Explanatory Challenges and Neo-Aristotelian Essentialism
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§0 Introduction

A cloud of suspicion has surrounded essences for much of the past century. Quine considers essentialism an "unreasonable," excessive "metaphysical jungle" (1966: 174; 1953: 156). Believing there is no principled way to select essential from non-essential properties, Quine takes essences to reside in our ways of describing things, not in the way things are (1960: 199). Putnam sees those who appeal to essences as "relics," because access to essences would require, supposedly *per impossibile*, intellectual intuitions or a "god's eye point of view" (1981: 54; 1983: 209). Even in the post-Kripkean revival of metaphysics, Meghan Sullivan (2017) argues that the motivations for essentialism are suspect and that an alternative, relativist picture is to be preferred. But these suspicions have largely concerned issues of reference or parsimony. When suspicions turn epistemological they are mostly suggestive.

With this in mind, and in light of the neo-Aristotelian conception of essence gaining prominence[1], I will explicate an epistemic problem for essentialists. Assuming there are essence-facts, what relationship between essence-facts and essence-attitudes explains why those attitudes' correctness is not coincidental? This question is at the center of an epistemic challenge for essentialists. It is a debunking challenge—what I call *the explanatory challenge*. This challenge, as I formulate it, is distinctive for at least three reasons: (i) debunking challenges typically revolve around the domain in question containing abstract objects, or having evolutionary etiologies, neither of which is of central concern here[2], (ii) it targets neo-Aristotelian essentialism, and so not merely essentialism insofar as it is modally analyzable[3], and (iii) the challenge comes in three grades that have remained tacit in discussions of related debunking challenges. Although debunking challenges do not pose a problem unique to essentialism, they

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[1] For some examples of those endorsing this conception see, e.g., Fine (1994), Hale (2013), Inman (2018), Lowe (2008), Oderberg (2008), and Tahko (2022).

[2] On debunking challenges motivated by these concerns, see, e.g., Benacerraf (1973), Field (2005), Plantinga (1993), and Street (2006).

[3] Essences are occasionally mentioned in discussions of debunking arguments, but they are usually discussed as being relevant insofar as the debunking arguments target *de re* modal properties. See, e.g., Rea (2002: ch.4), Goldman (1992: ch.3), and Thomasson (2018).

have yet to be explicitly applied to essentialism in detail. I aim to redress this omission here.

First, I'll explain the explanatory challenge in general terms, elucidating its weak, moderate, and strong grades. I'll give particular attention to a species of the moderate grade, what I call *the deflationary challenge*. Then, I'll survey David Oderberg's (2007) and E.J. Lowe's (2008) epistemologies of essence—arguably two of the most prominent accounts from a neo-Aristotelian perspective.[4] I'll argue that their accounts fail the weak challenge and that this leaves them especially vulnerable to the moderate challenge, where this involves positive reason to think the essence-facts do not, in fact, play an explanatory role in forming one's essence-attitudes, and so presents them with an undercutting defeater.[5] Lastly, I'll propose that Amie Thomasson's deflationary account of identity-conditions might offer a deflationary version of the moderate challenge for essentialism so understood.

§1 Preliminaries: Essentialism & Particular Realism

The framework for essence here will be neo-Aristotelian, which has become a prominent conception of essence in current analytic metaphysics. For neo-Aristotelian essentialists, the essence of something x is *what it is to be x*—it is the "very identity of x" (Lowe 2008: 35). And although essences are typically taken to be primitive in some sense, they can be elucidated by *real definitions* (Fine 1995: 53). A real definition (often stated by the locution *what it is to be x is to be y*) has an object or entity as its *definiendum*[6]—not a term or phrase used to refer to an object or entity—and the *definiens* is a proposition or collection of propositions which are true in virtue of the essence of the definiendum.[7] The essence-*facts*, then, are the grounds for the truth of real definitions. Additionally, essence-facts are supposed to reflect reality's objective

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[4] Indeed, Casullo (2020) regards Lowe's account as "the most sustained attempt in the literature to develop an epistemology of essence" (593).

[5] Following Bergmann's (2005) characterization, I'm understanding undercutting defeaters as, roughly, reasons for believing one's ground or source of believing p is not indicative of the truth of p—and so an undercutting defeater is a reason for no longer believing p, not necessarily a reason for thinking p false.

[6] One could take a wide interpretation of 'entity'—it might include e.g., material objects, persons, properties, sets, numbers, propositions (see Lowe's conception of *entity*, e.g., Lowe 2006, 7; 2008, 35). So formulations of real definitions may vary (e.g., predicables could have real definitions, rendered as *what it is to φ is to ψ*).

[7] On real definitions, see, e.g., Fine (1994: 13-14); Inman (2019: 17-29); Lowe (2012); and Oderberg (2011: 87-94).

categorical structure (e.g., Oderberg 2007: 18-20, Lowe 2008: 35, Inman 2019: 21), and so obtain independently of our contingent conceptual or linguistic practices.[8] Lastly, neo-Aristotelians understand essence-facts as unanalyzable in terms of *de re* modal facts and are instead thought of as the metaphysical grounds thereof (e.g., Fine 1994). So *x's* being essentially φ will not be *reducible* to what is necessarily true of *x*, even if, by being essentially true of *x*, it is, *ipso facto*, necessarily true of *x* (e.g., Fine 1994; Lowe 2012; Tahko 2018).[9] What is important is that essences serve as the *ground* for metaphysically necessary truths, not as their *analysanda*, and so an epistemology of essence need not straightforwardly coincide with an epistemology of modality on this picture. I'll interpret essences in this way throughout, and I'll use the label 'essentialism' to denote the position endorsing it.

Lastly, I'll focus on the challenge for what I'll call *particular essence realism*. Particular essence realism is a realism that endorses specific essence claims rather than merely general essence claims (e.g., 'knowledge is essentially factive' vs 'there are essences' or 'essences are principles of unity'). The *general* features of essences—whether they exist and what characterizes them generally—are one thing. But what the *particular* essence-facts are—what it is to be some particular *x*—is another. Suppose, for instance, you think future-facts exist, and so you are a *general future realist*. Further, you become convinced that (most) particular-future-facts (e.g., who will win the 2052 presidential election) lack a non-accidental relation to your attitudes about them in the present, so that your attitudes about them would only be accidentally correct at best. This need not threaten your general realism about the *existence* of future-facts and what they are like, as the the explanatory challenge concerns particular, not general, future-facts and the explanatory relations in which they stand to your attitudes about them. Indeed, it isn't clear why a similar explanatory challenge should arise for one's general future realism if, say, one were a general future realist on the grounds of special relativity. How the future facts relate to your attitudes involved in those broader theoretical judgments doesn't seem germane to the sort of attitudes and evidential source at issue; plausibly what matters, epistemically, is how positing those facts fulfills various independent theoretical desiderata given the data, not necessarily how the particular domain posited explains your attitude about the domain's existence

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[8] I'll leave questions of social or artifact essences aside for the purposes of this discussion. And, in any case, some essentialists countenance them in a way that satisfies the sort of objectivity criterion involved here (e.g., Lowe 2014b; Oderberg 2008: 166-70).

[9] So, *contra*, e.g., Plantinga (1974: 70) and Mackie (2006: 1), it will be false that *x* is essentially φ iff, necessarily, if *x* exists, then *x* is φ. For the *locus classicus* expressing and defending essence's modal unanalyzability see Fine (1994).

altogether. (Similar remarks could be made, *mutatis mutandis*, regarding other domains, e.g., general platonism vs particular platonism, or general modal realism vs particular modal realism.) As this example highlights, having most reason to accept that your attitudes lack this non-accidental relation may leave unaffected your reasons to accept D-facts in general, and doesn't necessarily settle questions concerning whether or not you have rebutting defeaters—defeaters that indicate your attitudes are *incorrect*—against your D-attitudes. As a result, I won't be occupied with adjudicating between essentialism and non-essentialism on that score. At least for some domains, then, one's general realism may be retained in the face of an explanatory challenge that targets their particular realism.[10] So when I speak of how one's attitudes relate to the facts of some domain, I'll assume these are *particular realist* attitudes and *particular realist* facts unless noted otherwise.

With these preliminaries out of the way, let's now turn to explicating the explanatory challenge.

§2 The Explanatory Challenge

The explanatory challenge is a species of debunking challenge. These challenges aim to establish that beliefs for some domain (e.g., modality, morality, mathematics) have some negative epistemic status because their source lacks an appropriate explanatory relationship with their subject matter.[11] The explanatory challenge, as I'm thinking of it, presents one with a potential undercutting defeater for their doxastic attitudes about some domain by questioning whether one's epistemic source of their belief stands in a non-accidental relation to the domain's facts.[12] The central idea, then, is that our source

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[10] One might worry that this does not generalize to all domains. For some domain, D, it might be that if one has most reason to think *any* particular D-attitude they have will fail to stand in a non-accidental relation to the D-facts, then that is reason to give up on the existence of D-facts altogether. Nothing I say here is committed to denying this possibility, but I think the illustration concerning time, the examples in §2.2, and the case for essence itself, are all suggestive enough that retaining one's general realism seems to be a legitimate option in some cases.

[11] I draw here on Korman's (2019) discussion and characterization of debunking challenges.

[12] For similar accounts which frame the threat of some debunking challenges in terms of defeat, see Plantinga (1993), Enoch (2010), Thurow (2013), and Korman (2019).

of justification cannot provide knowledge for some domain if one is given most reason to think it is merely accidentally related to the facts at issue.[13]

To illustrate, consider the following case, adapted from Field's (1989: 25-30) discussion of a neighboring problem for mathematical platonists:

> **NEPAL**: On one occasion, Elliott, a resident of Boston, forms specific beliefs about the daily goings-on in a remote village in Nepal, despite having never been there.

Supposing we find out Elliott's beliefs are true, we would plausibly expect an explanation of how the correctness of Elliott's beliefs is not a coincidence. Perhaps the source of Elliott's beliefs is that he has access to a live feed of the village on his phone, or maybe he has a Nepalese pen pal, informing him of their village's daily activities. In short: we would be in search of the source of Elliott's beliefs and how the facts concerning the activities of the Nepalese village stand in an explanatory relation to that source. Without it, it would seem to be a coincidence that Elliott's beliefs are correct. If Elliot has most reason to think this relation is absent, then his seemings would not be able to serve as a source of knowledge for him.

In contrast, consider a source of belief which plausibly has an appropriate explanatory relation between one's attitudes and their subject matter. Consider **CAT**.

> **CAT:** You come home from work, and upon walking into the living room, you see your cat, Glitch, on the mat. Accordingly, you form the belief that there is a cat on the mat.

In the case of perception about concrete objects, such as **CAT**, we can give some story for how one's belief non-accidentally relates to its subject matter. Barring typical skeptical worries, we can, in principle, offer an explanation for why **CAT** involves a non-accidentally correct belief, partly to do with the (non-deviant) causal connection between the concrete state of affairs and one's perceptual experience. The facts corresponding to your perceptual belief play an explanatory role in forming your belief such that your belief's correctness is not a coincidence. In contrast to **NEPAL**, your

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[13] I am not committed here to a specific account of non-accidentality, and I think we can get a sufficient grasp of the notion I have in mind by the examples I mention throughout. Even so, one might be motivated to have a non-modal account of non-accidentality which doesn't appeal to meeting safety or sensitivity conditions due to the fact that, *per* essentialism, for any x in the actual world α, and any essential property F x has in α, there just are no nearby worlds (indeed, no worlds at all) where x is not F, and so there are no nearby worlds where I falsely believe x is essentially F. For such accounts of non-accidentality see, e.g., Bengson (2015) and Setiya (2012: 89-90), where they think of non-accidentality in strictly explanatory terms.

attitudes about your cat seem to plausibly serve as a source of knowledge precisely because they stand in this explanatory relationship.

As we'll see, what is salient is that we have a defeater for our particular beliefs about a domain when we have more reason than not to believe such a non-accidental explanatory relationship is lacking.[14] With these general remarks, let's now survey the three grades of this challenge.

§ 2.1 Grades of the Explanatory Challenge

The way some have discussed debunking arguments suggests the challenge plausibly comes in three grades—weak, moderate, and strong—but these have not been explicitly distinguished in the literature. The weak grade targets realists of some domain as lacking an *account* of the relevant explanatory relation, the moderate grade argues our attitudes about some domain *actually lack* this relation, and the strong grade argues our attitudes *could not possibly* stand in the requisite relation to their subject matter.[15] But for the purposes of this paper, I'll leave the strong challenge aside, as what I aim to show is somewhat more modest: the essentialist is epistemically vulnerable to a species of the moderate challenge, given they lack an answer to the weak grade of the challenge. Let's now turn to a more detailed survey of the weak and moderate grades of the challenge.

According to the weak grade of the challenge, one lacks an *account* of an explanatory connection between the facts of a domain (D-facts) and their doxastic attitudes about that domain (D-attitudes). In other words, the weak challenge confronts those realists for whom the explanation is a mystery. In the course of elucidating debunking challenges in this vicinity, some indicate that the challenge is weak in this way. For example, here is Benacerraf on intuitive knowledge of mathematical objects:

> What troubles me is that [we lack] an account of the link between our cognitive faculties and the objects known…*[T]he absence of a coherent account* of how mathematical intuition is connected with the truth of mathematical propositions renders the over-all account unsatisfactory." (1973: 674-5, emphasis mine)

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[14] The debunker need not be committed to thinking the belief in question is unjustified for someone *simpliciter*. The debunker is successful when the justification would be undermined for the person who is exposed to some debunking argument. (see, e.g., Korman 2019, and Enoch 2010)

[15] The strong reading is displayed in Field's (2005) reconstruction of the Benacerraf problem: "The key point, I think, is that our belief in a theory should be undermined if the theory *requires* that it would be a huge coincidence." Likewise, Korman (ibid, 4) characterizes the explanatory premise as indicating that the domain's facts "aren't the sorts of things that *could* enter in an explanation of [the attitudes about that domain]."

Similarly, here is Bengson regarding intuitions and abstracta generally:

> What is perhaps the most forceful objection to realist rationalism concerns its apparent incapacity to render intelligible the relation between intuitions and abstract facts intuited…with successful intuition, *we seem to lack any understanding* of a relation between intuitions and the abstract facts intuited that could explain how a thinker's intuitions…can be non-accidentally correct… (2015: 7-8, emphasis mine)

It isn't initially clear what is troubling about such an absence of an explanatory account, or why a "lack of any understanding of a[n] [explanatory] relation" makes for a "forceful objection" against the realist of some given domain. I aim to make sense of these suggestive remarks, and so to make sense of why this weak challenge is indeed a *challenge* for realists, broadly speaking. As I'll illustrate, lacking an account of this explanatory connection can leave one especially vulnerable to defeaters by lacking any reasons to outweigh alternative accounts of an explanatory connection. For my purposes here, *having an account* involves having a proposed explanatory relation between the D-facts and one's D-attitudes *and* that one has reasons to think the relation obtains—it does Elliott no good in the NEPAL case to simply posit a causal explanation if he has no reason to think it is actually true of the situation that concerns him. What the realist risks, then, is having trivially most reason in favor of an alternative explanatory picture because they lack an account of how things actually stand when it comes to the realist explanatory situation at issue. So the challenge is weak insofar as failing it does not *on its own* defeat your particular realist beliefs. However, you may think many trivially lack such explanations for all sorts of domains (e.g., modality, morality, mathematics), perhaps because they are unsure how to characterize the domain (e.g., they are undecided whether they are *abstracta*), or maybe because they simply haven't considered the matter. The challenge would seem to trivially apply in such cases. Were you to lack an ontology of the domain, there would be no realist interpretation under threat, and, similarly, if you lacked an explanation as the result of, say, laziness, the non-realist alternative might seem just as good as mystery because you haven't yet looked into the matter. The challenge arises, then, if one at least endorses some metaphysical characterization of the domain at issue (e.g., "D-facts are abstract facts, and so are causally inefficacious") and they have at least attempted to understand how they know these facts so construed (I'll mostly leave these conditions for the challenge implicit, as it should be clear that Lowe and Oderberg have a characterization of

essences and attempt to give an account for how we could know them so construed).[16] If the realist comes up empty, then this likely risks an alternative explanation trivially outweighing your reasons for a realist explanatory connection, assuming you are given prima facie reason to believe the alternative, as the actual realist connection is an utter mystery to you. A realist in this situation, then, would have most reason to believe that if their D-attitudes were correct about the D-facts, it could only be a coincidence. I'll further illustrate this epistemically fragile predicament below, but for now, let's turn to the moderate grade of the challenge.

The moderate grade concerns whether our beliefs actually lack this connection to their subject matter. Korman (2014: 2) expresses something along these lines when it comes to beliefs about ordinary objects: "At the heart of the debunking arguments is the contention that *there is no appropriate explanatory connection* between our beliefs about which objects there are…and the facts about which objects there are." (emphasis mine). And elsewhere, Korman (2019) notes that the structure of debunking arguments generally include a premise according to which our attitudes and their subject matter simply "*do not* stand in [an appropriate] explanatory relation" (3, emphasis mine). So if we are given reason to think our attitudes are formed in a way that is explanatorily disconnected from their subject matter, then our beliefs about that domain are threatened with defeat. This is especially worrisome for those vulnerable to the weak challenge, as they have no outweighing reasons in favor of their attitudes standing in a non-accidental connection with the facts at issue.

To illustrate this moderate grade of the challenge, consider the following case:

> **CAT DREAM**: Currently, it seems Glitch is sitting on your favorite mat. Then, you wake up, and now realize the source of your belief was your dream, and so have no idea whether Glitch was on your favorite mat.

Upon waking, you were given good reason to think your previous attitudes were not connected up with the facts in the right way, because they were responsive to images received in your dream, not to Glitch's behavior. And this is not merely a possible explanation for your resulting belief—you've found yourself mistakenly forming beliefs on the basis of dreams before, so that if they represented reality, their connection with what they represent would be coincidental. And so you realize the facts about Glitch's behavior lack the appropriate connection with your belief about Glitch in order for your dream experience to serve as a source of knowledge for those facts. Unlike **CAT** above,

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[16] This way of spelling out the weak challenge is somewhat informal, but it should become clear enough in §2.2 how lacking an account under these conditions can leave one epistemically fragile.

in **CAT DREAM** you have a defeater for your belief by having reason to think your attitudes do not *in fact* stand in an appropriate explanatory relationship with their subject matter.

§ 2.2 The Deflationary Variant of the Moderate Challenge

There is a species of the moderate challenge: *the deflationary challenge*. This challenge offers a defeater for one's particular beliefs about a domain by giving a deflationary account of the subject matter, then posits a non-accidental explanatory relation between those attitudes and the subject matter so deflated. If the alternative explanation evidentially outweighs one's evidence to the contrary, the realist about the relevant domain is beset with a moderate challenge. So the realist is *especially* vulnerable if they fail the weak challenge by lacking any alternative explanation to rebut it. To illustrate this challenge, consider another case:

> **CAT DREAM***: You seem to remember seeing Glitch salivating last Saturday. As a result, you believe he was. But upon reflection, you are unsure whether what you remember is an image from a dream or Glitch. Then, you check your calendar and remember Glitch was at the vet that day. It's a mystery how you could know Glitch was salivating, if he was. But you know you dream about your cat sometimes, so you believe what you experienced was a dream, not Glitch.

Plausibly, you have an undercutting defeater for your belief that Glitch was salivating last Saturday. You realize you have no account specifying how Glitch's behavior last Saturday non-accidentally explains your belief.[17] You could artificially posit some causal or clairvoyant connection, but you, presumably, lack any reason to think these obtain.[18] As a result, your reasons weigh in favor of your cat-seeming standing in a non-accidental relation to a cat within a dream, not a bona fide cat. Seeing as you have most reason to think your source is a dream, you have reason to think had you happened to

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[17] Do I implicitly rely on inductive evidence against the explanatory connection between my belief and Glitch here, evidence that might be absent in the case of essence? We regularly form reliable beliefs about cats in virtue of our close proximity to them, so perhaps we have more than an account which simply lacks an explanatory relation for the belief in question. But a variety of beliefs might similarly get defeated via the deflationary challenge which won't straightforwardly rely on countervailing inductive evidence of this sort, e.g., beliefs from "ghost" sightings, tea leaves, astrology, and the like.

[18] In other words, one lacks a defeater-defeater; they lack some further positive reason to outweigh or neutralize the countervailing deflationary explanation.

be correct (say, it was salivating at the vet), you would only be accidentally correct, so you cannot be said to know Glitch is salivating on the basis of this source.[19]

These observations seem to suggest that when one's reasons weigh in favor of their D-attitudes being non-accidentally correct about deflationary D-facts, they have an undercutting defeater for their beliefs regarding particular realist D-facts. So were they to end up being correct about *realist* facts, it would only be a coincidence. In **CAT DREAM***, you had an undercutting defeater for your belief that Glitch was salivating, because you were given most reason to think that your cat-seeming non-accidentally related to a cat dream rather than Glitch. So while you're a general realist when it comes to cat-facts (you believe there are cats and they sometimes salivate), your *particular* realist cat-attitudes in this context are defeated.

CATDREAM* helps illustrate why the weak challenge is, indeed, a challenge. It isn't just that deflationary accounts give realists reason to think they might be in error about their beliefs, but that the realists are epistemically fragile if, after having considered the matter, bearing in mind their characterization of the D-facts, they lack any account whatsoever as to the actual explanatory connection between the D-facts and their D-attitudes. If I had an explanation for how the cat-facts involved in **CATDREAM*** explain my cat-attitudes—say, I had an explanation for how far-off cat behaviors actually explain my attitudes about them—my discovery of Glitch being at the vet on Saturday would likely fail to result in deflationary defeat. To clarify further, consider another example. Suppose it seems to you that you've been visited by ghosts. So you, a *general ghost realist,* now endorse *particular ghost realism* given your recent experience. But, after giving it some thought, you're unsure what could explain this. You lack any explanatory account for how you could be put in touch with disembodied persons. You visit the doctor, get an MRI, and, lo and behold, you are told you have a brain lesion responsible for ghostly appearances. It seems your reasons for thinking you've seen ghosts gets trivially outweighed. You have most reason to think *mere ghostly appearances* caused by your brain lesion explain your attitudes, not ghosts, given you have no realist explanation to the contrary on hand. You needn't even see the concrete evidence of a brain lesion in any detail (your doctor's word, however defeasible, would likely be enough, given you lack any explanation to the contrary). You may also retain your general ghost realism, supposing your reasons for it are independent of first-person ghostly experiences you happen to have. Were you ready with an account of an appropriate explanatory relation, and had some reason to think the account is true, the

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[19] I'm not requiring one has higher-order beliefs about one's evidence in order to have an undercutting defeater *generally* (Cf. Sturgeon 2014). But I am endorsing that a deflationary defeater defeats when (not necessarily *only* when) it involves such higher-order beliefs regarding one's source. For further discussion of how higher-order attitudes play a role in defeat, see Bergmann (2005) and Casullo (2018).

power for an alternative account to defeat your particular attitudes might diminish. If you had good, independent reason to think God put you in touch with disembodied persons on a given occasion, then any alternative account must now be able to target those reasons in order to outweigh them, which is to say, a realist of this sort would be less epistemically fragile than the person for whom the explanatory relationship is an utter mystery. The question, then, is whether the essentialist is in this sort of fragile position—whether they fail the weak challenge—and what sort of account might exploit that vulnerability.

Let's now turn to how the weak grade of the explanatory challenge might apply to two epistemologies of essence, potentially leaving them vulnerable to a moderate challenge.

§ 3 The Challenge Applied to Epistemologies of Essence

I'll now survey two of the most prominent neo-Aristotelian epistemologies of essence. On both accounts, essences are facts about the world that are not artificially settled by our attitudes—otherwise the explanatory challenge might not arise—much like the facts that concerned us in NEPAL and CAT. The crucial question, however, is whether our essence-attitudes stand in a non-accidental relation to those facts, and so whether they are less like Elliott's in NEPAL and more like those in CAT. As we'll see, each account is fundamentally a priori. The main differences between them concern their specific characterizations of essence, and so they differ on what serves as the intentional object of a priori essentialist attitudes. So the following will be our operative question throughout: What *are* essences such that explanatory challenges might threaten our a priori attitudes about them?

§ 3.1 Oderberg's Hylemorphic Essentialism

For Oderberg, essences are those "elements" of a thing that constitute it as the kind of thing it is (2011: 98). Essences are not just a bundle of properties, but are formally organized via principles of unity (*form*), where these principles explain what unifies something's essential properties—the set of properties which "flow" from a thing's

essence—into an integral whole (2007: 45-7).[20] For Oderberg, such essences are immanent universals (23), so are *in* their possessors, located where its possessors are insofar as they operate in and through their instances (82-3). They are universal in virtue of our intellectually abstracting what is shared among multiple particulars. So, e.g., *squareness* mind-independently exists as particularized in the particulars in which it inheres, and we can "encounter" *squareness* by encountering square particulars which stand in strict sameness relations to each other in virtue of instantiating squareness (83-4).

How do we know essences so construed? Oderberg gives two related answers. The first answer starts with the observation that we "find" things which share features in common, and this unity is explained by essences. It is explained by something which makes the unity the unity it is. But here Oderberg is not concerned with giving a detailed account of how we know some *particular* essence something has. He is offering a defense that we know there must be some essences or other. He notes that we need a metaphysics which can explain "the existence of objects that display a unified, characteristic repertoire of behavior, operations, and functions indicative of a single, integral entity" (45). He labels this *the unity problem*. It is in this vein that Oderberg notes that even if we endorsed an amorphous lump view of reality, we'd have to ask what makes reality one and not many (46). And so ultimately Oderberg appeals to the unity and difference in the world requiring some fundamental explanatory principle, the role he takes essence to play. But notice that so far we have an appeal to the knowability of the *existence* of essences—*general essence realism*. Thus far, then, the weak challenge is not surmounted, as it targets *particular essence attitudes*.

What about the second answer? Despite Oderberg's language of "encountering" essence-universals via their particular instances, Oderberg admits that knowledge of essence is not simply a matter of direct observation. It must be indirect, partly by "a priori metaphysical reflection"(2007: 47). We observe something's "characteristic" behaviors and properties, then observe a range of sameness of those features across individuals which exhibit them. But objects share all sorts of properties. We must distinguish features which obtain *constitutively* rather than merely universally or necessarily. Oderberg offers two related ways to do this. First, we distinguish these by

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[20] Something's *form* (itself metaphysically simple) is its principle of unity (2008: 109; 2011: 95-96). Form "gives" something its essence, where the essence just is its organizational unity, constituting it as the kind of thing it is (2011: 99). Occasionally, Oderberg seems to use 'essence' and 'form' interchangeably; e.g., he'll speak of properties flowing from something's essence (2007: 157), but elsewhere as flowing from something's form (2011:101), or that "unity is explicated by the principles of essence" (2008: 44), but elsewhere says that form is the metaphysical principle of unity (2011: 94). For simplicity I'll mostly stick with referring to essence where form might be called for, unless noted otherwise.

observing the set of properties which "flow"—are caused by and originate—from a thing's essence (e.g., that humans necessarily have the capacity for humor flows from humans' essence as *rational animals,* 49). Second, Oderberg suggests that we can engage in hypothetical deliberation about whether that thing would retain its characteristic behaviors if we take some given feature away. If it wouldn't, then that feature is a part of its essence; if it would, then that feature is not part of its essence (50-51).[21]

Regarding the first way, how do we know how to start our causal investigation? As Tuomas Tahko (2018) points out, it seems we must identify the (partial) essence as the property unifier at the outset to which we could then associate some set of properties. Ultimately, the process must be a priori. This seems consistent with how Oderberg (2011: 97) characterizes his account: "That gold must have a principle of unity is not within the remit of observation; that gold is a metal whose atomic constituents have atomic number 79 is." For Oderberg, what takes precedence is our "metaphysical judgment that certain properties indicate that an object has a certain essence, i.e., that it has a substantial form that puts it into one category rather than another." (ibid., 162). We must grasp the essence *before* we can identify essential properties which flow from it. There is nothing about our observation of, say, gold that delineates whether gold has an essence—and is not instead an accidental feature of some *other* kind—such that our causal investigation could begin.

This highlights why a priori judgments for the suitable property unifiers are needed to get the causal investigation going. But how might this a priori judgment secure our non-accidental relation?[22] Oderberg doesn't say. Perhaps, following Oderberg's suggestion, the judgment is prompted by the hypothetical considerations about what properties a thing could lose. If so, we'd need an explanatory relation between the hypothetical facts and the essence-facts they are supposed to reveal. But, for Oderberg, essences are the ground for modal facts, and our knowledge of essence

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[21] This is of a piece with Kripke's (1980) appeal to intuitions about reference in counterfactuals:

> When you ask whether it is necessary or contingent that Nixon won the election, you are asking the intuitive question whether in some counterfactual situation, this man would in fact have lost the election…I think [intuition] is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don't know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking. (41-2)

This is just the sort of methodology that gets targeted by the challenge I explicate here.

[22] This challenge is not motivated by skepticism about a priori justification nor about the relationship between a priori sources and abstract entities. I'm happy to countenance a priori justification—it's plausibly among our basic and indispensable epistemic sources (e.g., Bealer 1992, Bonjour 1998)—and essentialists, *qua* essentialists, need not countenance essences as abstract *entities* (e.g., Lowe 2008, Tahko 2022).

grounds our knowledge of modal facts (2011: 99; 2007: 6, 126). So if the hypothetical facts are a species of modal fact, our original question arises once again.

The upshot: for all Oderberg has said about how we come to know essence-facts, we lack an account of a non-accidental explanatory relation between our particular essence-attitudes produced by a priori metaphysical reflection and the particular essence-facts. So Oderberg's account does not overcome the weak challenge.

§ 3.2 Lowe's Serious Essentialism

Lowe endorses what he calls *serious essentialism*. According to serious essentialism, every entity—material objects, persons, properties, etc.—has an essence. But essences are not themselves some further entity over and above the things which have them. An essence is simply what a thing or entity is. If they were further entities[23], then they would have an essence, and a vicious regress would ensue (2008: 39).[24] We may think of them, as Tahko (2022) suggests, as simply the existence and identity conditions of an entity, where these just are "what it would take for a given entity to exist and what makes it the very entity that it is"(7). On Lowe's picture, then, for any entity x of kind K, these conditions will concern what it is to be a K (what Lowe calls a *general essence*), and what it is to be the individual x of kind K as opposed to another individual of that kind (what Lowe calls an *individual essence*) (ibid: 35). These conditions need not be construed as sets or propositions—and so not as further entities—even if we must know and express them by those means.[25] Further, Lowe maintains that essences are the ground for metaphysical necessity and possibility (e.g., x is necessarily F, because it is part of the essence of x that x is F) (ibid., 45; 2013: 152), and that modal knowledge is grounded in rational insight into essences (2008: 33). Additionally, Lowe maintains that we must know something's essence (even if only partially) to know it *exists*—as we must know it

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[23] An 'entity', or 'thing', for Lowe, is what does or could exist, applying to whatever falls under an ontological category, (e.g., material objects, persons, properties, sets, numbers, propositions) (Lowe 2006: 7; 2008: 35). Accordingly, Lowe does not go in for Quinean ontological commitment—we may quantify over essences all we please, but this need not commit us to their being existing *entities* in Lowe's sense (2008: 39-40).

[24] For a recent challenge to whether this regress is vicious for the essentialist, see Spinelli (2017); for further discussion of Spinelli's argument, see Wallner (2020).

[25] Tahko is careful to note that this at least "comes close" to Lowe's view of things (4). And although Lowe has interpreted essences as the *grounds* of identity conditions (2013, ch. 6), his remarks elsewhere seem to suggest that they are the *what-it-is* facts (e.g., "…in knowing what [two distinct things] are, we know their *identity conditions*…" 2008: 46-7, emphasis in original).

is possible for something of some kind to exist before determining whether it actually exists, where this modal judgment is itself grounded in knowledge of essence (40-41).

How do we know essences so construed? Lowe has negative and positive answers. Let's start with the negative. For Lowe, "essence precedes existence" both ontologically and epistemically: something's *existence* relies on its essence—and other essences—not precluding existence, and *understanding* essences is required to think "comprehendingly" about anything (35-40). Relatedly, denying essences creates both an ontological and an epistemological problem: there would be nothing to make, say, Tom (a cat) the particular thing it is as opposed to something else (36-7), and we couldn't "talk or think comprehendingly" about Tom if we couldn't know what kind of thing Tom is (even if only partially), or what makes Tom the particular cat he is as opposed to another individual of its kind. If we didn't have some minimal understanding of essences—of what categorial concept something falls under—then our thought and talk cannot "fasten" upon Tom as opposed to something else (35-36).[26]

Whatever else one might think of these negative answers, they do not answer the weak challenge. Notice that our particular essence attitudes are *compatible* with us being hopelessly lucky. We might need to hold certain categorial notions fixed—regarding *what it is* to be a cat— for the sake of inquiry. But why think this is reason to think we get the essence-facts *non-accidentally correct*? It is not explained how these attitudes being formed via an a priori process helps in this regard, nor does relieving essences of their ontological status as *entities* illuminate how the essence-facts play a role in that a priori process (more on this below). At best, Lowe's negative answers might offer reasons to countenance essences *generally*, but that would, at most, support *general essence realism*. So the weak challenge remains unmet.

What about Lowe's positive answer? Lowe states that knowledge of essence is possible because it is simply the product of understanding what it is to be something, and so doesn't require us to be acquainted with some special or obscure further entity (39). And the way we understand what it is to be something is by properly exercising a priori *rational insight*, a rational capacity which can reveal truths of essence (2014a:

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[26] For instance, we might think we must grasp that Tom is at least, essentially, a living organism rather than a "hunk of matter" (2013: 30-3)).

256-7).[27] But the procedure cannot start with judgments about what exists, because, recall that for Lowe, knowing what is actual requires knowing what is (metaphysically) possible; we need to know that some kind *possibly* exists in order to pick it out as existing (2008: 40-1).[28] Empirical evidence only helps us "select" a world as an actual world *candidate*, but we need priori rational insight to determine what worlds are possible from which that selection is made (2008: 32).[29] How do we know what is possibly the case? We can have this by having an a priori grasp of the *real definitions* of things, where these "reveal" something's essence (2012: 108). And given that modality is grounded in essences, knowing something's real definition (even if partially) will give rise to knowing what is possible for the entity in question, including its possible existence.[30] This process need not be construed as objectionably occult. That we sometimes understand real definitions is supposed to be just as innocuous as the fact that we sometimes understand propositions (266).

But Lowe's positive answer also fails to answer the weak challenge. Recall that, for Lowe, essences are not entities. So how is the challenged answered, given essences do not, strictly speaking, enter into a relation to one's essence-attitudes? He should not want to punt to conceptual or linguistic relata, as his account is robustly realist, and so will want to appeal to "worldly" facts of some sort. Perhaps the existing essence *possessors* are the relevant *relatum*. But essences are not entities, and so cannot be identical to an entity. We'd still be left with our question for how these entities non-

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[27] According to Lowe, this insight is not a matter of linguistic/conceptual competence (2008, 33). Nor, interestingly, are such insights identified with intuitions:

> Intuitions as such are just psychological states of rational subjects, but no such state can of itself constitute reliable evidence for the correctness of a rational subject's judgment concerning the nature or essence of some mind-independent entity. (2014a, 256)

But it isn't clear how our rational insight makes an evidential difference apart from intuition, especially as it concerns the explanatory challenge.

[28] Lowe applies this epistemic priority to the discovery of the transuranic elements: "Prior to the actual synthesis of various transuranic elements…chemists knew *what they would be*. That is to say, they grasped the real definitions of certain as yet non-existent transuranic elements (2014a: 267). Importantly, this priority *also* means we can know essences of non-existing entities (2008: 41).

[29] Elsewhere, Lowe states that much of our inquiry into essences consists in an interplay between a priori and a posteriori judgments regarding identity and existence conditions (e.g., 2006: 20; 2014a: 267-68). But as we'll see, this doesn't seem to assuage the problem that I argue confronts Lowe here, as ontological categorization takes epistemic priority on Lowe's picture.

[30] For instance, in grasping the real definition of a circle, we have an priori grasp of what it is, or what it would be *were* it to exist.

accidentally relate us to the essences they possess. Further, given *essences precede existence* both epistemically and ontologically for Lowe, and the relatum would be limited to *existing* essence possessors, we must look elsewhere. What would, presumably, enter into a relation would be the real definition-propositions which express or "reveal" a thing's essence. But how might we be non-accidentally related to propositions (abstracta or not), and how can we characterize that relation such that it distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful essence-attitudes corresponding to the select class of propositions? Noting that we sometimes *understand* propositions is not enough, primarily because this pushes back the question to *that* epistemic state of affairs:[31] how does our *understanding* relate to the real definition-propositions so they might non-accidentally shape our *understanding* of them? This question doesn't get addressed, so we have no answer here. Lowe's appeal to a priori understanding of real definition leaves this relation with such objects obscure.

The upshot: for all Lowe has said about how we come to know essence-facts, we lack an account of a non-accidental explanatory relation between our particular essence-attitudes produced by rational insight and the particular essence-facts. So Lowe's account does not overcome the weak challenge.

§4 Thomasson's Neo-Carnapian Deflationism

If the essentialist has no answer to the weak challenge, then they open themselves up to a deflationary challenge, and so potentially face a defeater for their essence-attitudes. And there seems to be at least one prominent deflationary account which might target

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[31] As Bengson (2015: 9) points out regarding the Benacerraf problem, this is why psychological and epistemic resources must be avoided to give an adequate answer to the question of non-accidentality vis-á-vis *abstracta*. Bengson suggests that the realist could instead appeal to the constitutive dependence relation between the abstract facts and our intuitions about them. Could the essentialist exploit this here? Perhaps, but we currently lack an account as applied to essence, and, in particular, we lack an account which gives us reason to think the relationship actually obtains. So the weak challenge may still confront the essentialist here. Furthermore, I worry that psychological and epistemic resources must be ultimately called upon on Bengson's picture, as he models this explanatory relationship off of constitutive explanations invoked in naive realism. On naive realism, the objects of perceptual experience are supposed to partly individuate one's corresponding experience, so that, e.g., part what it is to have this chair experience is for the chair to exist. The naive realist can explain this constitutive relationship in virtue of the presence of some material object, being situated thus-and-so in my visual field. But what would be the corresponding essentialist explanation? It appears that in all the worlds in which I lack that essence-attitude, or have the opposite one, the constitutive relations F stands in remain the same—indeed, especially if, as in Lowe's case, F is no entity at all—because essence facts are in a sense always *present,* as it were, assuming essence facts obtain necessarily. To individuate the constituted intuitions, then, it is tempting to appeal to those intuitions that result from *understanding* or *reflection*, but this appeals to the very sort of psychological and epistemic phenomena that need to be explained.

these neo-Aristotelian approaches to essence: Amie Thomasson's deflationary account of existence and identity conditions (hereafter, I'll simply speak of identity conditions, leaving existence conditions implicit).[32] Before discussing Thomasson's deflationism, I want to stress that my goal is not to defend Thomasson's view, but merely to illustrate what sort of deflationary threat might confront the essentialist who is vulnerable to the weak challenge. So why think Thomasson's deflationism potentially targets Lowe's and Oderberg's accounts? As we've already seen, Lowe plausibly takes identity-conditions as at least expressive of, if not identical to, essences (Lowe 2008: 46-7; Tahko 2022). And while Oderberg's remarks about how identity-conditions relate to essences are scarce, he considers a Wittgensteinien account of essences as a foil to his essentialism, on which essences are just expressions of conventional, indeterminate identity-conditions, and so lack identity-conditions that specify what essentially unites things of some given kind (2008: 40-41).[33] So when I speak of *essentialist-identity-condition-facts*, I'll assume there is a reading of both Lowe and Oderberg on which identity-conditions have an essentialist construal.

For our purposes, Thomasson's deflationism need not be thought as a rival of *general essence realism.* But, it *is* a rival theory for what explains our particular identity-condition attitudes. So, the potential defeating threat is that Thomasson's account, and accounts like it, might show that our essence-attitudes are more like attitudes in Cᴀᴛ Dʀᴇᴀᴍ* than in Cᴀᴛ, by indicating that they are non-accidentally explained by deflationary—not essentialist—identity-condition-facts.[34]

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[32] In Thomasson (2017), she explicitly notes that essences can be deflated this way. Additionally, see Elder (2011: 31-4) as interpreting her neo-Carnapian metaphysics as challenging essentialism.

[33] Oderberg makes explicit that *form* does not have identity-conditions, and the identity of substances is primitive and so does not involve identity-conditions (78). However, Oderberg claims what is *evidence* of any given primitive form is precisely the sort of criteria we invoke involving a thing's characteristic properties, despite its identity not *consisting in* those properties (118). If this is also true of essences, I think the deflationary defeater in our context is still fairly clear: if our essentialist *evidence*, involving such criteria of identity, more plausibly suggests a non-accidental relation to non-essentialist facts, then Oderberg's account is threatened.

[34] Thomasson has also been sensitive to debunking challenges, specifically regarding metaphysical modality. Thomasson (2018) argues that her account of modal normativism—which understands modal discourse as playing a normative rather than descriptive role—has the advantage over the realist when it comes to answering what she calls "the reliability challenge". As she is thinking of it, the challenge is to explain the reliability of modal knowledge given concerns about evolutionary debunking (e.g., Street 2011) and the lack of causal connections of modal features of the world. But the function of modal discourse, per modal normativism, is not to track external features of the world, and so the potential debunking threat is avoided. For the purposes of this paper, I'll leave aside how and to what degree this sort of answer is applicable here. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting Thomasson's treatment of this.

§ 4.1 Thomasson's Deflationism as a Moderate Challenge

Thomasson has laid out a deflationary framework for existence and modal questions in particular, while essences have been indirectly in view.[35] Even so, she explicitly aims to deflate identity-conditions and takes this to result in the deflation of "real metaphysical natures" (2009, 467).

For Thomasson, seeing metaphysics as "discovering deep, worldly truths" gives rise to "epistemological mysteries" (2017: 364), as they are not resolvable by empirical and conceptual methods alone. But the mystery is supposed to disappear by shifting the target of metaphysical discourse to expressions of metalinguistic rules which specify a term's applications conditions, where these conditions determine the existence and identity-conditions of the object the term denotes. Application and coapplication conditions are the conditions which specify when reference is established or not, and when we can re-apply the term to refer to the same entity (2009: 446-47).[36] Thomasson argues that this sort of conceptual analysis is relevant to discovering something's "nature" inasmuch as a *purely* causal theory of reference is inadequate to that task. Indeed, Thomasson (2007) argues that it *is* inadequate, partly because such a theory faces *the qua problem*, according to which any pure causal theory leaves reference far too indeterminate without "some very basic concept of what sort of thing (broadly speaking) [the speaker] intend[s] to refer to" (38).[37] That causal theories must presuppose we have something in mind—some broad categorial conception—when it comes to our referent is a point with which Oderberg and Lowe might likely agree. As we've seen, Lowe thinks one must have some sort of essence *in mind* to think "comprehendingly" at all about anything[38], and Oderberg rejects prominent approaches to essence via causal theories of reference for related reasons. In particular, he takes

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[35] Sometimes Thomasson lumps together questions of modality and essence under "modal debates" e.g., Thomasson 2016: 15.

[36] Thomasson's view of reference is a hybrid approach. It can rely on an externally determined chain of reference, but will be partly fixed by descriptive considerations (e.g., that 'Gödel' is a person-name) (448-9). Whereas, on a "pure" causal theory (cf. Kripke 1980), she notes that conceptual analysis might play a minor role, given we don't need a specific concept *in mind* for our terms to successfully refer.

[37] See Thomasson (2007: 39-45) for her arguments against a pure causal theory of reference. For further discussions of the qua problem see Papineau (1979, 158–68), Devitt (1981), Sterelny (1983), Devitt and Sterelny (1999), Dupre (1981), Kitcher (1982), and Stanford and Kitcher (2000).

[38] Concerning causal theories of reference, Lowe says even more explicitly that he "cannot begin to understand how it might seriously be supposed that a [causal] linkage of this sort could genuinely suffice to enable me to talk and think comprehendingly about" things. (2008: 36, note 24)

issue with the notion of rigid designation associated with causal theories of reference (e.g., Kripke 1980, Putnam 1975) because determining whether a term is a rigid designator requires "a criterion for separating correct from incorrect [modal] behavior"of some given term, and this requires independent access to metaphysical truths, so that accepting a term as a "rigid designator presupposes knowledge that things have essences as well as knowledge of what some of those essences are" (2008: 6). Elsewhere, Oderberg says that "speculation on whether a term can be considered a rigid designator…depends on a determination of whether the referent has an essence and what that essence might be…We can have no warrant for claims that a term behaves such-and-such a way in a modal context *without first settling what the term refers to, and this cannot be settled without having a grasp of what the referent is*" (2001: 34-35, emphasis mine). Here it seems Oderberg affirms something akin to Lowe, that grasping the referent of a term is, in some sense, bound up with our grasp of its essence or lack thereof. At the very least, then, it seems Thomasson's account cannot be dismissed by Lowe and Oderberg by simply embracing a purely causal theory of reference as it applies to essentialism. Further, these considerations might afford Thomasson's account some prima facie weight for Lowe and Oderberg, given its underlying motivation is one they likely share, even if they think the solutions for these problems are solved by embracing general essence realism.

With this hybrid approach to reference in mind, Thomasson provides an alternative conception of our thought and talk about essences (via statements of identity-conditions) where this need not be construed as describing facts about the world, but merely expressing the application/coapplication conditions for our terms we've already accepted. If our linguistic framework fails to yield a determinate answer, then it is open to us to precisify our terms on pragmatic grounds (451-52). And given some of these metalinguistic rules are established by our normative practices, these pragmatic grounds will incorporate our normative interests (Thomasson 2015, 2016). The explanatory relation between our judgments concerning identity-conditions and what makes them true, then, can be accounted for by empirical and conceptual means— a relation akin to the one borne by our grammatical-attitudes and grammar.

This picture need not be excessively revisionary. Thomasson sees her account as satisfying a charity constraint, on which the deflationist attempts to make the realists' assertions come out true and to not construe them as making simple a priori errors, nor as merely uttering trivial truths (2016: 6). The constraint can be satisfied by seeing the rules which generate these conditions as partly established by our normative practices (20). Thomasson notes how debates over essences "can very easily be seen as" engaged in what she calls *metalinguistic negotiation*, where such debates concern the appropriate use our terms. So not only can we misconstrue the relevant rules, in much the same way

we might be mistaken about rules of grammar, we can see our disagreements about something's identity conditions as involved in negotiating a term's appropriate use, according to our normative concerns (e.g., whether waterboarding *counts as* torture, 2016: 10-11). Relatedly, the empirical observations of shared properties need not be denied—such observations get codified in our application conditions—they just won't carry such a heavy metaphysical and epistemological burden, involving, say, underlying metaphysical principles of unity.

Recall, I do not aim to defend Thomasson's view. I only wish to highlight the sort of defeating threat Thomasson's account might pose to the essentialist vulnerable to the weak challenge. To that end, I want to suggest that key components of Thomasson's deflationism are not just a remote epistemic possibility. We know we can artificially introduce terms with associated application conditions (e.g., Sosa's *snowdiscall*, or Hirsch's *incar*[39]). This might provide us reason to think we could implicitly have done so, or have adopted such stipulated identity-conditions from our linguistic community. Like the **CatDream*** case—where I know that I sometimes dream of my cat, and it is a mystery how Glitch salivating while at the vet could non-accidentally explain my attitudes about that state of affairs, so I have most reason to think it was a dream, not a cat, which explains my belief—if I know I can sometimes artificially stipulate identity-conditions, and it is a mystery how *essentialist* identity-conditions could non-accidentally explain my belief about them, I may have most reason to think such artificial identity-conditions, not essences, explain my attitudes about them. Furthermore, Thomasson frequently defends her account as being more explanatory adequate, in addition to its ability to avoid the aforementioned *epistemological mysteries* associated with non-deflationary metaphysics. Thomasson's deflationism has the potential to explain why our attempts to grapple with questions concerning identity-conditions appear intractable and our answers to them indeterminate, because these proposed answers arise from identity-conditions established by human intentionality and so often involve incomplete or vague conditions, delivering up indeterminate answers (2009: 452; 2007: 93-95). Insofar as one has prima facie reason in favor of this explanatory adequacy, this may additionally give one reason to suspect their particular identity-condition attitudes are not actually explained by the essence-facts.

Along these lines, it's worth reminding ourselves that Thomasson's application conditions plausibly play a similar role to Lowe's essences, insofar as they enable us to

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[39] NB: I'm not appealing to *quantifier variance* or *existential relativity* here. I'm only using these familiar metaphysically deflationary examples to illustrate that we can arbitrarily generate the sort of identity-conditions Thomasson invokes. For Thomasson's approach (along with many neo-Aristotelians) whether the existential quantifier has multiple possible meanings is not of central concern for settling realist/deflationary disputes (e.g., Thomasson 2007: 118-19; Fine 2009).

"think comprehendingly" about things. Thomasson puts application conditions to work in this way without what she would see as the metaphysical baggage. She affirms the need to introduce or adopt application conditions which can disambiguate between our possible referents, determining whether some given term would apply in some given situation. When we have not adequately introduced the relevant rules so that we cannot think "comprehendingly" about things—when it is indeterminate to which of all the possible referents our term might refer—we may stipulate new rules to determine what the identity and persistence conditions will be, subject only to empirical and conceptual observations in addition to our pragmatic and normative interests (2009: 451). Accordingly, this may give us additional reason to think Thomasson's account does real explanatory work, and so gives us reason to think it is more than a mere epistemic possibility, but that it sheds light on our actual epistemic situation.

Just as CAT DREAM* did not need to undercut one's beliefs in cats or their behavior full stop, Thomasson need not undercut the neo-Aristotelian's belief in essences wholesale (even if she might see her deflationary picture extending that way). But an account like Thomasson's potentially offers an undercutting defeater for their *particular* essence-attitudes by giving an explanation in which those attitudes non-accidentally relate to identity conditions deflationarily construed. The potential challenge, then, is that the neo-Aristotelian—partly due to lacking an explanation—may have trivially most reason to believe these attitudes *as a matter of fact* non-accidentally relate to deflationary identity-conditions. So if they ended up being correct about *essentialist* identity-condition facts, it could only be a coincidence. Just as in CAT DREAM*, even if you ended up believing truly that Glitch was salivating, it could only be a coincidence that you were correct, given you have more reason than not to think your attitudes non-accidentally relate to particular dream images of Glitch.

One strategy for Lowe and Oderberg is to reply that Thomasson's approach does not adequately defeat every particular essence-attitude[40], but if one thinks it *does* generalize to any given particular essence-attitude, would that defeat one's general essence realism?[41] Like the B-theorist whose particular beliefs about the future might be vulnerable to defeat but can nevertheless retain their general future realism, Lowe and Oderberg may appeal to broader theoretical considerations that are not impacted by Thomasson's deflationary account. As we've seen in §§3.1-3.2, general essence realism

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[40] Lowe might likely respond that Thomasson must appeal to the essences of the concepts/application-conditions themselves, without which we would have difficulty making sense of their use if they are themselves constituted by further concepts/application-conditions (Lowe 2013: 106-9). But a discussion of whether this response works must be left for another time.

[41] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

may be defended in a way that fails to answer the weak problem, but plausibly avoids the deflationary challenge which exploits that failure due to it targeting one's *particular* attitudes. Lowe appeals to the need for essences to metaphysically undergird the existence of any given entity (as "essence precedes existence" ontologically) (2008:40), and to essentialist explanations for ontological categorization broadly (35). Oderberg cites how essentialist explanations are ultimately inescapable when confronting the unity problem (2007: 46). But Thomasson's focus is on our particular classificatory practices involved in "intractable" metaphysical debates (e.g., regarding composite objects or mereological sums, or debates about what counts as a *person*, an *artifact* of some given kind, a *work of art*, or an instance of *torture* (2016: 11-15), not the general nature of existence and ontological categorization, nor explicit considerations of the unity problem. So it appears Lowe's and Oderberg's broad considerations for general essence realism go beyond what is targeted by Thomasson's account; or, at any rate, they are not what is explicitly targeted by the alternative, deflationary explanatory picture. It is also important to note that my main aim has been to assess the predicament that arises from failing the weak challenge. The challenge has precisely to do with lacking an account of the relevant non-accidental explanatory connection, and that this leaves one vulnerable to undercutting defeaters for their particular essence-attitudes. So whether one *also* has a rebutting defeater for their general essence realism —reason to think essentialism is *false*—is not especially germane here. As far as the explanatory challenge goes, the question of one's general realism is left open. Furthermore, Thomasson might see her account as generalizing in ways that target these broader explanatory concerns, but the account canvassed here does not straightforwardly do so, or so it seems to me.

Accordingly, it remains open for Lowe and Oderberg to retain their *general* essence realism, supported by arguments that essences yield explanatory and metaphysical dividends. But without an answer to the weak challenge, they may have more reason to think that what makes their *particular* identity-condition beliefs non-accidentally correct is not by latching on to the essence-facts, but on identity-conditions deflationarily construed. The options for the neo-Aristotelian, it seems, are three-fold: (i) provide a defeater for Thomasson—maybe Thomasson's deflationary account is defective[42]—but remain challenged by the weak challenge, (ii) answer the weak challenge by giving a positive account for how one's a priori attitudes non-accidentally relate to the essence-facts, or (iii) answer the weak challenge by giving a positive account for how one's attitudes non-accidentally relate to the essence-facts via some *other* source.

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[42] For a recent critique see Raab (2021).

§5 Conclusion

Insofar as Oderberg's and Lowe's epistemologies of essence sufficiently represent the state of neo-Aristotelian accounts of the epistemology of essence, neo-Aristotelian essentialists appear vulnerable to the weak explanatory challenge. They lack an *account* for how their essence-attitudes are non-accidentally correct about the essence-facts. This leaves essentialists especially vulnerable to defeat via a moderate grade of the challenge, as they would lack a countervailing account to rebut it. While they may justifiably retain their *general essence realism*—that there are essences, and they can be broadly characterized—their particular attitudes, regarding what it is to be some particular *x*, are left vulnerable to defeat, having no explanation on hand for how *x*'s essence non-accidentally explains their particular essence-attitudes about *x*. Thomasson's deflationary account of identity-conditions illustrates how such a moderate challenge might confront essentialists in this predicament. Although suspicions about essence have been numerous, I hope to have made clearer an epistemic challenge essentialists face, and that this provides essentialists and anti-essentialists an avenue for further development of this terrain. For all I've said, essentialists might yet surmount the weak challenge by offering an account for how their essence-attitudes non-accidentally relate to the essence-facts. But, without an account, prospects of defeat loom.

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