

Revelation and the Essentiality of Essence

Franck Lihoreau

Abstract: It is usually agreed that the *Revelation Thesis* about experience – the idea that the knowledge we gain by having an experience somehow “reveals” the essence, or nature, of this experience – only requires that we know the essence of the experience, not that we know, of this essence, that it is the essence of the experience. I contest this agreement. In the light of what I call the “Essentiality of Essence Principle” – the principle that whatever is in the essence of something is also essentially so – I argue that the Revelation Thesis does require that we know, of the essence of an experience, that it is the essence of the experience, and draw some conclusions about the plausibility of that thesis.

Keywords: essentiality of essence principle, experience, qualia, revelation thesis

1. The Revelation Thesis about Experience

This paper is concerned with the so-called ‘Revelation Thesis’ about experience,¹ the idea that the knowledge we gain by having an experience ‘reveals’ the essence, or nature, of this experience, what it is or what it takes to be that experience.

Often formulated in relation to *qualia* – the phenomenal properties instantiated in our experiences – as the claim that *when we have an experience with quale Q, we thereby (are in a position to) know the essence of Q,*² the relatively few philosophers who have paid attention to the thesis have disagreed on a number of points, the most important of which including the questions whether *Revelation* is to be considered part of our folk-psychological notion of experience (Lewis 1995 thinks so; Stoljar 2009 thinks not), and whether it should be dismissed as inconsistent with physicalism (Lewis 1995 and Stoljar 2009 think so; Damjanovic thinks not). (I shall briefly return to these questions in the last section.)

Yet, those philosophers all seem to agree on one point: on a proper formulation of the Revelation Thesis, the expression ‘knowing the essence, *F*, of a

¹ So named after Johnston 1992, also referred to, by Lewis 1995, as the “Identification Thesis”.

² Following Williamson 2000, Damjanovic (2012, 71-72) suggests interpreting ‘being in a position to know’ the essence of *Q* as meaning that the essence of *Q* is ‘open to one’s view,’ so that ‘all that must be done to know that [essence]’ is for us to reflect on our experiences. For our limited purposes, an intuitive reading of the expression will work as well.

quale *Q*' is to be understood as 'knowing that *Q* is *F*,' and *not* as 'knowing that *F* is the essence of *Q*.' In other words, they agree that there is a substantial distinction to be made between a 'weak' (or *de re*) version and a 'strong' (or *de dicto*) version of the Revelation Thesis:

(*Weak Revelation*) When we have an experience with quale *Q*, if it is in the essence of *Q* that *p*, we thereby (are in a position to) know *that p*.

(*Strong Revelation*) When we have an experience with quale *Q*, if it is in the essence of *Q* that *p*, we thereby (are in a position to) know *that it is in the essence of Q that p*.³

and that by *Revelation*, we ought to refer to the former version, not the latter.⁴

It is the legitimacy of this agreement which I wish here to consider. And I shall contest it on the grounds that *Weak Revelation* entails *Strong Revelation* as a special case. So that if it is in the essence of quale *Q* that *P*, *Revelation* does not only require that the experiencer know that *P*, but also that he know that it is in the essence of *Q* that *P*. Or so shall I argue in the light of a principle not generally discussed, but which I take to be as natural as can be when it comes to reasoning about essences (or natures).

³ In these two formulations and throughout the paper, *p* stands for any sort of proposition that can be true of a quale. I certainly acknowledge that distinguishing between knowledge of essential truths and knowledge of essential properties might be relevant in the context of a discussion of Revelation – Damnjanovic 2012 is a good illustration –, yet not with respect to the purpose of the present paper in which *p* will be used to refer to any kind of claim that can be true of a quale (property ascriptions, identity claims, etc.).

⁴ Daniel Stoljar (2009), for instance, warns us that:

Knowing the essence of experience might be interpreted as knowing (e.g.) *that this itch is F*, where *F* is *in fact* the essence of the experience; or it might be interpreted as knowing *that F is the essence of this itch* (Stoljar 2009, 119)

and makes it clear that we ought to adopt the first formulation (for reasons that will be addressed in the last section); followed in this by Nic Damnjanovic (2012), who explicitly assumes from the start that:

If it is in the nature of the taste of peaches that *p* then *Revelation* only requires that we know that *p*, and not that it is in the nature of the taste of peaches that *p* (Damnjanovic 2012, 71, fn. 4).

On this point, most people who have lent some thought to the thesis have agreed with them. (An exception is Byrne and Hilbert 2007 who defend a form of *Strong Revelation*, but in relation to colours, rather than to experience. For this reason, this exception shall not detain us here).

2. The Essentiality of Essence

The principle I have in mind states that whatever is essential to something is also essentially so. To be precise, this ‘Essentiality of Essence Principle,’ as I shall call it, states that:

(Essentiality of Essence) For any thing (or class of things) X and any proposition p , if it is essential to X that p then it is essential to X that it be essential to X that p .

(Remark. I will use the expressions ‘it is essential to X that p ’ and ‘it is in the essence of X that p ’ interchangeably.) This principle follows, it will be seen, from basic, uncontroversial considerations regarding the connections between essentiality and necessity.

The question whether the essential *versus* accidental property distinction can be properly rephrased in modal terms has been, and still is a matter of dispute – most notably between those who think that being essential basically amounts to being necessary (a view often associated with Kripke 1980), and those who contend that essential properties cannot be analyzed in modal terms but need be characterized otherwise (for instance in definitional terms as in Fine 1994, or in explanatory terms as in Gorman 2005).⁵ There are, however, two undisputed and, I believe, undisputable claims that can be made, connecting essentiality with necessity on the one hand, accidentality with possibility on the other hand:

(E/\Box) For any proposition p and any object (or class of objects) X , if it is essential to X that p then it is (metaphysically) necessary that p .

(A/\Diamond) For any proposition p and any object (or class of objects) X , if it is accidental to X that p then it is (metaphysically) possible that not- p .

And these two claims, together with the following (also natural) claim:

$(\neg E/A)$ For any proposition p and any object (or class of objects) X , if p is true of X and yet it is not essential to X that p , then it is accidental to X that p .

are all that we need in order to derive the above Essentiality of Essence Principle.

To see this, let A be an object, P a proposition, and assume that P is not only true of A , but is also an essential truth about A (for instance, A could be water and P the proposition that water is made of H₂O molecules). In other words, assume that:

⁵ This is an oversimplified view of the debates. For a survey of the literature on the analysis of the essential/accidental property distinction, see Robertson and Atkins 2013.

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(1) It is essential to A that P

Then, by (E/\Box) :

(2) It is also necessary that P .

On the other hand, assume, for *reductio ad absurdum*, that:

(3) It is not essential to A that it is essential to A that P .

Then, by $(\neg E/A)$:

(4) It is only accidental to A that it is essential to A that P .

This, by (A/\Diamond) , implies that:

(5) It is possible that it is not essential to A that P .

Which, by (A/\Diamond) again, implies that:

(6) It is possible that it is possible that not- P .

This, of course, is incompatible with (2) as a matter of basic modal logic. By *reductio*, (3) is false and as a consequence:

(7) If it is essential to A that P , it must also be essential to A that it be essential to A that P .

(So, for instance, if it is essential to water that it be made of H₂O molecules, then it is also essential to water that water be essentially made of H₂O molecules.)

Since A and P are arbitrary in the foregoing reasoning, we can thereby see that the Essentiality of Essence Principle follows from fairly uncontroversial claims regarding essentiality, accidentality and modality.⁶ It is this principle that will play the pivotal role in my argument against considering *Weak Revelation* and *Strong Revelation* as if they were two substantially different theses.

3. From Weak to Strong Revelation

In the light of the Essentiality of Essence Principle, it should clearly appear that *Weak Revelation* entails *Strong Revelation* as a special case.

For consider *Weak Revelation* again:

(*Weak Revelation*) When we have an experience with quale Q and it is in the essence of Q that p , we thereby (are in a position to) know that p .

Suppose that, in fact:

⁶ Although I have derived the Essentiality of Essence Principle from claims connecting essentiality/accidentality talk with necessity/possibility talk, it is worth mentioning that this principle is also a theorem of the 'logic of essence' associated with Kit Fine's non-modal, definitional approach to the concept of essence, as found in Fine 1995 and Correia 2000. I take this as a further reason to endorse the principle.

(1) We have an experience with quale Q

and assume that:

(2) It is in the essence of Q that P

for some arbitrary Q and P .

From this latter assumption, (2), and the Essentiality of Essence Principle, it follows that:

(3) It is in the essence of Q that it is in the essence of Q that P .

Now, given (3), we can substitute 'it is in the essence of Q that P ' for p in *Weak Revelation* above, so that we get:

(4) If we have an experience with quale Q and it is in the essence of Q that it is in the essence of Q that P , we thereby (are in a position to) know that it is in the essence of Q that P .

And from this, together with the conjunction of (1) and (3), it follows by *modus ponens* that:

(5) We thereby (are in a position to) know that it is in the essence of Q that P .

We may therefore conclude that:

(6) If we have an experience with quale Q and it is in the essence of Q that P , we thereby (are in a position to) know that it is in the essence of Q that P .

That is, we get *Strong Revelation*.

Therefore, assuming the truth of the Essentiality of Essence Principle, *Strong Revelation* is but a special case of *Weak Revelation*. In other words, if it is in the essence of a phenomenal property Q that P , the Revelation Thesis requires not only that we know P , but requires that we know P to be essential to Q as well. Hence, the agreement found in the literature on the supposedly substantial distinction between a weak and a strong version of *Revelation* is ill-grounded.

4. Is (Strong) Revelation Plausible?

Now, what bearings does this have on the plausibility of the Revelation Thesis as part of a theory of experience? We just established that *Weak Revelation* entails *Strong Revelation* as a special case. This should sound like bad news for advocates of the Revelation Thesis. Here are two reasons why.

(A) A first point that might be pressed is that, as Stoljar (2009) points out, *Strong Revelation* amounts to requiring experiencers to antecedently possess some concept of essence, while "surely it is implausible that those who are itchy require the concept of essence." Stoljar might be right on this but what he says needs a little supplementation.

(i) If, as Stoljar thinks, knowing something to be the essence of a given quale requires possessing the concept of essence *in general* (rather than the concept of the essence of this or that quale in particular) – which seems to be Stoljar’s intended interpretation –, then I agree with him that *Strong Revelation* can hardly be true. Whatever meaning ‘possessing the concept of essence’ might have – whether we understand it as being able to articulate (some of) its conditions of application, or simply as being able to exercise, even unreflectively, that concept with (some) success, or as merely requiring that one have some notion of what makes a thing the thing it is –, people (even professional metaphysicians) surely have had lots of experiences long before they possessed the concept of what makes a thing the thing it is.

(ii) If, on the other hand, knowing something to be the essence of a quale requires possessing the concept of the essence of this quale *in particular* (rather than the concept of essence in general), this is likely to tense up the ears of anyone who thinks that the notion of qualia is to play a role in a proper understanding of experience. And the reason for this is that *Revelation* could easily be used in a sceptical argument against qualia talk. The argument in question would go like this. If knowing something to be the essence of a quale requires possessing the concept of this quale, then (*Strong*) *Revelation* entails that (1) one cannot have an experience with a quale *Q* unless one first has some notion of what makes *Q* the thing it is; but (2) one cannot have some notion of what makes *Q* the thing it is unless one could and did attend to *Q* in the first place; but, of course, (3) one cannot attend to *Q* at all before one has an experience with *Q*; therefore, (4) one could never have an experience with *Q* at all! – a result that a qualia theorist would not be willing to accept.

(Remark. Although such considerations incline me to agree with Stoljar that *Strong Revelation* is implausible, I disagree with him in that he takes that implausibility to be a reason why proponents of *Revelation* – of which, by the way, he is not – should retreat to its *Weak* version. For if *Strong Revelation* just is a special case of *Weak Revelation*, as I have argued, the implausibility of the former might so well be taken as a reason to dismiss the whole idea of *Revelation* in itself as implausible.)

(B) One might also press another point against proponents of the *Revelation* thesis, a point that echoes Lewis’s objection to the thesis. Considering it in its *Weak* version, Lewis has famously argued that *Revelation*, which he takes to be part of the folk theory of experience, should be rejected as false if physicalism is true, that is, “if qualia are physical properties of experiences, and experiences in turn are physical events.” For “then it is certain that we seldom, if ever, [know the nature of] the qualia of our experiences. Making discoveries in neurophysiology is not so easy!” (Lewis 1995, 328). Lewis concludes that our folk theory of qualia has to be revised.

I do not wish here to consider whether physicalism is true or false, or even whether it is compatible with *Revelation* or not (see Damnjanovic 2012 for a

compatibilist position on this latter question). Yet, I am confident that anyone sympathetic to Lewis's argument will find it at least as effective when directed at *Strong Revelation*. For if *Strong Revelation* were true, it would not only be easy to discover the neurophysiological correlates of the qualia of our experiences – e.g. that this pain is a C-fiber firing –, but also to discover ontological truths about these correlations – viz. that it is in the essence of this pain to be a C-fiber firing. This is likely to sound incongruous to many ears. What is more, note that this incongruity would hold even if physicalism were false: whatever properties, events, be they physical or not, whatever truths are part of the essence of an experience, (*Strong*) *Revelation* entails that these properties, events, truths, are revealed to us as such. But making discoveries in the metaphysics of mind, we might say, is not so easy either!

I have mentioned these two points – there may well be many more, which I leave it to others to press – just to give a feel of how problematic *Revelation* might turn out, once established the implication from its *Weak* to its *Strong* version. Establishing this implication was my main purpose here. If the essence of an experience is ever revealed to us, then it is revealed to us as such.

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