

Against the epistemology of essence

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As a preface to the paper proper, let me share a brief anecdote, told to me some years ago. The details aren't entirely veridical (notably, names have been changed to protect the innocent), but the gist of the story remains.

R and F, two metaphysicians at a major R1 university on the US eastern seaboard, were sitting around a table, debating whether there really was a table or just some simples arranged table-wise. During a lull in the argumentative to and fro, R let out a deep sigh and said, 'You know, in our discussions we regularly make some wild, substantive claims about the natures of objects. Why, just a moment ago you told me that this (gentle thumping the table) *essentially* has the parts that it does! And I... well, I sometimes worry about this. That is, I don't know how we *know* these essence claims. It sometimes isn't even clear to me how we could ever come to know 'em. Do you ever have the same worry?'

Laughing, F replied, 'Oh R, don't be silly! We're *metaphysicians* – we do epistemology last, if at all!' Hearing this, R also guffawed, and, setting aside their epistemic hang-up, tabled another potential metaphysical point.

Metaphysicians regularly throw around fairly weighty, substantive claims about the metaphysical essences of objects. For example, talking about the essentiality of origin, Kment says that, 'It seems plausible that [table] T is made from more than 50% of [matter] M, in the sense that being made from more than 50% is part of the necessary and sufficient conditions for being T...' (2021: s1979). Meanwhile, in the course of making his case against modal accounts of essences, Fine (in)famously claims that,

It is no part of the essence of Socrates to belong to {Socrates}. Strange as the literature on personal identity may be, it has never been suggested that in order to understand the nature of a person one must know to which sets he belongs. There is nothing in the nature of a person ... which demands that he belong to this or that set or which even demands that there be any sets (1994: 5)

Finally, in other work (Wildman 2013), I've argued that Socrates *is* essentially a member of {Socrates} – or at least I tried to give an account where it would make sense to say this.

Such substantive essentialist claims are, I believe, part and parcel of a number of central debates in metaphysics. And many of these debates are thriving! This is, to my mind, a good thing. But there is something deeply troubling about these debates. For while there is a lot of discussion about what is (not) essential to various things or to the consequences of such-and-such an essentialist claim, little thought seems to be put towards the underlying *epistemology*. Like R in the opening anecdote, I feel that we metaphysicians should give some kind of answer the question, 'What is the epistemology of essence?' For without an answer, it is not clear how essentialist claims are (or even could be) justified. This would undercut much (possibly all) of their argumentative force. In turn, it also calls into question the viability of metaphysical debates that turn on said essentialist claims.

The aim of this paper is to argue that, unfortunately, there likely is no good answer to this question. More specifically, I will here argue that, in light of what I call the Finean insight about essence, prospects for an adequate epistemology of essence are quite dim.

To show this, I begin (§1) by providing some underlying metaphysical background, spelling out the details of the Finean conception of essence. Key here is the distinction, effectively introduced by Fine, between *merely necessary* and *genuinely essential* properties. With this in hand, I then (§2) motivate why we need a specific epistemology of essence, rather than mere modal epistemology. I next (§3) turn to “classical” approaches to essence epistemology; “classical” in the sense that they use techniques familiar from modal epistemology, repurposed to get a grip on essences. I argue that these approaches fail, primarily because they do not give us a way to tell when we have a genuinely essential property, rather than one that is merely necessary. This motivates the subsequent section (§4), focusing on “new wave” essence epistemologies – that is, accounts that are not based on familiar modal epistemology stories, but instead employ novel mechanisms. Unfortunately, like with the classical accounts, these also fail for the same broad reasons. The upshot is that prospects for a viable epistemology of essence look bleak. Finally, I conclude (§5) by considering where this leaves those of us who want to make essentialist claims.

Before moving on, two quick points of clarification. First, my focus here is *objective* essence and associated claims – that is, claims about the essential properties of particular individual objects. This is in contrast to *general* or *kind* essence claims, where the focus is on what properties are essential to the kind/property itself. For example, claims like ‘Socrates is essential human’ and ‘{Socrates} essentially has Socrates as a member’ are objective, while ‘Humans are essential rational’ and ‘Singleton sets essentially have their members as members’ are general. Throughout this paper, I will only discuss epistemic accounts of the former.

Second, in the course of this discussion, I will often talk about the essences and the essential properties of objects. I take the former just to be the collection of essential properties possessed by a given object – i.e., Socrates’ essence just is the plurality of those properties he has essentially (whatever they may be). Moreover, this property-talk is not strictly necessary – we might instead speak of specific propositions being true in virtue of the nature of a given object. I prefer the property talk, though with some logical care, we can slide back and forth between properties and propositions. More importantly, I am confident that the following argument can be re-formulated in whichever of the means of expression is preferred.

With this out of the way, let us now turn to the metaphysical background of our epistemic question: the Finean conception of essence.

§1. The Finean Insight

The last two points essential for this discussion require a very brief potted overview of the contemporary debate about the metaphysics of essence.

For most of the 20th century, the dominant understanding of essence was broadly *modalist* – indeed, Correia jokes that modalism was once, ‘so wide-spread that it would be pointless to give references’ (2005: 26). Modalism’s core aim is to analyse or define essence in terms of (metaphysical) modality. The exact details vary, but the usual method goes along the following lines:

M x is essentially F iff_{df} necessarily, if x exists, then x is F

Infamously, Fine (1994) rejected modalism.¹ He did so via a series of example properties that seem to satisfy the right-, but not the left-hand side, of **M**. The most famous of these features Socrates and {Socrates}: necessarily, if Socrates exists, then he is a member of {Socrates}. By **M**, it follows that Socrates is essentially a member of the singleton. But, as we saw in the earlier quote, Fine holds that this property is *not* essential to Socrates. Thus **M**’s right-to-left entailment

¹ Notably, Dunn (1990) raised similar objections.

fails. And while a number of attempts have been made to rescue modalism from Fine's critiques,² most metaphysicians have abandoned it.

Having moved away from modalism, many metaphysicians instead adopted a broadly Finean account of essence. This view has many names – it is sometimes called Neo-Aristotelian essentialism, 'Serious' essentialism (Lowe 2008), Real essentialism (Oderberg 2007), or the 'reductive-essence-first account' (Wildman 2021). Nomenclature aside, the general idea is that modalism gets the story backwards: rather than using modality to define/analyse essence, we should instead define/analyse modality in terms of essence.³ Meanwhile, essence itself is then understood as a primitive (Fine 1994, 1995a, 1995b), or is cashed out in non-modal terms – e.g. via generalized identity, as in Correia and Skiles (2019, 2021).

For the sake of the following discussion, I assume Finean essentialism. This is not because I think it is the correct account of essence; rather, it is because I believe that the need for an epistemology of essence is sharpest given this view.

One point here is worth highlighting. The core of Fine's objection is that there seem to be some properties that objects have necessarily but which aren't part of their essence. Or, to put this in pithier terms: there are some properties that are merely necessary but not genuinely essential. Call this the *Finean insight*. Notably, most contemporary modalists – myself included! – agree with the insight; that is, they have adopted some form of *hybrid* modalism, which includes an additional component to distinguish the properly essential properties from those that are merely essential. What exactly this addition is varies widely, including Lewisian naturalness (Cowling 2013, Wildman 2013), intrinsicality (Denby 2014), and non-triviality (De 2020). But, in every case, the addition provides a means of *hyperintensionally* distinguishing between properties.

So I take it that there is a deep, important, and required hyperintensional distinction to be made here. We need to separate out the genuinely essential sheep from the merely necessary goats. And this seems to be a point where essence epistemology can help. For a good epistemology of essence should tell us how we can come to know where a given property falls here. That is, our essence epistemology should detail how it is we know that a given property is genuinely essential, rather than merely necessary, for this particular object, or vice versa.

§2. Why *essence* epistemology?

Even granting the above, we might wonder why we need an epistemology of *essence*. Why isn't an epistemology of modality enough? After all, much progress has been made concerning the latter, so surely something here will suffice?

One reason is that some epistemologies of modality explicitly appeal to prior knowledge of essence facts. For example, Peacocke's (1998) theory of implicit knowledge identifies constitutive principles of modal knowledge with knowledge of essence; consequently, his account requires an epistemology of essence to even get started (see Roca-Royes 2010 for further discussion). Similarly, Kment (2014, 2021) explicitly appeals to essence facts as being partially constitutive of metaphysical laws, which in turn play a role in helping us know what is possible/necessary. When it comes to these accounts, it is clear that we need some distinct, prior story to tell us how we come to know the antecedent essentialist information.

A second reason is that modal epistemologies might *implicitly* appeal to essence knowledge. Recently, Vaidya and Wallner have raised what they call the *problem of modal epistemic friction* (2021). This is intended to be a problem for the three major approaches to the epistemology of modality – the conceivability, counterfactual, and deduction theories. The basic

² See e.g. Zalta (2006), Cowling (2013), Wildman (2013), Brogaard and Salerno (2013), Denby (2014), and Livingstone-Banks (2017); for critical discussion, see e.g. Skiles (2015), Wildman (2016), and Steward (2015).

³ Finean essentialism is sometimes characterized in terms of *grounding* rather than defining or analysing modality; Lowe, for example, says, 'modalities are grounded in essence. That is, all truths about what is metaphysically necessary or possible ... obtain in virtue of the essences of things' (2012: 110). See also Kment (2014), Rosen (2010), and Tahko (2015: 156, 165).

idea is that, for any of these accounts to yield modal knowledge (i.e., knowledge about what is metaphysically necessary/possible), we must already have an antecedent grasp of essence.

Consider the conceivability account, in the vein of Yablo (1993) and Chalmers (2002). While details of specific instances of said account vary wildly, the core idea here is that we can use conceivability to get to modal knowledge. Suppose we want to discover if P is possible. According to the conceivability account, we do so by attempting to conceive of a scenario where P is the case. If we can, then P is genuinely possible. Alternatively, we can discover that P is necessary by attempting to conceive that not-P, failing, and then being ‘epistemically led’ from this inconceivability to not-P’s impossibility (Vaidya and Wallner 2021: S1913).

The problem comes in when we think about how we conceive the scenarios. For me to conceive of a scenario where, say, there exists a piece of transparent iron, I need to construct a representation of there being such a proof. So, let’s suppose I construct such a representation. How confident am I that this representation is in fact representative of there being a piece of see-through iron, rather than, say, a situation where a group of engineers come along waving a bar of transparent stuff telling me that it’s iron?

Vaidya & Wallner’s answer is that we should be confident when we have ‘at least not violated the nature of the entities in question’ (2021: S1914). In other words, a minimal condition on my being confident is that the representation does not violate any relevant essences. But then, for me to be confident that no violation has occurred, I ‘must have either implicit or explicit essentialist information about *what* iron is. This essentialist information must also put [me] in a position to know that transparent iron is possible on the basis of conceiving [the scenario]...’ (Vaidya & Wallner 2021: S1913). In other words, I already need to know something about iron’s essence in order to determine whether the constructed representation is in fact suitable for producing modal knowledge.

As with the conceivability account, so with the counterfactual and deductive theories. The counterfactual account, as developed by Williamson (2007), seems to need essence knowledge in order to determine which background information we hold fixed while imaginatively evaluating counterfactuals. Meanwhile, a Kripkean deduction theory needs essentialist information to construct/justify bridge principles like ‘If x is a human, then x is essentially human.’

So, in every case, it seems we need prior essence knowledge to ensure that our epistemic activities are properly aligned. In this way, essence knowledge provides the friction needed for the modal epistemologies to get traction. Without the essentialist knowledge, there is nothing to constrain our conceiving etc. – and without said constraint, there is no reason to think that they are tracking genuine possibility/necessity.

The problem of modal epistemic friction is a major issue facing many (all?) accounts of modal epistemology. But, more relevantly, it naturally leads to an independent epistemology of essence. We need to know the essences of things in order to get our modal epistemic machinery running. So we had better come up with a story about how we know these essences!

Finally, as well as massively impacting the debate about the metaphysics of essence, the Finean insight also makes it clear why we need an epistemology of essence which is distinct from our modal epistemology. However well developed a modal epistemology we might have, it is never going to sufficiently explain our knowledge of essence. Modal epistemology is designed to help us grasp intensional matters. But, given the insight, we know that essence is a hyperintensional notion. To put the point in our earlier terms: modal epistemology will never give us a way to distinguish between genuinely essential and merely necessary properties – it can only tell us whether an object necessarily has a certain property. So it is simply not fine grained enough for the job. We need a specific, hyperintensional epistemic account.⁴

⁴ One might be tempted to think that Finean Essentialism itself delivers an argument for thinking of essence epistemology as a separate project. As it is metaphysically prior, it *prima facie* seems that if we want to know about

Taken together, these motivate developing an independent essence epistemology (or at least thinking of it as a project distinct from modal epistemology). But what should this essence epistemology look like? In the next section, I examine four approaches that are extensions or modifications of familiar modal epistemologies.

§3. “Classical” approaches

The four approaches to be discussed are all variants of well-known modal epistemologies. The idea (or perhaps just the hope!) is that we can use the extensive discussion and development that has taken place with the modal epistemology debates as a way to kick-start essence epistemology.

The first is an *essence conceivability account*. Something like this was roughly proposed by Vaidya (2010), though (i) he focuses on ‘variation in imagination’, and (ii) the account he explicitly develops is only meant to deliver objective understanding, not strictly knowledge. Still, extending his project so as to make it a full-blown epistemology of essence seems fairly natural. The basic process here is broadly in line with conceivability approaches to modal epistemology (hence there will be just as many nuances and variations as with in the modal case). That said, the rough idea goes something like this: if we want to know whether a property F is essential to object o, then we should try to conceive of a scenario where o exists and lacks F. If we can, then we know that o isn’t essentially F – it is a mere accident. Alternatively, if we can’t, then we can conclude F is essential to o.

The second view is, much like the first, a variation on a familiar modal approach – specifically, on counterfactual approaches to modal epistemology (see e.g. Williamson 2007, Kroedel 2012). According to the *essential counterfactual account*, we come to know the essences of objects via counterfactual reasoning. More specifically, if we want to know whether o is essentially F, then we propose a counterfactual with o’s not being F as the antecedent. We then suppose this antecedent, either by imagining a suitable scenario, and develop this supposition by appealing to additional reasoning, offline predicative mechanisms, and other background knowledge and beliefs (Williamson 2007: 152f). Given all of this, if developing the counterfactual in this way does not lead to a contradiction, then we can conclude that o is not essentially F. In contrast, if we end up at a contradiction, then we come to know that o is essentially F.

Both of these are fairly natural, straightforward ways to approach an epistemology of essence. Unfortunately, both are fundamentally flawed. This is because neither approach is guaranteed to be a good guide to *essence*. Recall the Finean insight – not all necessary properties are genuinely essential, some are only merely necessary. Or, as Tahko puts it, ‘...not all necessary truths about a given entity x are essential truths about x ... essential truths are a proper subset of the necessary truths about x’ (2018: 94). The trouble is that these two methods only ever deliver necessities. That is, nothing here helps to make the relevant and required hyperintensional demarcation. For necessity is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for essentiality. And both these approaches only ever show that a property is (weakly) necessary. So they cannot be good essentialist epistemologies. As before, they are not fine grained enough.

The third view is also a variation on the deductive approach to modal epistemology (see e.g., Kripke (1971), Lowe (2008, 2012), and Hale (2013)). According to the *essential deductive model*, we come to know the essences of individuals via a kind of deductive argument. We first have an empirical premise about the object, which tells us that it has a relevant property. In addition, we have a kind of essentialist bridge principle, which says that if an object has the relevant property, then it essentially has said property. Finally, we conclude, via *modus ponens*, that our object essentially has the property. Schematically, the process is something like:

1. Object o has property F
2. If x has F then x is essentially F

modality, then we should learn about essence! However, metaphysical priority does not entail epistemic priority. So, this motivation does not seem very successful.

3. Therefore, o is essentially F

Unfortunately, this view also has a major problem, which is close to an issue raised against the modal deductive approach by Roca-Royes (2019). Namely, we need to already know the relevant essentialist knowledge we are meant to be deriving to perform the derivation.

To get a grip on the object, it is useful to note that many of the relevant properties/concepts we will invoke in our deductions are *modally* or *essentially loaded*. For example, consider the following quartet:

x is human* iff x is a member of the species *homo sapien sapien*
 x is human+ iff x is human* and x 's origins are genuinely essential to it
 x is human# iff x is human* and x 's origins are merely necessary to it
 x is human- iff x is human* and x 's origins are accidental to it

Now, consider Amanda. Granting she is a human*, we might then wonder, is she a human+, a human-, or a human#? There's nothing in the stated definition of human* that settles the matter – in fact, there doesn't seem to be *anything* that settles whether origin is essential, necessary, or accidental to a human*. Of course, we might insist that origin is genuinely essential to all human*s. But this begs the question, pre-supposing the very essentialist knowledge that we are supposedly going to derive; we would then be assuming Amanda essentially has the origin that she does in order to then derive the essentiality of her origin. Further, even if we somehow come to know that Amanda's origins are at least necessary to her, we still wouldn't know whether Amanda is human+ or a human#. To settle that question, we would need to already know whether her origin is merely necessary or genuinely essential to her. But this is exactly what we are meant to be deriving! Thus, as Roca-Royes says, '...knowledge that [Amanda] is a human+ involves knowledge that [Amanda's] origins are essential to her. [We] cannot therefore acquire knowledge of the latter via a deduction that exploits antecedent knowledge of the former' (2019: 12). In this way, the essential deductive view does not look like a satisfying epistemology of essence either.⁵

The final method is an extension of the idea that we can learn modal facts via perception and/or empirical investigation (see e.g. (Legg (2012), Hanrahan (2009), and Strohming (2015)). According to the *empirical essence view*, we come to know the essential properties of objects via empirical investigation, broadly construed. The basic idea is that we can, via empirically examining an object, come to know its essential nature. While I am not aware of anyone who explicitly holds this view in the literature, I suspect that there are some metaphysicians out there who think something like this.⁶

I have admittedly left this last account rather vague. This is partially because I see it as a rather big church – it can include everything from mere perception to extensive scientific experimentation and research. But it is also because I suspect that, once fully fleshed out, this view effectively collapses into one of the others described above. For example, we might think that science tells us the essences of things by e.g. helping us track which of its features support and survive counterfactual variation, which is just a form of the essential counterfactual account.

Regardless of the details, I don't see how this can be an adequate epistemology of essence. This is primarily because it is not clear how this view could even get us to mere

⁵ For what it is worth, I suspect that something like this argument can be turned on an intuition-based essentialist epistemology derived from intuition approaches to modal epistemology. However, spelling this out is a task for another day. For further discussion of this epistemology of modality, see e.g. Bonjour (1998), Bealer (2002), and Chudnoff (2013).

⁶ A relevant anecdote: at a conference some years ago, in response to my claim that there was no reason for thinking that human beings are essentially human, another philosopher insisted that I 'just had look at him' to see it. I retorted that my looking wasn't really making the essentialist point any clearer, but asked if it would perhaps help if he stood up.

necessities, let alone genuinely essential properties. The point here is a familiar one: empirical investigation alone doesn't demarcate necessities and true accidental generalizations. Moreover, even if we could find a way to suss out necessities, there is nothing that would vindicate judging a property as being genuinely essential rather than merely necessary. At best, this story would only get us enough support to assert the disjunction that it is one or the other. But that is a long way from being a good epistemic story.

Summing up, in this section we have examined and ultimately rejected as wanting four approaches to essence epistemology. All four were based on existing modal accounts, which was the source of their major downfall: in each case, the account didn't give us a suitable way to vindicate distinguishing between a property's being genuinely essential versus merely necessary, the core of the Finean insight. And any story that cannot do that cannot be an adequate epistemology of essence.

§4. "New Wave" Approaches

In light of the previous section, it seems like the old ways have failed us. So, let's try something new. Specifically, this section examines four approaches to the epistemology of essence that are *not* based on familiar modal epistemologies. To spoil the eventual result: I will argue that these too face significant problems, such that they cannot be the full story about our knowledge of essence either.

The first, advocated by Kment (2014, 2021), is the *inference to the best explanation account*. The idea here is that we can derive knowledge of essence facts via abductive inference. An example can get us going:

Suppose I am able to recognize a Bundt cake by its look, taste, and smell, but I don't know what it is to be a Bundt cake. One day, I watch you make a dish that I recognize to be a Bundt cake. ... I can consequently support certain assumptions about the essence of Bundt-cake-hood abductively. (Kment 2021: 1970-1971)

While this is about the general essence of Bundt-cake hood, it seems plausible to extend this to objective essence. Thus I might come to learn that cake *c* essentially has certain properties by discovering that it is a Bundt cake – so, e.g., *c* was essentially made in such-and-such a fashion, essentially includes such-and-such ingredients, etc.

One immediate issue with this account is that it can at best deliver only partial essential knowledge (a point that Kment himself admits). More substantively, there is a lurking version of the earlier objection we saw from Roca-Royes. To know that cake *c* essentially is made in such-and-such a manner, we would need to know that *c* is an instance of the (essentially loaded) property *Bundt cake+*, rather than a *Bundt cake#*, which only has its production method merely necessarily, or even a *Bundt cake-*, for which the production method is entirely accidental. But this is the sort of thing that our essentialist epistemology should be sorting out for us, not requiring that we already know.

A second option is the *conceptual competence account* (Kment 2014, 2021; Peacocke 1999). The idea here is that competence with certain expressions requires knowing the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying them; so, competent speakers will then be able to know that if the relevant entity exists or the associated predicate is satisfied, then it is essentially thus-and-so. For such essentialist knowledge is part and parcel of what it is to be competent with the concept!⁷

Notably, this view walks directly into a version of the Roca-Royes objection: we need to already know the essential properties of a thing for this account to deliver essential knowledge. For nothing in the concept *human** tells me that a *human** essentially has the origin it actually

⁷ Something like this might be what Lowe has in mind when he says that to 'think comprehendingly about something, I surely need to know what it is that I am thinking about' (2012: 944).

does. So, to know that Socrates essentially originates as he actually did, we need to already know that this origin is essential to him. For only then will we know that he is properly categorized as a human+, rather than human# or human-. But that's what we are meant to be learning in the first place! So, we are not making much progress.

Similarly, there are a number of concepts where competent speakers have significant doubts about the mere necessity, let alone the genuine essentiality, of relevant properties. For example, Walton (1970) contends that *art kinds* are quite thin with regards to essential properties. Instead, such kinds are said to have standard, contra-standard, and variable features (relative to that kind). Importantly, particular features can shift between these over time. For example, end notes are typically taken to be a contra-standard feature for a work being fiction. However, with the rise of novelists like Foster Wallace, such a property might gradually become variable (and, God help us, potentially even standard). In this way, there are few if any features that are strictly necessary for being an instance of a given art kind. Still, it seems like quite a stretch to say that Walton isn't competent with a concept like 'painting' or 'fugue'.

The final two approaches both turn on some fairly substantive metaphysical assumptions. *Maximal multi-thingism* is a position advocated for by Leslie (2011) and Kment (2014: 7.1, 2018). According to this view, every material object is co-located with countless other objects, and the only difference between them is their essential properties. More concretely, consider Bundt cake c. Suppose c essentially has properties $P_1 \dots P_n$. Per the maximum multi-thingist, c spatially overlaps a huge number of objects – c1, which essentially has properties $P_1 \dots P_{n-1}$ but has P_n only accidentally, c2, which has properties $P_1 \dots P_{n-2}$ essentially but P_{n-1} and P_n accidentally, c3... The maximal multi-thingist can then use various techniques to ensure that particular terms pick out one specific individual in the overlapping cornucopia; for example, they could say that being a competent user of the name 'c' requires being (at least implicitly) aware that something must essentially have properties $P_1 \dots P_n$.

One obvious issue with this view is that, to make it work requires an absolute ontological explosion. Such a view is committed to a whole lot of things! But that's not really that troublesome. Unfortunately, the issue of referential ambiguity is more problematic than the above makes out, since it yet again requires that we have knowledge of essence in order to come to knowledge of essence. Take Socrates. What properties are genuinely essential to him? To know the answer to that, I need to know which of this huge overlapping collection is 'Socrates' (rather than Socrates+, Socrates-, Socrates*, etc.). But, to do that, I need to already know which properties are essential to him – otherwise, I might confuse him with one of the other overlapping objects. So we need to know Socrates essence in order to know who Socrates is, which we then need in order know what's essential to him.

Finally, there is *essential bundle theory*, developed by Jago (2016, 2018, 2021a, 2021b).⁸ Like all bundle theories, EBT reduces material objects to bundles of properties (strictly, property instances, but we can largely set this complication aside). However, per EBT, the properties in the bundle are all essential to the relevant object – in other words, the bundle is the essence. More specifically, EBT says that 'Material object x is essentially F iff (an instance of) F is part of x's bundle' (Jago 2021a: S1442; see also Barker & Jago 2018: 2976). Notably, modal and sortal properties are not included in bundles, being instead analysed in terms of bundle-membership.

Moreover, much like with Maximal multi-thingism, EBT allows for a large amount of overlap between objects (i.e., bundles). Thus, 'for any spatiotemporal region, the property instances instantiated in it may bundle together in distinct ways, constituting distinct material objects' (Barker & Jago 2018: 2973).

This multiplicity is what allows us to use EBT as a way to get essentialist knowledge. First, we may 'specify a particular bundle of properties by specifying a location and enumerating the properties thereby bundled'; depending on how things are in that region, even a 'partial

⁸ See also Barker and Jago (2018).

enumeration of properties may be enough to single out a unique bundle' (Jago 2021b: S1990). Moreover, many of the properties we include in our specification will be such that only a single bundle in the specified region includes the property. For example, if we point at a particular region near a 5th floor wall in the MOMA and specify a bundle including the property *being an artwork*, then we are likely to pick out the painting *Starry Night*. This is because, according to Jago, no other bundles in the region include this property. Building on this, we the EBTER can say that,

When one has a referent *a* in mind and conceptualises it under some kind *F*, and thereby believes it to be essentially *F*, that belief will often constitute knowledge that *a* is essentially *F*. ... For a true belief to constitute knowledge, it must have an appropriate connection to reality: one that is reliable and which renders the belief safe from nearby error. ... the reliable connection to reality [in this case] arises due, in part, to the beliefs one forms about the kind of object one is thinking about. In conceptualising *Starry Night* as an artwork, I single out in thought a property bundle containing *being an artwork*. (And if all else goes right in singling out the object of my thought, that bundle is none other than *Starry Night*.) So the object I single out in this way is guaranteed to be essentially an artwork. This establishes a robust connection between my belief that *Starry Night* is essentially an artwork and the fact that it is. (2021b: S1992)

In other words, our conceptualization allows us to pick out a bundle that features relevant properties. Then, since anything in the bundle is essential, it follows that we know the relevant essentialist claim.

One lurking issue is how to make sense of accidental properties. For example, plausibly we *know* that Socrates is not essentially snub-nosed, even though this property would have likely been a part of his bundle. So, how to make sense of knowledge of inessential properties? In reply to this issue, Jago says that

The best explanation for this knowledge of inessentiality is that it is embedded in our concepts. It is built into the concept of being a certain kind of thing—a person, a human being, an artefact, a material entity—that certain other properties are inessential to things of those kinds. On this approach, it is part of our concept of being a person that, although a person must be located somewhere, their exact location is not part of what makes them the person they are. Roughly the same goes for our concept of artefacts. This gives rise to knowledge of inessentiality. (2021b: S1993)

The trouble is that this throws us right back to the familiar point from Roca-Royes: which concepts should we take as being applicable in the relevant case? When we consider the Socrates bundle, does it include or make reference to his origin? Is the bundle properly picked out using human+, human#, or human-? Cases can be made for any of the three. So, much as before, it looks like we need to already have essentialist knowledge for the story to get going. In this way, we haven't made much progress after all.

§5. Where do we go from here?

Let's re-assess. We started off by noting the Finean insight: there is a distinction between genuinely essential and merely necessary properties. This justifies searching for a particular epistemology of essence. It also serves as a key test: a good epistemic story should tell us how (or why) we can demarcate those properties that an object has whenever it exists into one of these two categories.

With this in mind, we then looked at eight distinct approaches to the epistemology of essence. The initial four were based on familiar modal epistemologies. Sadly, these failed, largely

because they weren't able to support the kind of hyperintensional distinctions that the Finean insight requires.

This led us to the next four, the 'New wave' approaches. Unfortunately, these also proved to be flawed. In particular, they all required that we already possess much of the essentialist knowledge that they were intended to deliver. This was brought about via a judicious application of the objection originally raised by Roca-Royes.

We seem to be at an impasse. We need a good epistemology of essence. But, the views discussed above don't seem to offer much promise. So, what should we do? Where do we go from here? I think there are basically four options.

First is a kind of Lockean scepticism. Effectively, we accept that metaphysical essence is (essentially?!?) unknowable, and embrace the idea that, whatever really is essential to Socrates etc. is something that we can never know. This seems fairly disastrous for essentialist debate – we're all making in-principle unknowable claims! – and potentially for metaphysics more broadly (essence-talk crops up in a lot of places).

Second is to adopt what I call *Armstrongianism*, so named for the (likely apocryphal) quip from Louis Armstrong. Purportedly, when asked what Jazz is, Armstrong replied, 'If you have to ask, you'll never know.' Running with this, essentialists might say that we just *know* what is essential to various objects, and that those of us who are sceptical or confused about essentialist claims are fundamentally misguided. To my mind, this is better than the Lockean scepticism, but only just, since it makes essentialism into the worst kind of spooky metaphysics.

Third, we might develop an alternative essentialist epistemology, one that is unlike any of those surveyed here. Exactly what form this might take I don't know. However, I suspect that any alternative account will face a version of the Roca-Royes problem. Moreover, I remain sceptical that any such story will justify taking a property to be genuinely essential rather than merely necessary. But perhaps this is overly pessimistic.

Finally, we might adopt an extreme approach to essence. What I mean is either a kind of hyperessentialism, according to which every property an object has is essential to it, or an extreme haecceitism, where there are little to no essential properties. Both of these views have an epistemic advantage over any more moderate view in that they don't need to demarcate between (say) genuinely essential and merely necessary properties. That because the former says every property is genuinely essential, while the latter says (effectively) none are even merely necessary (rather, they're all accidental).⁹ Of course, these views face their own difficulties. Hyperessentialism seems utterly implausible on the face of it – *surely* I could lose a few kilos (otherwise this diet really *is* murder) – though it also has some defenders – see e.g. Karofsky (2021). Similarly for extreme haecceitism (see e.g. Mackie (2006) and Wildman MS for further discussion). But perhaps one lesson to take from the above is that, given how difficult it is to tell a story that supports a moderate position, these extreme options aren't as implausible as they might first appear.¹⁰

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⁹ Indeed, Lewis (1986: 241) talk about the 'burden of moderation' facing anyone who posits qualitative limits on how different a given object can be.

¹⁰ ACKNOWLEDGEMENT REDACTED

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