

Natural Properties Do Not Support Essentialism in Counterpart Theory: A Reflection on Buras's Proposal

Cristina Nencha

University of Turin

Abstract

David Lewis may be regarded as an antiessentialist. The reason is that he is said to believe that individuals do not have essential properties independent of the ways they are represented. According to him, indeed, the properties that are determined to be essential to individuals are a matter of which similarity relations among individuals are salient, and salience, in turn, is a contextual matter also determined to some extent by the ways individuals are represented.

Todd Buras argues that the acknowledgment of natural properties in counterpart theoretic ontology affects Lewis's theory with regard to essentialism. Buras's reasoning is appealing. He claims that, since natural properties determine the existence of similarity relations among individuals that are salient independent of context, Lewis can no longer be claimed to be an antiessentialist.

The aim of this paper is to argue, against Buras, that if counterpart theory was antiessentialist before natural properties were taken into account, then it remains so afterwards.

Keywords: David Lewis, Counterpart Theory, Essentialism, Natural Properties, Todd Buras.

1. Introduction

David Lewis may be regarded as an antiessentialist, for it is said that, according to him, individuals do not have real essential properties, that is they do not have essential properties independent of the ways they are represented—namely, conceived or described. This is the case because: (a) the properties that are determined as essential to individuals are a matter of which relevant counterparts they have, (b) the relevant counterparts that individuals have are a matter of which similarity relations are salient, and (c) salience is a contextual matter also determined to some extent by the way individuals are represented.

In his *New Work for a Theory of Universals*, Lewis defends the view that there are both abundant and sparse properties.¹ Among the sparse properties there is a group of natural properties that marks out the genuine qualitative similarities and differences between individuals.²

Todd Buras, in his *Counterpart Theory, Natural Properties and Essentialism*, argues that, if Lewis accepts both counterpart theory and natural properties, he can no longer be classified as an antiessentialist. This is because the natural properties determine the existence of similarity relations among individuals that are salient, and therefore relevant, independent of the ways those individuals are conceived or described. If such similarity relations are obtained, Buras claims, individuals have real essential properties.

The aim of this paper is to argue, against Buras, that the implications of counterpart theory for essentialism are not altered by the acknowledgement of natural properties. If counterpart theory was antiessentialist without natural properties, then it remains so after natural properties are taken into account.

2. David Lewis's Antiessentialism

There are different characterizations of essentialism.

One might say that essentialism is the doctrine holding that at least some individuals have both essential and accidental attributes. According to this characterization, for instance, anyone who believes that, for every individual *a*, all of *a*'s attributes are essential to it, is defined as an antiessentialist.

Alternatively, one might characterize essentialism as the thesis that at least some individuals have some essential properties, so that someone who was an antiessentialist by the earlier criterion would now count as an essentialist.

One might also want to distinguish between trivial and nontrivial essential properties. Trivial essential properties are properties such as being either *P* or non-*P*, for any property *P*.³ Then, she might take essentialism to be the doctrine that at least some individuals have some nontrivial essential attributes. Thus, anyone who believes that individuals have only trivial essential attributes is regarded as an antiessentialist.

I neither need to say that this exposition is exhaustive nor to choose which kind of characterization is the best definition of essentialism. However, for the sake of argument, let us take essentialism as the latter thesis, which argues that some individuals have at least some nontrivial essential attributes. So far, then, commitment to essentialism is simply a matter of being prepared to say, without

¹Abundant properties are highly disjunctive properties, therefore, they are indiscriminating. By contrast, sparse properties are highly specific and characterize things completely and without redundancy. See Lewis 1983: 346-47; 1986: 59-61.

²Throughout this paper I will use "lazy" talk about properties. From Lewis's perspective, indeed, properties cannot explain anything. He is a class nominalist; he identifies properties with classes of particulars, and belonging to one class is a primitive fact that cannot be explained further.

³In the example, the triviality of the property of being *P* or non-*P* relies on the fact that this property belongs to all things. For attempts to establish which other properties count as trivial essential, see Marcus 1967 and Della Rocca 1996.

further explanation or characterization, that an individual has nontrivial essential properties. Nothing has been said about what is required for a property to be an essential property. Let us call this conception of essentialism “realistic-neutral essentialism”.

There is a further requirement for a stronger, metaphysically more robust conception of essentialism.⁴ Given an individual *a* and an attribute *P*, “*a*’s being essentially *P*” is a matter independent of the ways in which we conceive or describe *a*. Independently of the ways an individual is represented, there is a fact of the matter about its being essentially something. Let us call this stronger conception of essentialism “realist essentialism”. According to realist essentialism, individuals have thus—nontrivial—real essential properties.

There is thus another way to be antiessentialist, that is to deny that individuals have real essential properties. It is in exactly this sense that David Lewis ought to be counted as an antiessentialist. Lewis is thus characterized as an antiessentialist, precisely when people have in mind realist essentialism.

Let us look at the reason for this.

As far as essentialism is concerned, we are interested in *de re* modality.⁵ From Lewis’s perspective, *de re* modality is explained through counterparts (Lewis 1968; 1986).

Let us consider sentence type 1:⁶

1. *a* is essentially human.

According to counterpart theory, 1 is true if and only if—hereafter, iff—every relevant counterpart of *a* is human.

The general form of the truth-conditions for an essentialist sentence type is thus incomplete: it needs to be completed with the input of a relevant counterpart relation.⁷

A counterpart relation between two individuals is any relation of similarity between them; counterparts of *a* are simply any things that are similar in any respect and to any degree to *a*. There is then the further question of which counterparts of *a* are relevant; *b* is a relevant counterpart of *a* iff *b* is similar enough to *a* under relevant respects.

It is a matter of context which respects of similarity are salient and which grades of similarity are enough under such respects. The relevant counterparts of *a* are therefore determined to a large extent by the contexts in which 1 is produced and evaluated.

⁴ This further condition is generally attributed to Quine. See Quine 1953a; 1953b.

⁵ For Lewis, questions of essentialism are at one with questions of necessity *de re*. This is in common with many philosophers—like Quine, Kripke, and Marcus—but not with most philosophers after Kit Fine who would distinguish the two. See Fine 1994.

⁶ I use the distinction type-token in order to underline the fact that, according to counterpart theory, and as will be shown, the logical form of an essentialist sentence is incomplete. This completion happens only at the level of specific tokens of that sentence.

⁷ For instance, a token of 1 might be true iff *a*, *b* and *c* are human, while a different token of the same sentence type might be true iff *a* and *d* are human. This is because different tokens of the same essentialist sentence type can evoke different relevant counterparts: in the former case *a*, *b* and *c* are the relevant counterparts of *a*, while in the second case *a* and *d* are *a*’s relevant counterparts.

Counterpart theory thus gives complete truth-conditions only for specific tokens of 1. In other words, in order to have truth-values for essentialist claims about *a*, we need to know which of *a*'s counterparts are relevant, and this is determined for the greater part by the contexts in which the essentialist claims are uttered.

According to Lewis, the interests and intentions of a speaker and an audience, background information, the standards of precision, the presuppositions, spatiotemporal location of utterances, norms of charitable interpretation, and objective salience are among the contextual factors that help to select the relevant counterparts of individuals (Lewis 1979; 1980). What helps to select the counterparts of individuals that are relevant in a particular context, among other factors, are thus also the ways that those individuals are conceived or described.

Different tokens of the same essentialist sentence type about *a* might be produced and evaluated in different contexts and they can thus evoke different relevant counterparts according to those different contexts. Some tokens of the given sentence type might thus be true, and some others might be false. The properties that are determined as essential to an individual might therefore change from one context to another and, sometimes, all that changes from one context to another is our way of representing that individual.

For instance, there are at least two respects of similarity that we might take into account as relevant when we evaluate 1. We might take personhood as a relevant respect of similarity; alternatively, we might count bodyhood as a relevant respect of similarity. Which of these is relevant is a contextual matter. If the context in which the claim is produced assigns great weight to the former respect of similarity, then we see that *a*'s relevant counterparts are persons, since only persons can resemble another person with respect to personhood enough to be the relevant counterparts. Otherwise, if the context places great stress on the latter respect of similarity, we find as *a*'s relevant counterparts its bodily counterparts (Lewis 1971: 208). In the first context of utterance, the truth-conditions of 1 are completed by the input of personhood counterparts, while in the second context of utterance they are completed with regard to a different token of 1 by the input of bodyhood counterparts. According to the latter context, but not according to the former, it therefore might be false that *a* is essentially human. What changes from the first context to the second might be the way *a* is conceived or described. For instance, the first context might be one in which we conceive or describe *a* as "that person", while the second context might be one in which we represent *a* as "that thing". The token of 1 uttered in the first context is therefore true, while the token uttered in the second context might be false, and this is so because the two different tokens evoke different relevant counterparts according to different contextual ways of representing *a*. Thus, it turns out that different properties might be determined as essential to *a* according to different contexts and, specifically, according to different ways of representing *a*.

To sum up, according to Lewis essentialist sentences types do not have constant truth-values. This is because different tokens of the same sentence type about *a* might have different truth-values. Indeed, they might be produced and evaluated in different contexts and thus evoke different relevant counterparts of *a*. Some tokens of the given sentence type might thus be true, and some others might be false.

Individuals might therefore have different *de re* modal attributes according to different contexts. What may change from one context to another is, among other

features, the ways in which they are represented. Hence, the properties that are determined to be essential to individuals are sometimes influenced by our ways of conceiving or describing those individuals. Accordingly, in my classification, Lewis ought to be seen as rejecting realist essentialism—even though he accepts realistic-neutral essentialism.⁸

3. Buras's Proposal

In *New Work for a Theory of Universals*, Lewis defends the view that there are both abundant and sparse properties. Among the sparse properties there is a group of natural properties that marks out the genuine qualitative similarities and differences in things. According to Lewis, an adequate theory of properties has to recognize an objective difference between natural and unnatural properties; moreover, preferably, this difference has to admit degrees, so that the most natural properties are the perfectly natural properties (Lewis 1983: 346, 347). Natural properties characterize things completely and without redundancy; they carve out the joints of nature and it is the business of physics to discover these natural properties (Lewis 1983: 365, 366).⁹

From Buras's perspective, in admitting natural properties Lewis accepts that relations of overall similarity obtain among individuals, independent of the ways

⁸ Following the suggestion of an anonymous referee, I would like to specify one point. There is some important literature about counterpart theory and mereological essentialism—that is, the controversial thesis that fusions have their parts essentially. One of the most discussed questions in this debate is whether or not counterpart theory, when conjoined with composition as identity, entails mereological essentialism. For opposing answers to this question see Merricks 1999 and Borghini 2005. However, since this paper is not concerned with composition as identity, I will leave this matter untouched. In general, I take mereological essentialism to be a special case of the general essentialist thesis, in which we focus our attention on a particular attribute that individuals may or may not have essentially, that is the attribute of being composed of their actual parts. As for the other kinds of attributes, I take Lewis's stand to be the same: under some counterpart relations individuals have essentially the parts they actually have, while under some other counterpart relations this is not the case. In Lewis's words: "I myself think that some counterpart relations validate Mereological Essentialism and other equally legitimate counterpart relations do not" (Lewis 2001: 608). At any rate, for the purposes of this paper it does not matter which kinds of attributes individuals have or do not have essentially. Rather, what counts is whether or not, in Lewis's view, the acknowledgment of natural properties can make "*a*'s being essentially *P*" a matter independent of the ways in which *a* is represented, quite regardless of which kind of attribute *P* is.

⁹ It is well known that there are many unsolved questions about how naturalness should be understood in Lewis's metaphysics. They concern, among other things, the logical status of the notion of the natural in Lewis's metaphysics—for a survey, see Taylor 1993; how Lewis accounts for degrees of naturalness—see for instance Sider 1995 and Nolan 2005; which the bearers of natural properties are—for a non-standard reading of this matter see Borghini & Lando 2011—and so on. In this paper I am not taking issue with any of the problems that have been raised about the Lewisian characterization of naturalness, however. For the purposes of Buras's proposal, and thus for the aims of this paper, the details of naturalness do not matter, as long as some properties are classified as natural properties and there is a scale of degrees of naturalness.

those individuals are conceived or described. His first move in that direction is to define overall perfect natural similarity as follows:

2. a is overall perfectly naturally similar to $b =_{df}$ a shares at least one of b 's perfectly natural properties, and there is no individual c , distinct from a and b , such that c shares at least one of b 's perfectly natural properties, and c shares more perfectly natural properties with b than a .

He further claims that whether any two individuals are overall perfectly naturally similar or not is determined independently of the contexts and, mainly, independently of the ways in which those individuals are represented. Indeed, determining which properties are perfectly natural and which perfectly natural properties individuals have does not depend on contexts and, more specifically, it does not depend on our ways of conceiving or describing individuals.

Buras's crucial move then is to suggest that, if relations of similarity obtain among individuals independently of context and, thus, independently of our ways of representing those individuals, then individuals have real essential properties; that is, they have essential properties independent of the way they are conceived or described. This is because the overall perfect natural similarity determines the maximally natural counterparts—hereafter, MN counterparts—of the individuals: b is a MN counterpart of a iff b , in its own world, is overall perfectly naturally similar to a . The MN counterparts of a are therefore counterparts of a determined by virtue of similarity relations to a which hold independent of context and, specifically, independent of how a is represented.

If there are MN counterparts of individuals, then, according to Buras, individuals have real essential properties:

3. The real essential properties of $a =_{df}$ all and only the properties shared by all of a 's MN counterparts.

Indeed, the essentiality of the properties a shares with all of its MN counterparts is independent of the ways that a is represented.¹⁰

¹⁰ The reading of Buras's proposal that I pursue in the rest of this paper is as follows: given that counterpart theory must accept the existence of similarity relations that hold independently of the ways individuals are represented, such a theory must also accept that individuals have real essential properties. The reason for such a conclusion is that the essential properties of individuals are determined by virtue of such similarity relations. Therefore—to anticipate an argument provided in Section 5—a part of my strategy to rebut Buras's argument is to argue that, since according to Lewis's definition, a 's essential properties are determined by the relevant counterparts of a , Buras's proposal would have success only in the case in which, in every context, a 's MN counterparts were the relevant ones—given that only MN counterparts are determined by virtue of that kind of similarity relations—which is not the case. A referee pointed out that there might be another way to read Buras's proposal. According to this reading, Buras's definition 3 should be read as a stipulation. Buras's crucial move in order to show that counterpart theory is committed to realistic essentialism is thus to stipulate, by definition 3, that real essential properties are determined by MN counterparts. If this reading is right, then there would be no need to show that MN counterparts are not the relevant ones in every context, since they are, by stipulation, the ones that determine the essential properties. Moreover, there would be a clear sense in which counterpart theory was committed to realistic essentialism. Indeed, as will

Buras therefore claims that counterpart theory with natural properties commits one to realist essentialism (Buras 2006: 32-37).¹¹

4. Sharing Properties in Lewis's View

The first point that I would like to make in reaction to Buras's argument is that from Lewis's perspective, almost all similarity relations among individuals obtain independently of the ways those individuals are conceived or described. Indeed, similarity is defined in terms of properties sharing. The fact that two individuals have some properties in common, that they are similar in some way, does not depend, in general, on our ways of conceiving or describing them. To be sure, however, in some special cases the fact that two individuals share a property does depend on how they are represented. For instance, two individuals can be similar because they both have the property of being thought of by me or of being imagined by me and so on. However, for the most part, the sharing of properties is independent of how the individuals are represented. Whether or not *a* is similar to *b* is therefore usually independent of our ways of conceiving or describing *a* and *b*.

It should thus be said that, when they are shared, natural properties are not only supposed to give rise to similarity relations that hold independent of the ways individuals are represented, because this is true of almost any similarity relation. Rather, natural properties are supposed to mark out similarity relations between individuals that are metaphysically privileged, since they are similarities by virtue of shared fundamental properties. That is, the salience of such similarity relations is absolute, meaning that it is not contextually determined and, mainly, it is not determined by our ways of representing individuals. Such similarity relations then determine the MN counterparts, namely the counterparts that are metaphysically salient.

I am in agreement with Buras as far as this account of Lewis's metaphysical commitments is concerned. Counterpart theory, with natural properties in its ontology, has to accept the existence of counterpart relations and, *a fortiori*, of similarity relations among individuals that are metaphysically salient.

be shown, it is true that the Lewisian recognizes that there are MN counterparts, and thus clearly accepts that some individuals have some real essential properties, as Buras defines them. If the reader prefers the latter interpretation of Buras's proposal, she can read the rest of this paper as an attempt to show that counterpart theorists would not be obliged to accept Buras's stipulation about real essential properties, according to which *a*'s essential properties are determined by *a*'s MN counterparts. Indeed, according to Lewis, by definition, *a*'s essential properties are determined by the relevant counterparts and it is not at all obvious that the MN counterparts are always the relevant ones. Moreover, to appeal to MN counterparts in the definition of what makes for essential properties—as will be argued in Section 5—would lead to unacceptable consequences from the Lewisian point of view. My conclusion would then be that Buras is not successful in showing that counterpart theory is committed to realistic essentialism, even according to the latter interpretation.

¹¹ Ghislain Guigon has advocated a similar conclusion. See Guigon 2014. The difference between the two approaches lies mainly in the arguments they employ in order to defend this conclusion. For instance, as Guigon himself notes, while Buras believes that shared perfectly natural properties are privileged respects of similarity, Guigon argues that the similarity of perfectly natural properties counts as well. At any rate, I think that many of the arguments in this paper might also apply to Guigon's proposal—especially my metaphysical objection in Section 7.

Where I disagree with Buras is in my rejecting the conditional proposition that he asserts—that is: if there are such similarity relations and counterparts, then individuals have real essential properties.

In my semantical objection to Buras, I will argue that MN counterparthood is not metaphysically determined as the salient kind of counterparthood for every token of a given essentialist sentence type. The truth-conditions for essentialist sentence types are thus still inconstant and influenced, sometimes, by considerations of how we represent individuals.

In my metaphysical objection to Buras, I will claim that MN counterparthood is not metaphysically salient for determining which properties deserve to be characterized as the essential properties of individuals. The essentiality of those properties is still explained by facts about representation.

5. Semantical Objection to Buras

Recall that, according to Lewis, the truth-conditions of an essentialist sentence type about *a* are inconstant because different tokens of the same type might have different truth-values, since they might be produced and evaluated in different contexts and thus evoke different relevant counterparts of *a* according to those different contexts. Therefore, the counterparts of *a* that are semantically salient—that is, those relevant for the characterization of the truth-conditions of the sentence type—are those relevant in the contexts in which tokens of that type are uttered. Sometimes, what determines the contextual relevance of some kind of counterparthood of *a* is precisely the ways that *a* is represented in the context at stake. The truth-conditions of essentialist sentence types about *a* are thus always sensitive to context and, sometimes, they are sensitive to the modes of representation of *a*.

What I want to argue is that the situation remains unchanged after natural properties are taken into account. Indeed, we should not take Buras's metaphysical narrative above, according to which the acknowledgment of natural properties implies the existence of metaphysically privileged similarity relations, to have any automatic semantic implications. That is to say, it is not at all obvious that such similarity relations are, in virtue of their metaphysical privilege, semantically salient in every context so as to institute the salient kind of counterparthood for every token of a given essentialist sentence type. Even though there are metaphysically relevant counterparts, the truth-conditions of essentialist sentence types are not susceptible to being completed by the input of these counterparts in every context, because such counterparts are not, invariably, the semantically salient cases in every context. They are semantically relevant only according to some contexts, such as when the scientific perspective is contextually relevant, so that some token of some essentialist sentence type is made true by fundamental similarities. They might also be semantically relevant in the contexts in which a speaker's intentions and thoughts are not determinate enough to select a counterpart relation, so that we let the world decide for them. However, they are not semantically relevant according to every context.

We should consider how Lewis's account of semantics fits with his general theory of interpretation. That general theory emphasizes the charity of truthfulness. The interpretation of a speaker on an occasion is—*ceteris paribus*—the better for making the speaker a truth-teller. According to Lewis, there is a rule of accom-

modation holding that “what you say makes itself true, if at all possible, by creating a context that selects the relevant features so as to make it true” (Lewis 1986: 251). This is also true in *de re* modal contexts. For instance, when Kripkeans make claims of essentiality of origins they speak truly in the context of their own speaking. “They make themselves right: their preaching constitutes a context in which *de re* modality is governed by a way of representing (as I think, by a counterpart relation) that requires match of origins” (Lewis 1986: 252). In that context, according to Lewis’s general theory of interpretation, we are thus bound to project backwards, as it were, the kind of counterparthood that must be selected in order to make their essentialist statements true.

If metaphysically salient counterparts were inevitably those selected, it would have massively uncharitable effects. Indeed, both Kripkean essentialist claims, and many other essentialist statements, do not seem to be made true by fundamental similarities. They would thus turn out to be false in the contexts of their own utterances, contrary to Lewis’s expectations. So for Lewis, given how the semantics fits with his broader theory of interpretation, there is no chance of accepting the inevitable semantic salience of those counterparts that are metaphysically salient.

We should therefore not take the existence of metaphysically relevant similarity relations to imply that the truth-conditions for a given essentialist sentence type are truth-conditions completed in every context by the input of counterparts whose relevance is independent of our ways of representing individuals. Even with the acknowledgment of natural properties, the truth-conditions for essentialist sentences types are still sensitive, sometimes, to considerations of how we conceive or describe individuals.

6. Buras’s Reply to the Semantical Objection

Buras anticipated a similar objection.

He admits that the context still determines whether *de re* modal claims are to be evaluated against natural or unnatural facts. He also admits that *de re* modal claims are about natural facts only in some contexts.

His point, however, is that we should not confuse metaphysics with semantics. From his perspective, an antiessentialist is not someone who believes in the inconstancy of *de re* modal statements, rather it is someone who believes that there are no *de re* modal facts, or facts of the matter about the essential properties of individuals.

Buras’s argument is supposed to show that counterpart theoretic ontology with natural properties is able to give rise to *de re* modal facts, even though *de re* modal claims are inconstant. In his opinion, he only needs to show that “one counterpart relation stands out from the crowd for the purposes of characterizing the modal properties of an object” (Buras 2006: 40), which will be sufficient and hold independently of the semantic matter regarding whether or not the MN counterparts are also semantically privileged in every context.

Buras thus takes the acknowledgment of natural properties to imply that, metaphysically speaking, the MN counterparts are privileged in determining which properties deserve to be characterized as essential properties of individuals. This holds, in Buras’s opinion, even though the MN counterparts are not semantically privileged in every context; even though they do not determine the truth-

values of every token of a given sentence type. According to Buras, this is what makes a theory a realistic essentialist theory.

Now, granted that Buras's account of Lewis's metaphysical commitments does not have any automatic semantic implications—that is, granted that the MN counterparts are not semantically relevant in every context—I shall go on to argue that it does not even have the further metaphysical implications that Buras takes it to have: the MN counterparts do not make for the existence of facts of the matter about individuals' essential properties.

7. Metaphysical Objection to Buras

Two claims constitute my metaphysical objection. Firstly, by virtue of the Lewisian principle of recombination, there cannot be any facts of the matter about individuals' essential properties. Secondly, this thesis is not altered by the acknowledgment of natural properties and, hence, of metaphysically salient counterparts of individuals.

From Lewis's perspective, metaphysics can only establish which properties an individual has and which of these are natural. Which of these properties deserves to be characterized as being held as a matter of *de re* necessity is then not a question that can be approached within metaphysics alone. Which kinds of factors select the property of an individual as one that it has essentially, for Lewis, is a question about which relevant counterparts are selected. Relevance is a contextual matter that, sometimes, depends on our ways of representing the individual. In other words, metaphysics cannot establish that a property of an individual is one that it has essentially, because this is intrinsically a contextual matter that depends, sometimes, on our ways of representing the individuals.

Contrary to what Buras claims, even though there are metaphysically relevant similarity relations, there is thus no room for facts of the matter about an individual's essential properties, because it is the business of the context to establish which properties are determined to be essential to individuals. This cannot be the business of metaphysics; there is no property of *a*—not even one shared by all the MN counterparts of *a*—that is metaphysically selected as one that *a* has as a matter of necessity *de re*.

With the above in mind, metaphysically speaking, there are no counterparts of *a*—not even the MN counterparts—that are privileged for determining which of *a*'s properties deserve to be characterized as essential properties, precisely because there are no properties metaphysically privileged to be characterized as essential properties.

With the acknowledgment of natural properties, all that metaphysics can do is to put counterpart relations on different levels: only some play a role in characterizing metaphysically relevant facts of resemblance. Afterwards, by definition, it is a task of the context to select the relevant counterparts that determine which properties an individual has as a matter of necessity *de re*.

The implications of counterpart theory for essentialism are not altered by the acknowledgement of natural properties; the existence of metaphysically privileged similarity relations does not change the fact that metaphysics, in principle, cannot establish which properties are determined to be essential to individuals. There are thus no counterparts that stand out from the crowd, metaphysically speaking, for determining which properties deserve to be characterized as essential properties of individuals. There are no *de re* modal facts.

In addition, if we went along with Buras, there would be *de re* modal facts, despite the inconstancy of the essentialist claims. However, as Beebee and MacBride note, “[...] what the inconstancy of modal language forces upon us is the recognition that the counterpart relation *is* indeterminate—otherwise the inconstancy of our language would betoken nothing but its failure to be rule-governed” (Beebee & MacBride 2015: 227).

The inconstancy of the truth-conditions for essentialist claims therefore mirrors the fact that there are no counterparts that metaphysically determine which properties deserve to be characterized as the essential properties of individuals; that is, the inconstancy of modal language reflects the fact that there are no *de re* modal facts. Thus, if we recognize the former, we should also recognize the latter, because they come together.

8. Conclusion

I have argued that, even though Buras is right in saying that counterpart theoretic ontology can provide metaphysically relevant relations of similarity, this is not sufficient for counterpart theory to accept that individuals have real essential properties.

I have provided two kinds of objections against Buras’s thesis.

The first was semantic in character. I have shown that the truth-conditions for essentialist sentences types are inconstant and influenced, sometimes, by considerations about how individuals are represented, even though natural properties are taken into account.

The second was metaphysical in character. I have argued that the acknowledgement of natural properties does not imply the existence of facts of the matter about individuals’ essential properties.

In conclusion, I think that counterpart theorists can continue denying that individuals have real essential properties, even if they accept natural properties. Contrary to what Buras claims, the acknowledgment of natural properties in counterpart theoretic ontology does not affect the theory with regard to realist essentialism. If counterpart theory was antiessentialist before natural properties were taken into account, it remains so afterwards.¹²

References

- Beebee, H. and MacBride, F. 2015, “De Re Modality, Essentialism, and Lewis’s Humeanism”, in Loewer, B. and J. Schaffer (eds.), *A Companion to Lewis*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 220-37.
- Borghini, A. 2005, “Counterpart Theory Vindicated: A Reply to Merricks”, *Dialectica*, 59, 67-73.

¹² I would like to thank John Divers and Giorgio Lando for their precious help in improving this paper. I am thankful to Alberto Voltolini for his useful comments and remarks. I am also very grateful to the members of the “Mind, Language and Cognition” curriculum of the FINO PhD program with whom I discussed an early draft of this paper. Finally, I would like to thank two anonymous referees from *Argumenta* for their helpful suggestions.

- Borghini, A. and Lando, G. 2011, "Natural Properties, Supervenience, and Mereology", *Humana.Mente*, 19, 79-104.
- Buras, T. 2006, "Counterpart Theory, Natural Properties and Essentialism", *Journal of Philosophy*, 103, 27-42.
- Della Rocca, M. 1996, "Recent Work in Essentialism, Parts 1 & 2", *Philosophical Books*, 37, 1-13 and 81-9.
- Fine, K. 1994, "Essence and Modality", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8, 1-16.
- Guigon, G. 2014, "Overall Similarity, Natural Properties, and Paraphrases", *Philosophical Studies*, 167, 387-99.
- Lewis, D. 1968, "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic", *Journal of Philosophy*, 65, 113-26.
- Lewis, D. 1971, "Counterparts of Persons and their Bodies", *Journal of Philosophy*, 68, 203-11.
- Lewis, D. 1979, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8, 339-59.
- Lewis, D. 1980, "Index, Context, and Content", in Kanger, S. and Öhman, S. (eds.), *Philosophy and Grammar*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 79-100.
- Lewis, D. 1983, "New Work for a Theory of Universals", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 343-77.
- Lewis, D. 1986, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lewis, D. 2001, "Truthmaking and Difference-Making", *Noûs*, 35, 602-15.
- Marcus, R.B. 1967, "Essentialism in Modal Logic", *Noûs*, 1, 91-96.
- Merricks, T. 1999, "Composition as Identity, Mereological Essentialism, and Counterpart Theory", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 77, 192-95.
- Nolan, D. 2005, *David Lewis*, Chesham: Acumen.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1953a, "Reference and Modality", in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1953, 139-59.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1953b, "Three Grades of Modal Involvement", in Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, New York: Random House, 1966, 158-76.
- Sider, S. 1995, "Sparseness, Immanence and Naturalness", *Noûs*, 29, 360-77.
- Taylor, B. 1993, "On Natural Properties in Metaphysics", *Mind*, 102, 81-100.