay*. Springer.
- Strawson, P. F. (1959). *Individuals* (Reprinted, transferred to digital printing). Routledge.
- Wallace, J. R. (1965). Sortal Predicates and Quantification. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 62(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2023313>
- Wetzel, L. (2000). Is socrates essentially a man? *Philosophical Studies*, 98(2), 203–220.
- Wiggins, D. (1967). *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity*. Blackwell.
- Wiggins, D. (1980). *Sameness and Substance*. Harvard University Press.
- Wiggins, D. (2001). *Sameness and Substance Renewed*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wildman, N. (2013). Modality, Sparsity, and Essence. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 63(253), 760–782. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.12059>

---

<sup>i</sup> This chapter is dedicated to Penelope Mackie who sadly passed away in December 2022. Although I never met Professor Mackie in person, I am deeply indebted to her. Her contributions, especially those on free will and the metaphysics of modality, have had a huge influence on my own research and interests. I will continue to be inspired by the clarity and depth of Professor Mackie’s writings, which I take as paradigms of excellent philosophy. I would also like to acknowledge the help I received from the editors of this volume, Kathrin Koslicki and Mike Raven, and from Vincent Grandjean, Camille Neidhardt, and Maria Scarpati.

<sup>ii</sup> Following Lowe (2009), if a certain object is, say, a cat, I use the plural of “cat” in italics to refer to the kind to which that object belongs.

<sup>iii</sup> Mackie (2006: 26) states that the two lives must be specified in an “owner independent” way. That is, there cannot be any specification of one of the two lives that implies who is the “owner” of that life. For more on this see Mackie (2006: Ch. 2, fn. 15).

<sup>iv</sup> Sometimes this thesis is labelled “Kind Essentialism”. Using the term “sortal” instead of “kind” allows a sharp contrast with the distinct thesis of Natural Kind Essentialism.

<sup>v</sup> Interestingly, in his *Sameness and Substance Renewed* there is no mention of such a principle.