

THE CONTEXT OF ESSENCE¹

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I address two related questions: first, what is the best theory of how objects have *de re* modal properties? Second, what is the best defence of essentialism given the variability of our modal intuitions? I critically discuss several theories of how objects have their *de re* modal properties and address the most threatening antiessentialist objection to essentialism: the variability of our modal intuitions. Drawing on linguistic treatments of vagueness and ambiguity, I show how essentialists can accommodate the variability of modal intuitions while holding that objects have their modal properties independently of contexts.

Essentialism is a doctrine about objects and their properties. Roughly, an object *O* has property *P* essentially when *O* must have *P* in order to be the object that it is.² If *O* has *P* essentially, then, necessarily, in any world in which *O* exists, *O* must have *P*.³ Given that an object has the same essential properties in every possible world in which it exists, we can think of the essential properties as capturing the nature of the object.

According to this picture, essentialism is grounded upon *de re* modality: the essential properties of an object are a feature of the way these objects are in themselves, and are not merely an artefact of the way we talk or think about them.⁴ I think it is a fact about my cat, C. Louise, that she could not have been a banana. This is a fact about her. It is a fact about a particular protein that for it to exist it must include certain amino acids. This is a fact about it. More generally, it seems right to say that there are ways the world is independently of our descriptions or characterizations of the world, and these ways include facts about objects' natures.⁵ Essentialism is a theory about these facts, i.e., a theory of the objective, context-independent *de re* natures of objects, and quantified modal logic is the framework used to model the view.

¹ I'm indebted to David Lewis and John Hawthorne for discussion of a very early version of the ideas expressed in this paper, and to Frank Jackson, Kathrin Koslicki, Denis Robinson, Jason Stanley, Brian Weatherson and audiences at the 2001 Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference, the 2001 Annual Conference of the Australasian Association for Philosophy, and the University of Washington for comments on written versions.

² Here I am basically following Fine [1994].

³ I'm not distinguishing here between existing in a world and being represented as existing in a world.

⁴ So in the essentialist picture, objects have *de re* modal properties such as *being essentially P* or *being accidentally Q*, and the *de re* modal properties an object has are independent of context.

⁵ The intuitive case for essentialism and *de re* modality is something like this: we have a reasonably robust understanding of familiar objects in our world such as cats, dogs, pencils, computers, and the like, and this understanding involves (at least partial) knowledge of their natures. Not only do we know something about the natures of the objects around us, but we know that that different objects have different natures and we can often recognize some of these differences. These differences between natures of objects are not merely differences in ways of describing and characterizing objects; they are ontological, i.e., they are characteristics of the objects themselves.

The debate over essence runs deep in contemporary philosophy—some of our most hotly debated questions are grounded on the issue of whether things have (nontrivial) essential properties. Arguments from differences in essential properties hold that entities with different essential properties have different natures. Questions about the identity of the mind and the brain, about the relationship between persons and their bodies, whether a shaped lump of bronze constitutes but is not identical to a statue, and even whether the reference of names in modal contexts is constant are all centred on whether seemingly straightforward essentialist claims about essential differences in the natures of things can and should be reinterpreted from a more sophisticated antiessentialist perspective.⁶ For those who wish to deny the relevant identities, the viability of the essentialist program is of the first importance.

Below, I will critically discuss several theories of how objects have their *de re* modal properties. After developing the view I favour, I will discuss the most threatening antiessentialist objection to essentialism: the variability of our modal intuitions. Drawing on linguistic treatments of vagueness and ambiguity, I will show how essentialists can accommodate the variability of modal intuitions while holding that objects have their modal properties independently of contexts. So the paper addresses two related questions: first, what is the best theory of how objects have their *de re* modal properties? Second, how can we defend essentialism against the variability of (some of) our modal intuitions?

I. Against Primitive *De Re* Modality

If essentialism is the view that objects have *de re* modal properties, in particular, that objects can have properties essentially and accidentally, to develop a theory of essentialism we need to start with an account of what it is for an object to have such properties.

The need to explain what it is for an object to have *de re* modal properties is often resisted by advocates of essentialism. Instead, what it is for objects to have *de re* modal properties is taken as primitive: objects are substances which are not reducible to anything more fundamental and have their *de re* modal and persistence properties in virtue of being ‘identified by’ or ‘falling under’ sorts or kinds. A statue is essentially statue shaped because it falls under the statue-sort, so cannot persist through remoulding into a pot. The lump of bronze which constitutes the statue at time *t*, shares the same matter and occupies precisely the same spatiotemporal region as the statue, is not essentially statue shaped and could persist through a remoulding into a pot because it falls under the bronze-sort.⁷ Call the advocate of such a view a ‘substance theorist’.

On the face of it, the view has intuitive appeal. But by taking substance, sorthood and hence *de re* modality as unanalysable and hence primitive, any counterintuitive consequences of the view are difficult to explain or make palatable, since we know so little about why the objects have the modal and persistence properties they do. Such consequences

⁶ Fine [2003] argues that such antiessentialist reinterpretations cannot be accommodated in a semantics of natural language.

⁷ Wiggins [1967; 1980; 2001] is one well-known proponent of this view.

have been well-discussed in the literature on constitution: if the lump and the statue share their matter and occupy precisely the same spatiotemporal region, how can they differ in their modal properties? It seems, at least *prima facie*, that modal properties should supervene on the nonmodal properties shared by the statue and the lump. Substance theorists, as primitivists, can give no explanation of how these objects have their *de re* modal properties and hence give no explanation of their modal difference.

A related worry involves the consequence implied by the claim that the lump and the statue are not identical: the lump and the statue coincide, so two numerically distinct objects share their matter and occupy the very same spatiotemporal region. But without any explanation, this result is radically counterintuitive, for it seems to contradict our usual way of thinking about material objects as individuated by their matter and region. The substance theorist has little to say in response—coincidence just is a consequence of his view, as his primitivism prevents him from having sufficient materials to construct an explanation. This leaves him in the unfortunate position of being able to marshal strong and plausible commonsense intuitions to support his view but of being unable to accommodate these intuitions in a philosophically respectable way.⁸

To add to the problems of the primitivist, insisting that *de re* modality, kindhood and persistence conditions must be taken as primitives is hard to justify in the face of the promising approach employed by many metaphysicians of reducing *de re* modality to representation relations objects have to abstract possibilia. The (actualist) representationalist holds that objects have their *de re* modal properties in virtue of being represented in certain ways by specified abstract representations—ersatz worlds, cashed out as pictures, sets of propositions, sets of properties, combinations of states of affairs, or the like. The view is reductive in the sense that *de re* modality is reduced to facts about representation, even if (as some argue) the modal is not reduced to the purely nonmodal. There are debates over the right way to *de re* represent and over other bits of the overall approach, but as long as the representationalist has an adequate notion of crossworld identity or counterpart theory it seems she can give a reasonably plausible characterization of *de re* modality as supervenient upon relations that objects stand in to abstract representations.

Finally, antiessentialists have presented a serious objection to essentialism based on the seeming context-dependence of our modal intuitions about an object *O*'s essential properties: in different contexts we have different intuitions about which properties are essential to *O*. Antiessentialists who embrace *de re* modality have used this objection to argue that whether objects have essential properties must be a context-dependent matter.⁹ Any theory of essentialism needs an adequate response to this important objection, but the substance theorist can say little that is positive in response. This is because the substance theorist hasn't really given a theory of how objects have their *de re* modal properties, he has merely stated that they have them because they fall under sorts. Since the substance theorist has no developed positive theory that can be amplified to address objections,

⁸ In Paul [forthcoming a] I give an account of coincidence that explains these modal differences consistent with the treatment of *de re* modality I develop below.

⁹ There is a second, related objection involving the possibility of small changes adding up to big (unacceptable) changes that I don't have room to address here. For details see Forbes [1985, 1986]; Salmon [1986]; Robertson [1998]; and Hawthorne and Gendler [2000]. I argue for a way to resolve the issue in my [forthcoming b].

he can at best re-emphasize the intuitive plausibility of his view and attempt to find flaws in the antiessentialist argument.

II. Fusions and *De Re* Modal Properties

For essentialists who reject substance theory and its primitivism about *de re* modality, the most attractive theories of objects are the substrate-attribute theory or the bundle theory.¹⁰ I prefer bundle theory. To explain what it is for an object to have *de re* modal properties, I start with a characterization of what an object is: an object is a fusion of properties, and hold that composition with respect to property parts (as opposed to spatial or temporal parts) is restricted.¹¹

Taking an object to be a fusion of properties preserves the intuitive plausibility of bundle theory—that an object is somehow composed of its properties—and subsumes the theory of objects under the broader aegis of mereology. Properties that are members of the fusion are parts of the object, and the primitive relation of fusing, already a part of standard ontology, is used here to explain how an object is generated from a collection of properties. Moreover, since fusion is restricted, we dispense with the need for a coinstantiation or colocation requirement.¹²

Once we have an account of what objecthood involves, namely, fusions of properties, the need for an explication of what it is for something to have *de re* modal properties becomes clear. Consider an object O. How could O have P essentially or have P accidentally? There are different options.

We might think that being P is a property included in the fusion that is O, but so is, e.g., being accidentally P. This would mean that being accidentally P is simply a property that is taken as a primitive component of the bundle that is O. Arguably, this makes a certain amount of sense, since we certainly want to agree that in some sense a statue made of bronze has the property of being made of bronze as well as the property of being accidentally

¹⁰ Under substrate theory, an object consists of a nonqualitative substrate which somehow has properties. The main objection to this view involves the notion of the nonqualitative substrate: it isn't clear what such a thing might be. If the substrate is merely a spatiotemporal region which has properties, then depending on how the region is said to have its properties, the view collapses into a bundle theory where the properties of the bundle are somehow tied together using spatiotemporal location. If the substrate is taken to be something else, then it is some sort of primitive stuff that cannot be defined in terms of qualitative or spatiotemporal properties. In any case, the questions about how an object characterized under the substrate theory has *de re* modal properties will be similar to the questions for the bundle theorist.

¹¹ I develop this theory of objects and their parts in my [2002]. There I indicate that I prefer to hold that composition of property parts is restricted, but develop the account in terms of unrestricted composition in order to keep the view as simple and broad as possible.

¹² Bundle theory traditionally takes objects to be sets of collocated or coinstantiated properties, since not just any set of properties is an object, and either coinstantiation or colocation is taken as primitive. If colocation is taken not as a primitive but as *same location*, such that bundles must be co-located properties or tropes, there can be only one object to a place at a time. Not only does this imply the falsity of contemporary physical theories according to which multiple numerically distinct electrons can occupy precisely the same place at the same time, it implies that it is not possible to have numerically distinct collocated objects such as a person and the lump of matter she is composed of or unlocated objects such as disembodied minds.

made of bronze. But under this conception an immediate question arises: are the properties of being made of bronze and being accidentally made of bronze entirely distinct properties? Further, under essentialism, does it really make sense to think of an object simply having properties such as being made of bronze, i.e., having such properties *simpliciter*? Shouldn't we say that an object has all of its properties either essentially or accidentally? The fact that O has P seems to be derivative in some sense from the fact that O has P essentially or O has P accidentally. (What way is there for O to have P other than to have it essentially or to have it accidentally?) These considerations suggest that what it is for a property to be essentially P or to be accidentally P somehow involves or supervenes in part on O's being P.

So we should consider alternatives that respect the idea that the property of being P is somehow part of the supervenience base for being essentially P or being accidentally P. One way to do this is to hold that being essentially P or being accidentally P are different ways of having the same base property, e.g., being essentially made of bronze and being accidentally made of bronze involve different ways of having the property of being made of bronze. In terms of our theory of objects, this means that a fusion could fuse property P more tightly than property Q, and this difference is just the difference between P being had essentially and Q being had accidentally. This view makes facts about *de re* modality supervene on the kind of fusion that gives us O. If a different object, O*, has P essentially and also has Q essentially, then the way that the properties of O* are fused is different from the way that the properties of O are fused.¹³

I might be essentially female and accidentally corporeal. Some other object might be accidentally female and accidentally corporeal. If so, and the account I've given of discriminatory fusion is correct, the way my properties are fused is different from the way the accidentally female object's properties are fused. If we have an object that is a statue made from a lump of bronze, and we think the statue is not identical to the lump of bronze, we might say that the fusion that is the statue is such that being statue shaped is fused more tightly (had essentially) than being made of bronze (had accidentally). The lump of bronze has these properties fused in a different way; being statue shaped is fused less tightly (had accidentally) than being made of bronze (had essentially). Since the same properties are fused, albeit in different ways, we have an explanation of the difference between the *de re* modal properties of the statue and of the lump of bronze. This is an example of how a non-primitivist account of *de re* modality can respond to scepticism about essentialism (and constitution) in a way that the primitivist about modality cannot.

Cashing out *de re* modality in terms of different ways of fusing properties is more attractive than the view that objects double up on properties by having them *simpliciter* along with having them essentially or accidentally. But the view imports an objectionable multitude of fusion relations, because for each object there corresponds a way of fusing. For those who already like the idea that objects have individual haecceities, it may be able to assimilate haecceities to ways of fusing, but many (including myself) want to keep the

¹³ Thomson argues that when one object constitutes another, the objects share their spatial parts but differ in whether they have (some of) these parts essentially. 'In short [the lump of clay] is more tightly tied to its parts than [the statue it constitutes], and that is the ontological difference between them marked by saying that [the lump of clay] is not identical with but merely constituted [the statue]' [1998:157]. This interesting view bears an obvious affinity to the view that there exist different property fusion relations.

number of fusion relations to a minimum. For reasons like this, I prefer fusion of properties to be constant across objects.

Given this preference, a better way to explicate *de re* modality is to hold that objects have *de re* modal properties in virtue of the properties they are represented as having or are not represented as having in other possible worlds. In other words, O's property of being accidentally made of bronze supervenes on O's property of being made of bronze plus the relational property of standing in represented-by relations to representations of objects that are not made of bronze. The view makes O's *de re* modal properties supervene in part on representation. In virtue of the fact that modality is cashed out in terms of representation, my account is reductive even though a complete reduction of the modal to the nonmodal may not be accomplished.

In the representationalist, actualist version I prefer, nonactual worlds are characterized by abstract representations R, and O's *de re* modal properties supervene in part on relational properties of being abstractly represented (or not) in some (linguistic, pictorial, propositional, etc.) way by specified (parts of) Rs. Representation by abstract representations is based upon qualitative similarity. I take this ersatzist approach towards *de re* modality to be—at least broadly—in conformity with the way that most philosophers who accept that modality involves representability want to understand the notion.

Here is the best way to explicate modality-as-representation: take O's core properties to be $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$. By 'core properties' I mean to pick out all the properties included in O except relational representational properties such as those I define below and conjunctions (or disjunctions) involving such relational representational properties. Core properties will tend to be intrinsic and empirically discriminable properties such as having mass m , having colour c , etc.

If O is n_1 but might have been n_{n+1} instead (i.e., O has n_1 accidentally), the fusion of $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$ stands in a represented-by relation to a representation of the fusion of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$. (For ease of exposition, assume that $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$ stands in only one such represented-by relation.) The fusion $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$'s standing in this represented-by relation generates the relational property R_{PROP} of standing in the represented-by relation to a representation of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$, and O includes $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$ as well as R_{PROP} . We can stipulate that an object is *de re* represented as P in virtue of that object including relational representational properties such that its core stands in a represented-by relation to a representation of something that is P, so, in this case, in virtue of O's including R_{PROP} , O is *de re* represented as $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$. What it is for O to be accidentally n_1 is for O to be n_1 but *de re* represented as not being n_1 (in this case, by being *de re* represented as being $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$).¹⁴

If O includes R_{PROP} , does this mean that the abstract representation of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$ itself is included in what O is? In other words, is O something like an actualist version of a modal realist's modal continuant, i.e., an actualist version of an individual spread across many possible worlds?¹⁵ No: the abstract representation of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$ is not included in O. R_{PROP} is a relational property that is different from (but entailed by the existence of)

¹⁴ What determines that $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$ stands in a represented-by relation to the representation of the fusion of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$ in the first place? The (abstract representation of) qualitative similarity.

¹⁵ Lewis [1986: 210–20] discusses a modal realist treatment of modal continuants. (I'm indebted to Ted Sider and Bill Lycan for pressing me to clarify this point.)

the structured entity of $n_1, n_2 \dots n_n$ standing in the represented-by relation to the representation of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$. $N_1, n_2 \dots n_n$'s standing in the represented-by relation to the representation of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$ generates the monadic relational representational property R_{PROP} , the property of standing in the represented-by relation to a representation of $n_2 \dots n_n, n_{n+1}$ that is included in O .¹⁶

With regard to our sample object O , O is accidentally n_1 because O includes n_1 and R_{PROP} ; being accidentally n_1 supervenes on O 's including both n_1 and R_{PROP} . If O were to have n_1 essentially then it would lack the property of having n_1 accidentally, i.e., O would include n_1 but lack R_{PROP} .¹⁷ The representational facts about O thus determine the *de re* modal nature of O .

As I've expressed my view, I am neutral between the claim that *de re* representation involves (abstract representations of) fusions that would be O , if actual, and the claim that *de re* representation involves (abstract representations of) fusions that, if actual, would merely be counterparts of O . What the view does not allow, however, is for representational context-dependence: the representation of fusions remains constant across contexts.¹⁸

This account of *de re* modal properties allows the essentialist to explain the difference between the *de re* modal properties of the statue and the lump as a difference between relational representational properties included in the statue and the lump, respectively, and hence explains material constitution in a way that primitivism cannot.¹⁹ More importantly, the account will give us a particularly straightforward way of handling the central objection to essentialism: the seeming inconstancy or variability of our modal intuitions.

III. The Inconstancy of *De Re* Modal Intuitions

That objects can have essential properties is much easier to establish than the more precise claim about which properties objects have essentially. Quine famously challenges essentialists on this front, asking how we are to determine what properties of an object define its nature—what is it about an object that makes it the case that it has some of its properties essentially and others accidentally? [Quine 1960: esp. 199; 1963: 155] The question expresses a desire to know more about what determines the nature of an object.

In the absence of an account of what it is about the object that determines the modal status of the properties it has, sceptics like Quine argue that there is nothing that determines that an object has some properties essentially and some accidentally, so the

¹⁶ This touches on the interesting question of how to define relational properties: are they structured properties, reducible to the entity that is the object plus the relation R and the other relata? Or are they numerically distinct properties entailed by the object's standing in R to other relata? I choose the latter, more natural option. Hence, when objects include their relational representational properties they do not include their representations as parts: there is no backdoor route to making objects into modal continuants.

¹⁷ I define *being essentially* P as having P but lacking the property of *being accidentally* P for two reasons: (a) simplicity and (b) it makes the best sense of how a fusion can have all its properties essentially.

¹⁸ Hence, I reject the inconstancy of Lewis's counterpart-theoretic approach, see my discussion below.

¹⁹ I discuss this in detail in my [forthcoming, a].

distinction between essential and accidental properties is, as Quine [1963: 155] calls it, 'invidious'. If nothing determines the *de re* modal status of such properties, then, sceptics suggest, the best explanation is that properties simply aren't had essentially or accidentally—since surely modal properties aren't had arbitrarily. The antirealist about *de re* modality might reject essentialism by arguing that modal facts about necessity and possibility attach to propositions expressed by sentences, not to properties had by objects, and our essentialist intuitions to the contrary can be explained by careful *de dicto* reconstructions of the claims we want to make.²⁰ Or, he might reject essentialism by arguing that essentialist intuitions are simply expressions of how we have trained ourselves to think about objects or of the conceptual scheme we've adopted rather than being grounded upon mind-independent *de re* modal facts.²¹

For those of us who remain unconvinced by expressivism or *de dicto* reconstructions of *de re* claims, a seemingly obvious way to respond to the sceptic is to argue that we can rely upon thought experiments involving possible worlds to help us determine essential properties. An argument for this view might run roughly as follows: given that, if P is essential to O then O cannot exist (is never represented as existing) without P, if we determine via a series of thought experiments that there is no world which can have (represent) O without P because O must have P in order to be the object that it is, then P is essential to O. This is the kind of approach that essentialists generally rely on when assessing the modal status of the properties of O. (Representative samples of this sort of essentialism include Forbes [1985], Kripke [1972], and McGinn [1976].)

But without some development, this reply is inadequate. The problem is that our intuitions seem to be subject to a wide spectrum of variability with respect to the modal status of most of the properties an object has. Richard Cartwright famously argues that this is really the main problem essentialists face from Quine's challenge.

Advocates of [essentialism] can be expected to disagree over particular cases. What are the essential attributes of, say, Dancer's Image? No doubt it will be counted essential that he is a horse and accidental that he was disqualified in this year's Kentucky Derby. But what of the attribute of being male, or of being a thoroughbred, or of not being a Clydesdale stallion? Here, I suppose, essentialists may disagree. Indeed, a reasonable essentialist might well take the position that these are hard cases that admit of no clear decision.

[1968: 615]

If we think that we lack clear intuitions about which properties of an object are essential to it, Quine's worry about arbitrariness might seem to have some bite: perhaps attributions of essence are arbitrary after all, making antirealism about essentialism much more attractive.

Cartwright's point is a good one: in very many cases, we find it is a difficult matter—to say the least—to determine more than a few of an object's essential properties. We can

²⁰ To do this is to follow in the footsteps of Carnap and C. I. Lewis. Some discussions of translations from *de re* to *de dicto* include Quine [1963: esp. 148–9], Mackie [1974], and Plantinga [1969].

²¹ I'm thinking here of a kind of modal expressivism: think of *de re* modal claims as expressing our cognitive stance towards objects or bits of the world rather than describing mind independent reality. This is a sort of neoQuinean way to go—reject all kinds of modal claims, *de re* and *de dicto*, except as expressions of our cognitive stance. I'm indebted to Philip Pettit for pointing out this option to me. If you want to be a full-on Quinean, you can simply reject the coherence of modal claims altogether.

consider the horse, Dancer's Image, and ask ourselves about its properties: which of these properties must it have in order to be the object that it is?

Try the property of being a stallion. Is Dancer's Image essentially a stallion? When we think of some of the characteristics of the horse, we might think that he is essentially a stallion, since (we imagine) his nature as a powerful and aggressive male champion seems to define at least part of what he is. But perhaps Dancer's Image could have been female. If so, then she could still have been powerful, aggressive, and a champion in a possible world, for there is no necessary connection between being a stallion and having these characteristics. So if we focus on the properties of being powerful and aggressive, perhaps we can dispense with the property of being a stallion, and think of a possible world where Dancer's Image is a female champion.

The problem is that in one light we can think of the horse qua stallion, and hence conclude that Dancer's Image is essentially a stallion or at least essentially male. But in another light where we emphasize different (i.e., non-stallion) characteristics but keep our imagination focused on enough original traits, we can think these different properties should count as essential instead. This is because when we consider whether Dancer's Image could have been P, a natural way to proceed is to imagine an object in a world that has most of the original properties of Dancer's Image along with property P, and try to determine whether this object could be Dancer's Image. But as long as we keep enough of the original properties constant, we can almost always convince ourselves that the P-object could be Dancer's Image.

This is a serious problem for the essentialist if she thinks that an object's nature is not adequately captured by the few essential properties we have reasonably clear intuitions about.²² As such an essentialist, I take the variability of our intuitions about which properties of objects are essential to constitute the most serious threat to essentialism. After all, essentialism has a solid intuitive grounding as part of a philosophical (and perhaps even somewhat pretheoretical) understanding of the world, and the success of quantified modal logic has provided a rigorous formal framework that can undergird the view. But if, on gentle investigation, the intuitive grounding turns out to be confused or even absent, then the robust ontological picture of the *de re* natures of objects that essentialism entails may be more costly than it is worth.

As I noted above, in reaction the sceptic might reject *de re* modality altogether and either reconstrue *de re* modal claims as *de dicto* claims or simply class *de re* modal claims as subjective expressions of some sort. This is a straightforward way to reject essentialism. But of those who think that we can make modal claims about properties had by objects, that is, for those who are realists about *de re* modality, and especially for those of us who want to reduce the having of modal properties to relations to abstract representations or to possibilia, the variability of modal intuitions can push towards a more subtle kind of

²² It is not avoidable by holding that, as we might elsewhere, that we can *stipulate* that Dancer's Image is in a particular world. The whole point here is to try to determine the intuitive case for whether a property is essential to Dancer's Image by determining whether Dancer's Image can be in a world where it lacks that property. And if the general procedure of thinking about other possible worlds to evaluate modal intuitions is right-headed, i.e., if the way to see if Dancer's Image is essentially a stallion is to evaluate the possibility of there being a world in which Dancer's Image exists without being a stallion, we cannot stipulate that Dancer's Image is or isn't in one of these (non-stallion) worlds without begging the question.

antiessentialism. Such antiessentialism embraces *de re* modality but denies the constancy of *de re* representation, i.e., denies that essential properties are had absolutely or independently of context. Many who embrace *de re* modality as the result of the variability of our modal intuitions defend this sort of inconstancy. This is the view David Lewis develops in his seminal book *On the Plurality of Worlds* [1986].

In the context of exploring essentialist claims such as the Kripkean claim that some properties of an object's origin are essential to it, Lewis argues that

those philosophers who preach that origins are essential are absolutely right—in the context of their own preaching. They make themselves right: their preaching constitutes a context in which *de re* modality is governing by a way of representing (as I think, by a counterpart relation) that requires match of origins. But if I ask how things would be if Saul Kripke had come from no sperm and egg but had been brought by a stork, that makes equally good sense. I create a context that makes my question make sense, and to do so it has to be a context that makes origins not be essential.

[1986: 252]

Lewis thinks that claims about *de re* modality are claims about salient counterpart relations that actual objects have to otherworldly objects. For Lewis, to say that O is possibly P is to say that a counterpart of O (an individual that is similar to O, but is not O itself) in another possible world is P. Counterparts of O are individuals in possible worlds that represent O in those worlds. Lewis's view is that our essentialist claims like 'O is essentially P' are, strictly speaking, true, but not in virtue of objects having properties such as being essentially P absolutely—rather, an object is essentially P only relative to a context.

For Lewis, when we say that O is essentially P, what we do is establish a context which highlights a property P of O, and then pick out counterparts of O that are P, i.e., otherworldly objects that are suitably similar to O, where suitable similarity, in this context, includes having the property P. (We can do the same with not-P.) The idea is that when we claim that O's being P has a certain modal status, we create a context in which we pick out counterparts of O that conform to the claim about P's modal status.

Lewis takes himself to be defending a particularly weak version of essentialism: I say that it is so weak so as to not count as essentialism at all—it is a version of antiessentialism. Philosophers with Lewis's antiessentialist intuitions who do not wish to embrace the details of his modal realism often adopt an actualist version of the approach, where counterparts, instead of being other-worldly individuals, are abstract representations of such individuals.

So for antiessentialists who accept *de re* modality, whether an object O that is P is essentially P or accidentally P is true in virtue of a context, a way of describing or thinking of O or a way of highlighting certain characteristics of O that is used to determine the relevant counterpart relation. This means O does not have the property of being essentially P absolutely. For if the object named by O has the property of being essentially P absolutely, then no context can make it true that this object is accidentally P. But the fact that some contexts seem to make it true that an object is essentially P and other contexts seem to make it true that the very same object is accidentally P is just the result these antiessentialists want to embrace.

This approach towards essentialist attributions is what allows antiessentialists like Lewis who embrace *de re* modality to defend arguments for the identity of the mind and the brain,

the statue and the lump, a person and her body, etc. In each case, the antiessentialist argues that the truth of claims about different essential properties attributed to the mind, statue, person, etc. are merely a function of context, and hence that in different contexts we can truthfully predicate different essential or accidental properties of the very same object. If the seeming differences in the essential properties of the mind and the brain or a person and her body are merely a function of different contexts of attribution, then the mind and the brain, or the person and her body, etc. can be identical after all.²³

IV. Vagueness and Essence

But essentialists can account for the seeming variability of *de re* modality while maintaining that O is (absolutely) essentially P. To do this, what we need to recognize is there is more than one way to explain how the truth of ‘O is essentially P’ varies with context: one way is to say that being essentially P is a context dependent rather than an absolute matter. But another way to explain the variation of truth with context is for the referent of ‘O’ to vary with (this-worldly) contexts.²⁴ For those who find essentialist intuitions compelling, I believe the best explanation of the variability of our modal intuitions is to hold that in such cases there is semantic indeterminacy—the truth of ‘O is essentially P’ can vary because in different this-worldly contexts we may be able to select different objects for evaluation.

This move takes a page from the literature on semantic treatments of vagueness and ambiguity: there are several competing accounts of the best way to treat the seemingly incompatible claims we may wish to make about, e.g., the boundaries of an object.²⁵ When we make loose and unphilosophical claims about the salt shaker—call it ‘Fred’—on the table, we may never need to make up our minds about which object ‘Fred’ denotes—and so we never do make up our minds about it. But when being more precise, we may find ourselves at one time in a context where we wish to include molecule C in Fred, but at another time in a context where we do not. The best way to explain this switch from one context to another is to say that in different contexts we pick out different, albeit very similar and overlapping objects as the referent of ‘Fred’: in a this-worldly context that marks off C as beyond a certain boundary, we will define the referent of ‘Fred’ so as to exclude C. Change the this-worldly context and we may well change the referent. But if context never demands that we make a semantic decision about what ‘Fred’ refers to, then we don’t make such a decision. The semantic indeterminacy is harmless until we find ourselves in a context in which we are forced to distinguish the different candidates.

When faced with the need to precisify claims about boundaries, context helps us to determine denotation. So too with the problem of variability of essentialist attributions. When a this-worldly context highlights the property of, e.g., being descended from a particular pair of gametes, we ensure that what is denoted by ‘this very woman’ by the question ‘How could a person originating from different parents, from a totally different sperm and egg, be this very woman?’ is an object which has that property

²³ Fine’s [2003] arguments call the success of this antiessentialist strategy into question.

²⁴ ‘O’ could still be a rigid designator with respect to modal contexts.

²⁵ If contextualism is found to be unsatisfactory for more general reasons, one might draw on epistemicist approaches instead.

essentially.²⁶ As Lewis so astutely points out in his discussion of essentialist attribution, when evaluating sentences, we evaluate them so as to make them true if it is at all reasonable and possible to do so—if we can precisify our denotation within a context and then interpret a sentence in accordance with this precisification in order to make it true, we will. I say we do it when considering claims involving different boundary precisifications for material objects—and we also do it when considering questions such as ‘Could Queen Elizabeth have originated from different parents?’

In the right context, i.e., a context in which essentialism about origins is paramount, even Lewis grants that we will stand by the claim that the object we are denoting by ‘Queen Elizabeth’ has its origins essentially. But in other contexts we may argue just as hard that the object we denote could have had a different origin. There is no contradiction here, for if in these other contexts we can find an object denoted by ‘Queen Elizabeth’ which includes its origins only accidentally (we’d probably find several), then we will denote that object or objects and hence make the sentence true. And just as with cases involving boundary precisifications, when we can’t make up our minds about which essential attribution to make, the variation results from the fact that we haven’t decided or can’t decide which object we want to denote by ‘Queen Elizabeth’, not that an object essentially descended from a certain pair of gametes doesn’t exist.

Such a picture makes good intuitive sense of the variability of our modal claims. I will now flesh things out with some technical details so we can understand more about how the semantic indeterminacy arises. Think of the picture I presented earlier of how objects get their *de re* modal properties: O’s *de re* modal properties supervene on core properties plus relational representational properties (or absences of such properties) of the core standing in represented-by relations to specified representations.

What we pick out when we pick out an object that has *de re* modal properties is an object that is a fusion of core properties plus some relational representational properties. Since an object that does not have all of its core properties essentially is a sum of core properties together with some relational representational properties, if the sums we pick out differ, the objects we pick out differ. And there may be many different sums we can pick out: we may pick out a maximal sum of core properties and relational properties, or we may pick out suitable proper parts of this sum. The proper parts of the maximal sum that are suitable (they will be objects that include the core properties and perhaps some of the relational properties) will be objects with different *de re* modal properties.

When we simply stand back and consider a fusion of core properties alone, we see it may be fused with many different relational representational properties to give us many different objects with different *de re* modal natures. (The objects will not be mereologically distinct.) Consider the fusion of core properties that occupies the region of space at *t* that we, pretheoretically, would want to include in Queen Elizabeth at *t*. These core properties might include being Queen of England, having a certain genetic profile or origin, having a certain mass, etc. This fusion of core properties might be represented by a number of different fusions—it might be represented by fusions including the property of being a mere Princess, or fusions including a different genetic profile or origin, or fusions including a different mass. What we take as the referent of ‘Queen Elizabeth’, if we are referring to an

²⁶ Kripke [1972: 113] introduces this famous example.

object that has some of its core properties accidentally, won't be just a fusion of core properties, it'll be a fusion of core properties plus some relational representational properties.

Which representational relational properties are included in the fusion we select as referent determines the *de re* modal character of what we are talking about. What an object is, under this characterization, is determined in part by its modal character, that is, in part by what it is or is not represented as in other possible worlds, that is, in part by the relational representational properties included in the fusion that it is. If we select an object that does not include relational properties involving the representation of different origins, then we have selected an object that has its origins essentially. In one context we may use 'Queen Elizabeth' to denote an object that has its origins essentially, and so denote an object that is not represented as any object with different origins. In another context we may use 'Queen Elizabeth' to denote an object that has its origins accidentally, and so denote an object that includes the same core properties as the former object, but different relational representational properties (since here we pick out an object that is represented as having different origins).²⁷

Note that since many of our *de re* modal claims are quantified, the account I've sketched above is incomplete. Fortunately, the material needed to complete the picture is available, as quantified statements can be naturally restricted. Just as when someone declares that 'Every wine bottle is empty' she is simply restricting her attention to the bottles on the table, when someone declares that 'Every queen has her origins essentially', she is restricting her attention to queens that lack the relevant *de re* representational properties.²⁸

When we consider a spatiotemporal region occupied by a fusion, we consider a myriad of objects, all of which contain the same core properties. Each of these objects overlaps with respect to all its properties except for some of its relational representational properties (and perhaps some other non-core properties). Since the differences between the objects are not grounded in easily discriminable qualitative differences within the region that we use to pick out the objects, unless we are very clear at the outset about which objects we mean to pick out and which we mean to exclude, it is easy for us to fail to differentiate them. The objects we are distinguishing between occupy the very same spatiotemporal region and share the matter that occupies that region, and when making loose or indeterminate claims we often identify them merely by picking out the spatiotemporal region or the matter. Applying this to our theory of essentialism and semantic indeterminacy, we see that the problems with variability stemmed from the ease with which we switched from one object to another in the same spatiotemporal region. After all, the objects hardly differ. Since in such cases the objects share precisely the same spatiotemporal region, matter and hence many of their empirically discriminable properties, is it any surprise that we usually neglect to pull them apart unless a context demands it?

²⁷ Consider the recent—mind-numbing, as one participant put it—debate about origin essentialism. Is it really any surprise that there is vagueness here? Current debate about origin essentialism is treated in Forbes [1985; 1986], Salmon [1986], Robertson [1998; 2000], and Hawthorne and Gendler [2000]. Recognizing that there are many objects we can denote may solve the problems for origin essentialists raised in these essays.

²⁸ Here I am particularly indebted to Jason Stanley for pointing out the need for a discussion of quantified modal claims and for helpful discussion on my treatment of this issue.

V. The Problem of the Many

We have seen how semantic indeterminacy accounts for the differences in our modal intuitions. But a problem remains. How do we explain the multiplicity of objects that such semantic indeterminacy implies?

The first point to note here is that although we may have many different objects, the differences are partial, i.e., there is much overlap. In the relevant cases, when we choose between an object that is essentially P and an object that is accidentally P, we are choosing between objects that share nearly all of their properties. The case is basically the same as when we must choose between referring to a salt shaker named 'Fred' that includes molecule C and a salt shaker named 'Fred' that does not. The two objects share nearly all of their molecules, so even though they are numerically different, they overlap almost entirely.

In many cases, we can supervalue, ignoring the multiplicity of almost-identical objects and capturing much of what we want to capture by claims about ordinary truth. In the case with the many candidates for 'Fred', most of the statements we'd make, such as 'Fred is empty' or 'Fred is on the table' will be true or false under any precisification, and hence supertrue or superfalse. In the case of the many candidates for the referent of 'Queen Elizabeth', most of the claims we'd make, such as 'Today is the Queen's birthday' or 'The Queen is attending the celebration' will be true or false under any precisification, and hence supertrue or superfalse.

But in contexts where we must distinguish different candidates that overlap extensively, we can say that the many objects are truly many, but in some sense they are almost one.²⁹ What we need to do in such cases is recognize that if we are willing to distinguish between objects that partly overlap each other, that is, make sense of mereological difference as opposed to mereological distinctness, then in contexts where we need to precisify mereologically different candidates, we must be willing to grant the existence of multiple objects. By characterizing the objects as many, but almost one, we highlight the fact that the objects overlap a great deal—perhaps almost entirely—so that numerical distinctness does not constitute the threat that it would if we were postulating the existence of many mereologically distinct objects. These problems and their solutions are familiar. By using supervaluation where we can, we eliminate the need to worry about precise differences when precision doesn't seem to matter. When the differences do matter, we can recognize that the degree of overlap should make the number of objects less offensive.

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²⁹ Here I'm building on Lewis's [1999] nice treatment of Tibbles. Lewis would have enjoyed the irony of my relying on his view of the problem of the many to bolster my case against his treatment of essentialism.

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