

Conferralism

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This article is about Ásta’s conferralist account of essence, which she has developed in a series of papers (2008, 2013). Conferralism provides an *anti-realist* account of essence. In order to understand conferralism, it is important to first understand the difference between realist and anti-realist accounts of essence. In this article, we cast the difference between realism and anti-realism as a difference over how an *in-virtue-of*-question is answered. The question is: *why* (or in virtue of what) does an essentialist fact hold? Anti-realist positions, such as conventionalism (see Livingston-Banks & Sidelle, this volume) and conferralism take the essentialist fact to hold in virtue of our conceptual commitments and practices (section 1).¹ In section 2, we present Ásta’s notion of a conferred property by introducing some examples that have become seminal in the debate. Section 3 is where we sketch Ásta’s account, which we subject to critical inquiry in section 4.

1 Realism vs. Anti-Realism about Essence

Ásta (2008: 136) makes it clear that her conferralist account of essence is based on

... the idea that an object’s having the essential properties that it has is a reflection of our values and interest, as expressed in our conceptual practices, as opposed to essentiality residing in independent reality.

(Ásta 2008: 136-137)

It seems obvious that this makes the view *anti-realist*. But what does this mean exactly? Realism about some x is standardly taken to contain at least two claims: an *existence claim* - x exists - and an *independence claim* - x exists independently (from us). (See, e.g. Miller 2021.) Accordingly, there are at least two ways of being an anti-realist: one can deny the existence claim and one can deny the independence claim. Since Ásta’s characterization of the guiding idea behind her view acknowledges essential properties, her view does not seem to deny the existence claim concerning essence. So, it is not a form of what could be called the “nihilistic” brand of anti-realism. It is indeed the independence claim that is rejected, as the latter part of the characterization of the guiding idea makes clear. Ásta does not think that essentiality resides in independent reality but that it is a “reflection of our values and interests, as expressed in our conceptual practices”. To see what this means exactly, it is best to take an example.

¹ Note that by casting the difference between realism and anti-realism about essence in these terms, we are disregarding the *nihilistic* form of anti-realism, which rejects any form of essentialist facts.

Think of a triangle T . Suppose that among the many properties T has, there are the following two: (a) it is red; (b) it has three sides. Orthodoxy has it that (b) is an essential property of T , while (a) is a mere accidental property. Why? What makes (b) essential for T ? Why is (b) - as opposed to (a) - essential to T ? Ásta's brand of anti-realism can be read as answering this question in the following way: because of our values and interests, as expressed in our conceptual practices. "[A] property is essential to an object because we value certain things over others, not the other way around." (Ásta 2008: 139)

We need to unpack two things to clarify that statement and to get a better grasp on Ásta's brand of anti-realism: first, how, precisely, can we understand the value that is assigned to some but not to other properties; second, what is the contrast class that Ásta is alluding to by using the words "not the other way around"? Let's start with the first point. Ásta is rather elusive about what "our values and interest, as expressed in our conceptual practices" actually refers to. If we stick to our example and to orthodoxy, then (b), i.e. the property of having three sides, is essential to T while (a), i.e. the property of being red, is merely accidental to T . Now, according to Ásta, this difference is supposed to lie in "our values and interest, as expressed in our conceptual practices". What is it about the property of having three sides that we value more or that interests us more than the property of being red? This, we think, can only be answered if we relate this to the object, T , i.e. the bearer of those properties. (b), as opposed to (a) is what makes the object the (kind of) object it is, what *defines* the object. Being three-sided, as opposed to being red, is definitional of what T is. Moreover, while T can stop being red, and still remain the (kind of) object it is, this does not seem to be the case for the property of having three sides. So, we think that the different value we assign to or the difference in interest we show with regard to different properties *of specific (kind of) objects* has to do with what could be called the definitional and modal importance of that property *for the specific (kind of) object*. (Fn: Depending on whether you are working with a so-called "modal" or a so-called "non-modal" account of essence, you will assign different priority relations between the modal and the definitional features of a property. See Correia this volume and Torza this volume.)

Moreover, Ásta does not think that (b) is modally and/or definitionally important for T *because* of some objective fact residing in independent reality. Rather, she thinks of our values and interests as being "expressed in our conceptual practices". This brings us to the second issue to be unpacked. The relevant contrast class in her claim: "[A] property is essential to an object because we value certain things over others, *not the other way around*." (Ásta 2008: 139; *emphasis added*)

We can take Ásta's anti-realist position as a specific answer to the following Euthyphro style question:

- (E) Do we (1) value (or are we especially interested in) property P of object o *because* P is essential to o or (2) is P essential to o *because* we value (or we are especially interested in) property P in relation to o ?

It is difficult to understand these vague and under-defined terms, 'value' and 'interest', especially with respect to the key roles they are supposed to play. As a consequence, we can formulate an analogous question replacing those terms with what we have called the modal and definitional importance.

- (E*) Do we (1) assign modal and/or definitional importance to property P with regard to object o because P is essential to o or (2) is P essential to o because we assign modal and/or definitional importance to P with regard to o ?

Ásta's anti-realist position goes for the second option, (2). Ásta's position is an answer to the question as to what accounts for the difference between essential and accidental properties of some object o . Her answer is that rather than modal and definitional importance lying in some objective fact residing in independent reality, the ground of this difference lies in our values and interests that are expressed by our conceptual practices. (According to our interpretation of this somewhat enigmatic sentence, it lies in the fact that our conceptual practices assign modal or definitional importance to P with regard to o .) In contrast to that, the first option, (1), is more common with realists about essence. The realist thinks that what accounts for the difference between essential and accidental properties of some object o is indeed an independent worldly fact about o .² In summation, we can pinpoint the difference between Ásta's brand of anti-realism about essence and some realist positions about essence in their respective answer to the following in-virtue-of-question:

- (V) In virtue of what is a property essential to an object?

Ásta's anti-realist answer: in virtue of our values and interest, as expressed in our conceptual practices

Our best interpretation of Ásta's anti-realist answer: in virtue of our conceptual practices, which assign modal and definitional importance to properties with regard to objects

² Note that the characterization of the difference between realism and anti-realism about essence here is by no means meant to exhaustively include all possible realist and anti-realist positions. For one, the nihilist anti-realist about essence denies the existence claim concerning essences or essentialist facts and, consequently does not bother answering a question like (V) or (V*). Neither does the *expressivist* about essence, who is also standardly considered an anti-realist, since in their view, claims about essence are not fact-stating. However, we find the Euthyphro style questions (E) and (E*) as well as the in-virtue-of-questions (V) and (V*) a good way to characterize the difference between Ásta's brand of anti-realism and the kind of realism that she is up against.

Even with this restriction of scope in mind, however, one might have the following worry about our characterization of this difference between realism and anti-realism about essence: Questions (E) and (E*), respectively, seem to presuppose that we do in fact value o 's being P . It may, however, be controversial whether we do, and it may be highly contingent that we do. For these reasons, it seems inadvisable to hitch the issue, i.e. the difference between realism and anti-realism, to what we value.

In response, we partially reject that characterizing the difference between Ásta's anti-realism and the realism she is up against presupposes that we actually value o 's being P . Characterizing the kind of realism at play by opting for option (1) on (E) and (E*), respectively, does not entail that the realist needs to actually assign special value or any modal or definitional importance to P (with regard to o). Even if we would not care at all about the value of P (with regard to o), all that a characterization of realism by means of option (1) in (E) or (E*) says, is the following: *if* we were to care about the special value that is the modal or definitional importance of P (with regard to o) it would be *because* of P 's being essential to o - and this is totally compatible with us not caring at all. So much for the realist side, i.e., for option (2). It is true, however, that on the anti-realist side, i.e. option (2), where essentiality lies in us valuing P , our valuing P (with regard to o) is required for P being essential (to o). But this, we claim, is the intended outcome, inasmuch as it is the precise point about this brand of anti-realism. According to Ásta's anti-realist convictions, essentiality is grounded in our conceptual commitment, which expresses our values and interests. So, the contingency of our values and interests seems to carry over to the contingency of essentiality. More on this in the section where we discuss the difference between conferralism and conventionalism and in the section where we pose the question as to whether contingent conceptual practices can even be the ground of essentiality.

But what is the realist's answer concerning the source of essentiality? According to Ásta the realist holds that essentiality lies “in the *nature* of things, as it is independent of human thought and practices” (Ásta 2008, 136, *emphasis added*).³ It should be noted that this answer is not very substantive, given that “essence” and “nature” are often used interchangeably. So, we might want to ask whether there is a more interesting question.

(V*) In virtue of what does an essentialist fact of the form “it is essential to x that p ” hold?

While realists can answer (V) by just referring to the essence or nature of x , (V*) asks for a more substantive explanation, source, or ground of essentiality. With regard to (V*), many realists about essence hold that there is (in some sense or other) no explanation, ground or source of essence, hence, taking (V*) to be unanswerable in a sense. Examples include Dasgupta (2014, 2016), Glazier (2017), Wallner & Vaidya (2020), and Wallner (2020).

Dasgupta (2014, 2016), e.g., finds it plausible that (facts about) essences do not have a ground, a view that can also be found in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, for they are not the kind of things that can be grounded. Dasgupta likens essentialist facts to axioms in mathematics. Just like it does not make sense to ask for a proof of axioms, it does not make sense to ask for a ground of essentialist facts. The latter are what Dasgupta calls “autonomous facts”.

Glazier (2017) argues that essences figure in specific *sui generis* metaphysical explanations, called “essentialist explanations” as *explanantia*. E.g., the fact that {Socrates} contains Socrates as a member can be explained by the fact that it is *essential* to {Socrates} to contain Socrates as a member. However, while Glazier leaves it open whether essences have some kind of explanation, he maintains that essences do not themselves have essentialist explanations. More precisely, for every essentialist fact f , there is no object o , such that o is essentially such that f holds.

Wallner & Vaidya (2020) and Wallner (2020) argue that while there is an explanation of the *necessity* of essentialist facts or propositions, essentialist claims themselves cannot be explained in the same way, thereby taking essences to be “buck-stoppers”.⁴

While these broadly realist thinkers discuss reasons to believe that (V*) is unanswerable, some anti-realists about essence provide a substantive answer to (V*). On both, conventionalist (see Livingstone-Banks & Sidelle this volume) and conferralist accounts of essence, a property is essential to an object in virtue of some *conceptual practices and commitments*. The precise difference between conventionalism and conferralism lies in how the details are cashed out. More on this below.⁵ For now it is important that realists and anti-realists about essence disagree on how the Euthyphro-style question (E) from above should be answered. Realists about essence tend to pick

³ Whether the realist about essence really needs to hold that essentialist facts or their sources are independent of human thought and practices is especially contentious when it comes to the essences of mind-dependent entities like social kinds. For discussion see Griffin this volume and Passinski this volume.

⁴ However, within the realist camp we also find essentialists that might be interpreted as to provide a substantive answer to (V*). Correia & Skiles (2019) argue that the notion of essence can be analyzed in terms of the notion of generalized identity. While this clearly amounts to a view according to which essence is not conceptually primitive, it is unclear whether this implies that essentialist facts are not metaphysically fundamental, i.e. whether there is a substantive answer to (V*). Due to space reasons, we cannot settle this question here.

⁵ Note that *expressivism* about essence, which is also considered to be an anti-realist position, does not answer (V*), since claims about essence, on this view, are not fact-stating.

option (1): the reason why P seems so important for o is that P is essential to o . Anti-realists about essence, like conferralists and conventionalists, pick option (2): the reason why P is essential to o is that our conceptual commitments and practices assign special value to P with regard to o .

2 What is a Conferred Property?

At the heart of Ásta's conferralism lies the notion of a conferred property. In this section we briefly introduce this notion by using Ásta's own examples that have become seminal in the debate.

Consider Ásta's definition of a conferred property:

I call a property of an object 'conferred' if it is in virtue of some attitude of subjects that the object has the property. We can say in that case that the attitudes of the subjects confer the property on the object.

(Ásta 2008: 136-137)

Now take the following example: a baseball pitcher's pitch possessing the property of being a *strike in baseball*. In baseball the umpire's verdict about whether or not a pitch is a strike is final.⁶ The umpire's verdict is to track the physical fact whether the ball traveled through the strike zone. However, even if it didn't, if the umpire calls a strike, the pitch is a strike, even though everybody else agrees that it should not have been one. So, there is a baseball-property of being a strike and that property is conferred by the umpire. However, there is also a physical property of having traveled through the strike zone, which, ideally, the umpire's verdict should track. This physical property, however, is *not* conferred.

Consider a different example: an act's being pious. In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro debate whether an act is pious because it is loved by the gods (Euthyphro's position) or whether the gods love an act because it is pious (Socrates' position). In Euthyphro's position, being pious is a conferred property. It is conferred on to the act by the gods' love. Every conferred property needs a subject (or group of subjects) who does (do) the conferring. It can also be specified what attitudes or states of mind of the subject(s) matter in the conferral. And, finally, it can be specified under what conditions the property is conferred. Ásta schematizes these specifications as follows:

Property: what property is conferred, e.g. being pious

Who: who the subjects are, e.g., the Greek gods

What: what attitude, state, or action of the subjects matter, e.g., their love

When: under what conditions the conferral takes place, e.g., normal, ideal, or some specified conditions (Ásta 2008: 139)

With this schema in mind, we can move on to the next section where we explain what it means for the property of *essentiality* to be conferred.

⁶ In fact, since the video assistant referee has been introduced to baseball, strictly speaking, it is no longer the umpire's verdict that is final but the referee team's verdict still is, one might argue. For the sake of simplicity, we will be referring to the umpire's verdict in the text.

3 Conferralism about Essence

In this section we sketch Ásta's conferralist account of essence by specifying what it means for the property of essentiality to be conferred. Let's begin by looking at the schema as applied to essentiality.

- Property:* essentiality (being an essential property of a particular object)
Who: ideal subjects, i.e. ideal versions of us concept users
What: their finding it inconceivable that the object not have the property
When: at the limit of enquiry into how we use concepts (Ásta 2008: 140)

We will discuss each of these points in turn.

3.1 Property: *Essentiality*

It is important to be clear about what the conferred property is. Suppose it is essential to Franz Kafka that he is human. Being human, then, is an essential property of Kafka. Now, conferralism about *essence* is not the view that the (essential) property of being human is conferred on to Kafka. Rather, it is the view that the property of *essentiality* is conferred on to the property of being human (that Kafka possesses). Call a property of an object that is not itself a property a *first-order property* and a property of a property a *second-order property*. So, what is conferred is not the first-order property of *being human* on to Kafka, but the second-order property of being *essential* on to Kafka's property of being human. But this latter sentence is still ambiguous, in as much as it is not entirely clear about what exactly the second-order property of essentiality is being conferred on to. Does Ásta mean that the (second-order) property of being essential is conferred on to *the property of being human itself* or on to *its instantiation by Kafka*? In order to get a better grip on this question and on what is at stake, we have to take note that it does not make sense to speak of a property as being essential, *period*. A property *P* is essential (or non-essential) *for a specific object o*, which has *P*. So, essentiality is not just a property of a property, but a property of a property that is had by an object. This is in line with Ásta's characterization of essentiality as "the property of being an essential property *of an object*" (Ásta 2008: 136; *emphasis added*). So, what is conferred here is the second-order property of essentiality onto Kafka's being human, i.e. on to the property of being human *of Kafka*, in other words, onto Kafka's instantiation of that property.

This is also the place to draw a comparison between the conferralist scheme as Ásta uses it in her account of essence and her later development of the conferralist scheme in her *Categories We Live By* (Ásta 2018). In her later work, Ásta uses conferralism to provide an account of our social categories such as sex, gender, race, disability, religion, and LGBTQ categories. (See also Rosario this volume, Griffith this volume, and Passinsky this volume.) Strikingly, in this later work, the conferralist schema, contains a fifth point, besides the Conferred property, the Who, the What and the When: the so-called *Base property*. Using the baseball example again, Ásta complements the conferralist scheme by adding the following:

Base property: what the subjects are attempting to track (consciously or not), if anything; the physical trajectory of the ball (Ásta 2018: 8)⁷

There are or might be more or less clear answers to the question as to what the base property of conferred properties like being a strike, or sex, gender, or race is. In the case of the property of being a strike, as we have seen, it is the physical trajectory of the ball. The base properties of social categories like the above might have to do with either some phenotypical appearances or with social roles that subjects are perceived to have. The question that arises here is whether there are substantial reasons for Ásta not to include a base property in the conferralist scheme in her account of *essence*.

It is important to note that Ásta (2018: 8) adds the “if anything” to the characterization of the base property as “what the subjects are attempting to track (consciously or not), if anything”. We think that there are some conferred properties that do track a base property and some that just don’t. Suppose, one is siding with Euthyphro, taking the piety of an act to be a property conferred by the gods. In this case, the gods’ love which is supposed to confer moral properties on to the act does not attempt to track anything at all. Either the gods love an act or they don’t. If they would love it for a specific reason, e.g. the fact that it maximizes happiness, it would be the latter that would function as the ground for the moral property and not the gods’ love. If they would love it for its piety, being pious would not be a conferred property at all. So it seems possible to have a conferred property without a base property that is supposed to be tracked. Consider another example. Being money is plausibly a *conferred* property of objects like coins and bills. In contrast to the pitch’s property of being a strike, it does not seem as if there would be anything that the conferred property of being money would track. It certainly is not *value*, since money is not money because it is valuable. Quite the opposite is the case: money is valuable because it is money - because someone has decreed it to be valuable, thereby making it money. The conferred property of being money also does not seem to track properties like being scarce or hard to get. The production of bills and coins is actually so easy that we have to regulate it. And, again, money is not money because it is hard to get. It is rather hard to get because it is money.

These examples make it plausible that there are conferred properties without a base property that is supposed to be tracked. The crucial question here however seems to be whether essentiality is such a property. Is there a base property that is supposed to be tracked in the conferral of essentiality? It is very difficult to answer this question. But *why* is it so difficult? Why isn’t being human the base property of essentiality in this case, one might ask. Note that the base property is supposed to be the property that the conferring subjects “are attempting to track” (Ásta 2018: 8). Being human here is rather the property (of the specific object in question) upon which essentiality is conferred.⁸

Here is a thought about a possible base property of essentiality: It seems that if the conferred property is to *track* the base property, the minimum requirement for being a base property is that it is a property *of the same object* (i.e. had by the same object) as the conferred

⁷ Note that it is important for Ásta’s account of social categories or properties like sex, gender, and race, that it does not matter whether those perceived to belong to these categories, i.e. those onto which these social properties are conferred, actually have the respective base property. All that matters is whether the conferrers take them to have it.

⁸ One might also wonder whether the conferring subjects’ finding it inconceivable that the Kafka lacks the property of being human is the base property of essentiality. But, as will become clearer in section 3.3, that is *what* about the conferring subjects’ attitudes does the conferring, not the base property the conferring is supposed to track.

property. In case of essentiality, the object of this conferred property is itself a property. So, it seems plausible that whatever the base property of essentiality is, it will also be a property of a property, hence, a *second-order property*. But which second-order property could fit the bill? Coming back to our Kafka-example: what (if any) property of Kafka's property of being human is essentiality supposed to track? Maybe it is the property of being indispensable or definitional? Being human is indispensable and/or definitional for Kafka. Note however, that this definitional and/or modal importance is not rooted in worldly facts for Ásta, but rather in our conceptual commitments. So maybe the base property that the conferral of essentiality is supposed to track is related to our conceptual practices. This would also square nicely with Ásta's brand of anti-realism. Settling this matter, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. We submit a determination of the base property of essentiality viz. the question whether essentiality has a base property at all to further research.

3.2 Who: *Ideal Subjects, i.e., Ideal Versions of Us Concept Users*

This point should inform us about who is actually doing the conferring. However, as opposed to straight-forward cases like the baseball example, where the umpire (or the referee team) is doing the conferring, in the case of essentiality we have what Ásta calls "ideal subjects". By "ideal subjects" Ásta refers to idealizations, i.e. ideal versions of us concept users that are "smarter, less forgetful, better at rational deliberation, and maximally knowledgeable about how we use the concept under consideration" (Ásta 2008: 141).

However, can we really speak of such idealizations *actually* conferring a property? How literal are we to take that proposal? It seems that for these idealizations to actually confer a property, they would have to exist. However, even on realist accounts of abstracta and idealizations on which ideal subjects do in fact *exist*, their existence does not seem to be such that they could, in the literal sense, *actually* confer a property.

Ásta suggests that the introduction of ideal subjects is rather to be taken as a metaphor or heuristic "spelling out what it is for our conceptual commitments to do the conferring" (Ásta 2008: 141). Ásta (2008: 140) speaks of the ideal subjects' act of conferring as a *hypothetical act*: "Pedro's being human is essential because ideal versions of us would find it inconceivable that Pedro not be human." So, on this view, where a *hypothetical act* confers essentiality, ideal subjects do not need to exist, strictly speaking. Given the heuristic function ideal subjects fulfill, Ásta's claim that essentiality is conferred in such a hypothetical act can be read as the claim that the essentiality of Pedro being human is *metaphysically explained* by (or *grounded* in) our conceptual commitment.^{9,10}

3.3 What: *Their Finding it Inconceivable that the Object not Have the Property*

What precisely are the attitudes, states, or actions of the ideal subjects that matter in their conferral of essentiality? Admittedly, given the heuristic and metaphoric role those ideal subjects seem to play, asking about their concrete attitudes and states seems a bit odd. However, there is a clear

⁹ Note that one does not need to commit to the notion of "grounding" (nor to the notion of "metaphysical explanation" for that matter) to make this point. Any suitable (explanatory) metaphysical determination relation will do.

¹⁰ We will be coming back to the heuristic function of ideal subjects and the question about who actually does the conferring in section 4.1.

answer that pertains to the idea that essentiality is conferred in a “hypothetical act”. To repeat Ásta’s (2008: 140) quote: “Pedro’s being human is essential because ideal versions of us would find it inconceivable that Pedro not be human.” So, it is the ideal subjects’ finding it inconceivable that the object, *o*, not have the property, *P*, that confers *P* onto the object.

Yet, what does it mean that ideal subjects find *o* without *P* inconceivable? Given that ideal subjects are defined as ideal versions of us concept users that are “maximally knowledgeable about how we use the concept under consideration” (Ásta 2008: 141), this ideal inconceivability of *o* without *P* just amounts to the conceptual impossibility of *o* without *P*. Again, Ásta’s account seems to boil down to the idea that essentiality is metaphysically explained by (or grounded in) conceptual commitments. We will be discussing the relation between conceptual commitments, ideal subjects, and conferralism more when critically assessing Ásta’s account in 4.1.

3.4 When: At the Limit of Enquiry into How We Use Concepts

We have already seen that in order to get a clear grasp on the *Who* of the conferralist schema concerning essentiality, we need to also understand the *What*: it is their finding it inconceivable that *o* is not *P* that makes the ideal subjects confer essentiality onto *o*’s property *P*. Similarly, it is obvious that to fully grasp the notion of “ideal subjects” in this connection, we also need to understand this *When* condition. Ásta’s idea is that “the property of being essential to an object is conferred by the ideal representatives of us concept users *at the ideal limit of a procedure of correcting for cognitive limitations*” (Ásta 2008: 140; *emphasis added*). This *When* condition (i.e. the italicized part of the quote), i.e. the fact that conferral takes place at the limit of enquiry into how we use concepts, just expresses the idea that the conferring ideal subjects are maximally knowledgeable, infallible even, about our conceptual commitments. In other words, the *When* condition simply specifies the notion of ideality that is at play in the *Who* condition of the scheme. The most important thing to note here is that those idealized subjects are *not* ideal with regard to their infallible sensitivity concerning the *objective fabric of the world* but with regard to their omniscience concerning our *conceptual commitments*. If it were the former, conferralism would, arguably, be more realist than anti-realist.

With these specifications of Ásta’s account in the background, we are now ready to move on to a critical appraisal of conferralist essentialism.

4 Critical questions

The following critical questions serve a dual purpose. Thinking through them should, on the one hand, make the reader more aware of the systematic problems and open questions the conferralist about essence faces; on the other hand, it should also provide the reader with a deeper and more detailed understanding of the view itself.

4.1 Who or What Really Does the Conferring in (Constructivist) Conferralism?

We have seen that in order to make sense of what it means for ideal subjects to confer essentiality, Ásta assigns this notion a heuristical and metaphorical role, that is supposed to express the idea that essentiality is actually conferred by (or explained by, grounded in) our conceptual commitments. The ideal subjects serve as a *construction*, so to speak. Accordingly, Ásta takes her conferralism to be

[...] constructivist in that in spelling out what it is for our conceptual commitments to do the conferring we make use of idealizations of us and our epistemic conditions; i.e., a construction, which is to capture our actual conceptual commitments, does the conferring.

(Ásta 2008: 141)

In this passage Ásta says that our conceptual commitments do the conferring. Yet, she also says that one way to spell this fact out is to claim that a construction, i.e. ideal subjects, do(es) the conferring. (For a discussion of social construction, see Griffith this volume.) So we have two claims:

- (i) Our conceptual commitments confer essentiality.
- (ii) Ideal subjects confer essentiality.

(ii) is supposed to be a way to express (i). But we have already seen in 3.2 that it is difficult to see how *ideal subjects* could actually confer a property. They either do not actually exist, or they exist in a way that makes it mysterious how conferring would be something that they could *actually* do.¹¹ Ásta is aware of that, which is why she thinks there is not an actual but a *hypothetical* act involved. The fact that essentiality is conferred upon property *P* of object *o* just means that ideal subjects would not find *o* without *P* conceivable. Now, it is the ideal subjects' *hypothetical* inconceivability-judgment that *actually* confers essentiality. After all we want to say that *P* is *actually* essential to *o*. Ásta does not find it particularly mysterious that *hypothetical* acts can *actually* confer a property. As a precedence, she cites Hume's account of aesthetic properties: *o* is beautiful *because* experts *would find it pleasing*. (Ásta 2008: 143)

One worry that might arise from the analogy between conferralism about essence and Hume's "conferralism" about aesthetic properties is the following: one might ask whether the conferralist idea is more suited for aesthetic properties than essence. In addition, and more importantly, a conferralist (or, generally, an anti-realist) story might be more suited for some essences (such as some social kinds) (see also Passinsky this volume) than for other objects (such as natural kinds) (see also Tahko this volume). One need not think that there is even a hard boundary between these kinds, only that in some cases our conceptual commitments are regulated by factors external to us, while in other cases our conceptual commitments are all there is to say on the matter. In sum, a worry one might have is that conferralism itself is more suitable to some domains than to others when it is understood as a theory where *only* conceptual commitments do the work.

Putting this big-picture question aside, here is a more systematic worry for this brand of constructivist conferralism, coming from Ásta's commitment to both (i) and (ii). (ii) is taken to be a heuristic, a way to spell out (i). However, even if we grant that hypothetical acts of ideal subjects

¹¹ Some readers might find our assumption that it might be problematic that *ideal* (non-actual) subjects can *actually* confer properties unfair. After all, in debates about morality and rationality (morally or rationally) ideal subjects are regularly appealed to and their non-actuality does not seem to be that much of a problem there. Why is it here? The reason we think this *might* be especially problematic here is because of the way the conferralist idea is introduced. Conferring is supposed to be an *action*, done by subjects and it is introduced using the model of actual subjects committing actual conferring actions.

can indeed do the *actual* conferring of essentiality, i.e. even if we grant that (ii) is not problematic, (ii) is taken to be just a heuristic and a way to spell out (i), and (i) might turn out to be particularly worrisome. One might find it particularly difficult to conceive of our conceptual commitments actually conferring a property if those commitments are, as some of Ásta's (2008: 139) remarks suggest, encoded in dispositional or counterfactual facts. Can dispositional or counterfactual facts (or commitments as such) confer properties? Given that conferring was introduced as something done by *subjects*, how exactly facts/commitments can confer properties needs further explanation. So, either the conferralist provides us with a story about how facts/commitments can confer properties, or she fully embraces the idea that hypothetical actions of ideal subjects are *not only a heuristic* but the precise story of how conceptual commitments are *encoded*.

Summing up, there seems to be somewhat of a dilemma for the constructivist conferralist about essence:

- (D1) Either, first horn, conferralism leans into the fact that ideal subjects are just a *heuristic* and a metaphor, in which case it needs to tell a story about how conceptual commitments are “officially” encoded and of how conceptual commitments can confer the property of essentiality (since there does not seem to be any kind of subject involved in the official story).
- (D2) Or, second horn, conferralism takes those ideal subjects more seriously and makes it the “official” way in which conceptual commitments are encoded and not just a heuristic. This would then allow for a straight-forward account of conferring essentiality, because now there are officially subjects involved. But it would also place the burden on conferralism to explain how exactly the commitments can be encoded using ideal subjects. How exactly is that done?

So, on either of those horns, there is more explanatory work to be done by the conferralist.

4.2 What Sets Conferralism Apart from Conventionalism?

Due to space-limitations we can only sketch Ásta's (2008: 144-148) detailed answer to this question. The most important distinction is that, according to conventionalism, it is something about us, our conventions, that actually confer(s) essentiality, while, according to (constructivist) conferralism, a construction, i.e., a hypothetical act of ideal subjects confers essentiality. (See also Sidelle & Livingstone-Banks this volume.) Ásta takes this difference to yield a crucial advantage of conferralism over conventionalism, which she conveys by the following thought experiment:

Suppose, at time *t*, before the dawn of conferring subjects, there lived a dinosaur, Dino. Arguably, Dino was *essentially* a dinosaur. On conventionalism, essentiality is grounded in actual conventions. Since, at *t*, there were no subjects, hence no conventions, the fact that Dino was essentially a dinosaur lacks its metaphysical source.¹² Not so on (constructivist) conferralism, for, since a construction does the conferral, “there is no point in time at which the conferral takes place” (Ásta 2008: 145). Such a strategy, of course, raises questions about the details of how hypothetical acts are able to actually confer properties (see 4.1).

¹² For a conventionalist response to this problem, see Sidelle (1989, 54-55).

4.3 On Conferralism, Can Essence Ground Modality?

Fine (1994) and others popularized the view in modal metaphysics that essence is the metaphysical ground, source, or metaphysical explanation of modality (instead of the other way around). Given the popularity of this view, one might ask whether it is available to the conferralist about essence. We want to make two points with respect to this question. (We shall use the grounding idiom to make those points.)

First, it is plausible that, on conferralism, essence is grounded in conceptual commitments. Combining this with the view that modality is grounded in essences,¹³ per transitivity of grounding, we get that modality is grounded in conceptual commitments, thus yielding a plausibly anti-realist view of (metaphysical) modality.

Second, there might be a principled reason why essence cannot ground modality on conferralism. Again, it is plausible that, on conferralism, essence is grounded in conceptual commitments. Ásta (2008: 139) sometimes suggests that those conceptual commitments are encoded in dispositional or counterfactual facts. If we take those to be *modal facts*, it seems that, by transitivity of grounding, essence-facts are grounded in modal facts, and, on pain of a violation of the asymmetry of ground, cannot themselves ground modality.

4.4 Does Conferralist Anti-Realism about Essence Entail Relativism?

On conferralism, essentiality is conferred by (explained by, grounded in) *our* conceptual commitments. In other words, essentiality is conferred upon properties by a hypothetical act of ideal versions or *us* concept users. Now, there might be a different group of concept users with conceptual commitments different from us. Ideal versions of them might not confer essentiality upon, say Kafka's property of being human. Thus, whether or not a property is essential to an object seems to be relative to the community of concept users that one finds themselves in.¹⁴ It seems conferralism entails some kind of relativism. Of course, some anti-realists about a domain *D* are happy to buy into the package deal with relativism about *D*, but it is neither clear whether those two need to go together, nor whether one having motivation for the former also has motivation for the latter.

4.5 How (Anti-)Realist does (Anti-)Realism Need To Be?

We have treated conferralism about essence as an anti-realist account of essence precisely because it holds that essentiality is conferred by (explained by, grounded in) *our* conceptual commitments. However, we might want to ask where our conceptual commitments are coming from. Is this just

¹³ We do not know of any actual proponent of this combination of views in the literature. We just thought that, given the relative popularity of the Finean idea that essences ground necessity, the question about the consistency of such a combination would be interesting.

¹⁴ At this point, one might wonder whether Ásta's considerations of the ideal conceptual agents might remove the community-relative features. However, this is not the case. The point about Ásta's notion of ideal subjects is that they are ideal in virtue of being maximally knowledgeable, infallible even, about *our conceptual commitments*. Since our conceptual commitments are relative to our community (other communities might have different conceptual commitments), considerations of such ideal subjects cannot transcend or remove community-relative features. Thanks to Mike Raven for pushing us on this point.

a matter of conventions? Even if it is the case, we can ask whether our conceptual conventions and commitments are influenced by the world, i.e. by the fabric of reality.

In section 1 we have seen that conferralism answers the question as to why we take P to be essential to o by appealing to our conceptual commitments. But we can ask further why we have the conceptual commitments we actually have. If our conceptual commitments are partially grounded in the fabric of reality, conferralism might not be as anti-realist as one initially thought.

In general, we can ask whether the opposition between realism and anti-realism is strictly dual or whether there is room for a continuum of more or less realist and/or more or less anti-realist views. Realism about some domain of entities, D , has traditionally been understood as something like a purity thesis, where D is pure and *uncontaminated* by human thought, meaning that the existence and reality of (the entities in) D is in no way dependent on human thought.¹⁵ Anti-realism, on the other hand, seems to allow for a continuum of more or less (anti-)realist views, depending on the respective contribution of the world and the mind concerning the grounds of D . (For more on issues concerning mind-(in-)dependence, see Griffith this volume.)

It is an interesting question as to whether this continuum view of anti-realism also suggests that realism comes in degrees or kinds or whether the label “realism” should be reserved exclusively for the extreme pole of this spectrum. Consider the following view: The source of essentiality lies both in human interest and practices, *and* the world. Should this kind of view be regarded as anti-realist, for its “contamination” by human thought, or might a small enough contamination still warrant the classification “realist”?

4.6 What Is the Motivation for Conferralism?

It is safe to say that there are two purported motivations, one ontological, one epistemological: On the ontological side, the conferralist might argue that her view has less ontological commitment than realism about essence (cf. Ásta 2013, 22), taking this at least as a motivation for *anti-realism* about essence.¹⁶ On the epistemological side, the conferralist argues that it is easier to give an account of the epistemology of essence than on any realist account. Ásta issues the following *prima facie* challenge for any realist account of the epistemology of essence. (For a sketch of some contemporary accounts of the epistemology of essence, see Mallozzi this volume.)

If essentiality, being the peculiar property it is, is *real*, and has nothing to do with us or our conceptual powers, how is exercising those powers in thought experiments or ordinary discourse to be a justified method of gaining knowledge of the essences of things? [...] If essentiality were somehow dependent or linked to our conceptual powers, then perhaps we could acknowledge that exercising those powers in thought experiments could give us knowledge. But no such story is available to the realist.

(Ásta 2013: 23-24)

¹⁵ Although this is indeed controversial and hard to apply to mental domains, as Rosen (1994) and others have pointed out, we can take this as an, indeed, coarse-grained sketch of what many people understand under “realism”. Note that we do in fact proceed to cast some doubt on this view.

¹⁶ However, it is not entirely clear how precisely Ásta’s point should be understood here. If the point is that (conferralist) anti-realism does not need to *reify* “spooky” essences, one might argue that many contemporary accounts of essence that have been classified as realist accounts should be able to claim the same advantage for their explicit attempt to avoid such reification.

Since conferralism grounds essentiality in our conceptual commitments and practices, Ásta takes her view to have the upper hand, compared to realism about essence, when we are discussing the epistemological story.

Ásta (2013: 24-25) briefly considers possible responses to the *prima facie* challenge on behalf of the realist. The realist might, e.g., resort to intuitions about essence or to science for their epistemological story of essence. However, Ásta maintains that even if there might be some such answer to the *prima facie* challenge available for the realist, the conferralist account still has the edge over the realist. This is because she thinks that the conferralist account of essence can best make sense of our practices of using *thought experiments* in our pursuit of knowledge of essence. Conferralists argue that when we are conducting thought experiments in order to answer questions like whether a specific table could have had one more leg or whether a specific tiger could have lacked its tail, what we are testing are not our intuitions about an objectivistically construed essence of the tiger or the table but our intuitions about our *conceptual commitments* (Ásta 2013: 30-31). In this way the conferralist, contrary to the realist, can avoid the *prima facie* challenge and neatly account for our epistemic practices concerning essence.

Note that Ásta (2013: 23) assumes that any epistemology of essence must involve thought experiments. This assumption, however, might be questioned. (See Mallozzi this volume for an overview of some contemporary accounts in the epistemology of essence.) Is it true that employing thought experiments is essential in any pursuit of knowledge of essence? If it is not, the two responses to the *prima facie* challenge that Ásta herself grants the realist to have at their disposal, i.e. resorting to intuition or to science, suddenly look significantly better. So the question is whether Ásta might have unjustifiably stacked the deck against the realist by conceiving of our knowledge of essence as essentially depending on thought experiments.

In addition, there might be a general problem with the epistemological motivation for constructive conferralism. Depending on how serious the appeal to ideal subjects is in constructive conferralism, we can critically ask how this appeal to those ideal subjects really facilitates the epistemology of essence. Going anti-realist, as Ásta claims, has the purported advantage of making the epistemology of essence easier. However, if we are to track the judgements of ideal subjects in order to get to know what they would find (in)conceivable, the worry might be coming from the fact that we will never truly be “ideal” subjects. So, the epistemic gap between us ordinary subjects and *real* or objectivistically constructed essences, that was supposed to be closed by the anti-realist move, seems to be replaced by a gap between us ordinary subjects and the judgements and competence of *ideal* subjects.

4.7 Can Conceptual Commitments even be the Metaphysical Source of Essentiality?

Arguably, conceptual commitments are contingent. There might have been different conceptual commitments and practices than there are actually. So, on conferralism, the metaphysical source of essentiality is contingent. Now, there are, standardly, two views available concerning the relation between essence and modality. So-called modalists (see Torza this volume) collapse essence and (de re) necessity. The Finean essentialists (see Correia this volume) take essence to be different from (de re) necessity. On the latter view it is standardly assumed that essence is the ground, source or metaphysical explanation of modality. Either way, conferralism entails that the metaphysical source of modality is contingent. However, how can something contingent account for or explain necessity? It seems that contingent facts lack the required “oomph” to explain why something is

necessary. We cannot go into the details of this criticism. For an argument to the effect that the metaphysical source of necessity must itself be necessary, see, e.g., Cameron (2010: 139-140). It should be mentioned, however, that this criticism is not specific to conferralism. If it hits, it equally hits other anti-realist accounts of essence that ground essence (and modality) in something contingent, like, e.g., conventionalism. (See also Sidelle & Livingstone-Banks this volume.)

5 Conclusion

The goal of this contribution was to outline Ásta's (constructivist) conferralist account of essence. In section 1 we clarified in what sense the account is to be considered an anti-realist one. In section 2 we introduced her notion of a conferred property by using some examples from the literature as well as Ásta's own *schema* of how to specify concrete qualifications of a conferred property. In section 3 we discussed how Ásta is applying this schema to essence or essentiality, in order to argue for the fact that essentiality is conferred. Finally, in section 4 we introduced some critical questions whose discussion was supposed to serve a dual purpose: to provide a deeper understanding of the conferralism about essence as well as to indicate some problems and open questions of the view. Some of the most interesting questions, in our opinion, occur with regard to Ásta's conception of ideal subjects, as well as with regard to the proper understanding of the distinction between realism and anti-realism concerning essence.¹⁷

Related Topics

The following chapters in this handbook are related to the issues discussed in the present chapter:

Modal Conceptions of Essence
Non-Modal Conceptions of Essence
Natural Kind Essentialism
Epistemology of Essence
Artifacts, Artworks, and Other Social Kinds
Sex and Gender
Conventionalism
Social Construction

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¹⁷ We are grateful to the participants of the Routledge Handbook of Essence Workshop in July 2021 and, especially, to Kathrin Koslicki, Mike Raven and Ásta for insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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