Essentialism: Origin and Order

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> Rawlins propped the heel of one boot atop the toe of the other. As if to pace off the heavens. My daddy run off from home when he was fifteen. Otherwise I'd of been born in Alabama.
>
>> You wouldn't of been born at all.
>>
>> What makes you say that?
>>
>> Cause your mama's from San Angelo and he never would of met her.
>>
>> He'd of met somebody.
>>
>> So would she.
>>
>> So?
>>
>> So you wouldn't of been born.
>>
>> I don't see why you say that. I'd of been born somewheres.
>>
>> How?
>>
>> Well why not?
>>
>> …
>>
>> You're makin my goddamn head hurt.
>>
>> I know it. I'm makin my own.
>
> <div align="right">Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses</div>

1. The dialectical situation

In the article (Robertson 1998) to which Hawthorne and Gendler (2000) respond, I offered two counterexamples to the sufficiency premise of Salmon's (1981) argument for origin essentialism.[1] They suggest a way of repairing the premise to protect it from the second counterexample. However this repair is susceptible to the *first* counterexample, which reappears—with the names changed from "Ed" and "Fred" to "Crosby" and "Stills"—at the end of the penultimate section their paper.[2] Their final section explores four potential responses by the origin essentialist, all of which they (as well as I) find unattractive. It is unclear to me whether

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[1] Since the main concern of Hawthorne and Gendler is Salmon's argument and not Forbes's, I discuss only the former.

[2] "Tak[ing] the liberty of ignoring the complications raised by [their revision of the sufficiency premise]" Hawthorne and Gendler (2000, §§7–8) actually discuss my first counterexample with respect to Salmon's version rather than their own. I will make clear that the first counterexample does apply to their revision.

Hawthorne and Gendler see the dialectical situation as I do, so I give a defense of my account.

I offered two counterexamples to the following sufficiency premise that Salmon uses to establish his particular version of origin essentialism, namely, that if (it is possible that)a given table originates from certain matter, then it is necessary that the given table is not the only table to originate from any nonoverlapping matter (Salmon 1981, p. 229).[3]

(1)   If it is possible that a table x is the only table originally constructed from matter z according to plan P, then necessarily, any table that is the only table originally constructed from z according to P is the very table x and no other.[4]

The first counterexample (Robertson 1998, p. 737) was a "table-of-Theseus" world in which a table, Ed, and later a distinct table, Fred, are both originally made from m according to P. Ed could have been the only table to have been so made. And the same goes for Fred. (1) then incorrectly identifies Ed and Fred.

The second counterexample (Robertson 1998, pp. 737–8) played on an intuition that Salmon wants to preserve, namely that slight variation in the original material constitution of a table is possible. Consider an "almost-table-of-Theseus" world in which a table, Gary, is originally constructed from m according to P and a distinct table, Harry, is originally constructed from m (just a molecule or two different from m) according to P. It seems that Gary could have been the only table to be originally constructed from m according to P. And the same goes for Harry (which in fact *is* the only such table in the almost-Theseus world). (1) then incorrectly identifies Gary and Harry.

[3] See Robertson (1998, p. 733, n.8) for explanation of the parenthetical "it is possible that". See also note 12 (below).

Salmon's premises (if true) generate a stronger conclusion than Salmon stated (but it's a mouthful and a mindful!): if (it is possible that) a given table originates from certain matter, then it is necessary that it is not any one-of-a-kind table originating from any nonoverlapping matter. What's the difference between an only-table-originally-made-from-n (say) and a one-of-a-kind table-originally-made-from-n? Suppose that there are 20 tables originally made from n and that the first one, Armand, was made according to $P1$ (where there may be other tables that do not originate from n that are made according to $P1$), and the 19 others were made according to some other plan, $P2$. Although Armand is not the only table to originate from n, it is a one-of-a-kind-table-originating-from-n. For all Salmon's *stated* conclusion says, a table made from m (where m and n do not overlap) *could* have been like Armand. The stronger conclusion *denies* that such a given table could have been like Armand. (I am grateful to Nathan Salmon for taking the time to verify my claims here.)

[4] This is my (P3) (1998, pp. 735–6), which corresponds to Salmon's (V) (1981, p. 229). I retain the use of "x " rather than "x", since it was intended to help make the argumentative role of the sufficiency premise in Salmon's argument clear. (See Robertson 1998, pp. 733–4.) As I will explain in §2 Hawthorne and Gendler's (2000, §3) schematic argument does not capture Salmon's argument.

Hawthorne and Gendler suggest the following repair to escape the second counterexample. The key notion is that of an *m-variant*, a hunk of matter "which largely (but not wholly) overlaps *m*" (Hawthorne and Gendler 2000, p. 288).

(2) If it is possible that (a) table *r* is the only table originally constructed from *m* and (b) no other table is originally constructed from an *m*-variant according to plan *P*; then necessarily, any table which is the only table originally constructed from *m*, where no other table is originally constructed from an *m*-variant according to plan *P*, is *r*.[5]

But this repair still falls afoul of the first counterexample concerning Ed and Fred. Before explaining and addressing this issue, there is a minor problem that needs to be addressed. (2) as it stands succumbs to Hawthorne and Gendler's (2000, p. 286) Pete-Pierre case (originally Caleb and Dirk case (Robertson 1998, p. 734) following Salmon's nameless case (1981, pp. 210–1)). That is to say, their repair has not incorporated their "Lesson One". How? Say Pete is the only table originally made from *m* (according to the Marriott-plan) while no table is made from any *m*-variant according to the escritoire-plan. It seems possible for a table, say Pierre, to be the only table originally made from *m* (according to the escritoire-plan) while no table is made from any *m*-variant according to the escritoire-plan. (2) then incorrectly identifies Pete and Pierre.

I offer the following modification on behalf of Hawthorne and Gendler.

(2ʹ) If it is possible that (a) table *r* is the only table originally constructed from *m* according to plan *P* and (b) no table is originally constructed from an *m*-variant according to plan *P*; then necessarily, any table which is the only table originally constructed from m according to *P*, where no table is originally constructed from an *m*-variant according to *P*, is *r*.[6]

Even this repair leaves us with the first counterexample concerning Ed and Fred. Not only is there a possible world in which Ed is the only table originally constructed from *m* according to *P*, but there is a world in which that is true while, in addition, no table at all is constructed from any *m*-variant. And the same goes for Fred. So (2ʹ), like (1), incorrectly identifies Ed and Fred. (And so for the same reasons does (2).)

The advocate of (2ʹ) has two possible types of response: she could deny that the counterexample is indeed a counterexample or she could offer a

[5] This is basically their (14). I have (first) attached clauses (a) and (b) to the phrase "If it is possible that" rather than to the phrase "If it is possible that table *r* is:"; and (second) deleted two occurrences of "[plus restrictions]" (at the end of clause (b) and right before the final comma), so that (2) is a premise rather than a premise-schema.

[6] Given that *m* is not itself an *m*-variant, I deleted the two occurrences of "other" in "other table" from (2).

further repair. Hawthorne and Gendler (2000, §8) offer three responses of the first type (their options (i), (ii), and (iii)) and one of the second type (their option (iv)). The only live option of the first type seems to be their (i): embrace some sort of order essentialism, according to which Fred could not have existed without Ed.[7] (Their option (ii) denies that Theseus-type cases are even possible. Their option (iii) denies the necessity of identity/distinctness, thereby denying an assumption on which the arguments for origin essentialism rely. Hence options (ii) and (iii) seem to be nonstarters.) I briefly discuss option (iv) in the next section.

Hawthorne and Gendler do not find option (i) attractive. Neither do I. But others have opposing intuitions. Perhaps by pointing out a consequence of the required type of order essentialism, I can add to Hawthorne and Gendler's (2000, pp. 292–3) attempt to diminish the opposing intuitions.

Consider the following modification to the first counterexample—a modification that plays on the intuition that origins are "flexible". Consider a possible world in which a table (Lennon, say) is originally made from m according to P, but eventually comes to be composed of wholly different matter, at which point, matter m_1 (just one molecule different from m) is brought together to make a distinct table according to P. This second table undergoes a similar process, and eventually comes to be composed of wholly different matter, at which point, matter m_2 (just one molecule different from m_1 and two different from m) is brought together to make a table distinct from the first two, but still according to the same plan, P. Continue in this way through to matter m_n, which has no molecules in common with m. Call the table originally made from m_n "Garfunkel". Call its immediate predecessor in the series "Simon". It seems to me—relying in part on the flexibility of origin—that there is a possible world in which Simon is the only table to be made from m_n according to P and in which no table is made from any m_n–variant. The same seems to go for Garfunkel. (2) then incorrectly identifies Simon and Garfunkel. Of course one might want to deny that Garfunkel could have existed without Simon. Presumably then one would also want to deny that Simon could have existed without its predecessor. And so on back up the line. Then one would have to say that Garfunkel could not have existed without Lennon. But this is not obviously true. (I find this counterexample, if such it is, most compelling when I consider human beings rather than tables. We do in fact change in material constitution quite a lot over time. There is little left in me of the material that originally constituted me. Certainly it is pos-

[7] I (1998, p. 737) touched on this option, pointing out that by embracing it, one is blocked from accepting an obvious route from the rather limited claims of origin essentialism that these arguments generate to more general claims of origin essentialism.

sible that there is none. So Theseus cases are possible, if not for tables, certainly for human beings. There is no reason most of my original matter could not come together to make a human being who had the same plan (genetic code, say) as I do. Not likely, but possible. Similarly for this second human being, and so on. Suppose that you are at the end of a series of this sort. Intuitively it seems that you could have existed without me. But, if this turn to order essentialism is right, you could not have.) The claim that Garfunkel could not have existed without Lennon is less intuitively plausible than origin essentialism was in the first place. And an argument that depends on a claim that is even less intuitively plausible than its conclusion leaves something to be desired.

2. Schemata and generality

Hawthorne and Gendler try to generalize many of the often mind-numbingly detailed claims that are involved in these discussions of origin essentialism. Unfortunately, although their generalizations are appealing and offer a kind of view of a forest, they smooth over details that are important, and hence the generalizations get things wrong: the forest they show us is not composed of the trees that are the object of our study.

One organic way to bring this out is to ask what the (unstated) conclusion of the argument utilizing (2) is supposed to be. By trying to work that out, a number of problems with the following are revealed: their schematic principles (3), (4), and (5) (quoted below with a fortuitous matching of my numbering and that of Hawthorne and Gendler); their schematic argument from (6) through (9) to the negation of (6) (again quoted below and with matching numbering); and the major claim of their §7 "Sufficiency and Generality".

(3) *Sufficiency*: If it is possible that a k-type entity r originates from hunk of matter m, then necessarily, any k-type entity that originates from m and satisfies certain constraints (call them "C") is r.

(4) *Impossibility*: No entity could originate (in the same world) from each of two entirely distinct hunks of originating matter (where "originate" means, *inter alia, be made entirely from*). [My changes of quotation marks.]

(5) *Compossibility*: If a hunk of matter m could have been made into a k-type entity r (with constraints C satisfied), and a possible non-overlapping hunk of matter n could have been made into a k-type entity (with constraints C satisfied), then there is a possible world where m is made into a k-type entity r, and n is made into another k-type entity (with constraints C satisfied in each case).

(6)   Assume [for reductio] that *r*, a *k*-type entity which originates from *m*, could have originated from some non-overlapping possible hunk of matter, *n*.

(7)   By Compossibility, *m* and *n* could coexist in a world where each is made into a *k*-type entity satisfying *C*.

(8)   By Sufficiency, *r* originates from *m* and *r* originates from *n* in that world.

(9)   But, by Impossibility, *r* does not originate from both *m* and *n*.

The first thing to notice is that (2´) does not have the form of (3), since the former, but not the latter, contains constraints in the antecedent not just in the consequent. (2´) is though an instance of a modified version of (3).

(3´)   *Sufficiency*: If it is possible that a *k*-type entity *r* originates from hunk of matter *m*, and satisfies certain constraints (call them "*C*"), then necessarily, any *k*-type entity that originates from m and satisfies *C* is *r*.

One would expect that we can now plug in (2´) as an instance of (3´) and get out the negation of an instance of what is assumed for *reductio* in (6) as the conclusion. But any instance of (6) would have no constraints whatsoever in it. So the conclusion in this case would be desirably general, saying simply that no table that originates from *m* could have originated from some nonoverlapping hunk of matter *n*. This is surprising given that Hawthorne and Gendler claim (falsely of Salmon's argument, as it turns out) that "as Sufficiency is modified to deal with counterexamples, the range of cases to which it is applied is narrowed, and the generality of the conclusion is correspondingly restricted" (2000, p. 293).[8] What is going on?

To answer this, I will work carefully through the schematic argument. (6) can raise no controversy. But (6) and (5) (Compossibility) do not in fact give rise to (7): for (5) to do its job, *r*, as it actually is, and as it is in the possible world of the *reductio*, must satisfy *C*. A modification will fix this problem: change (6) to (6´), which together with (5) will yield (7), as desired.

(6´)   Assume, for *reductio* that *r*, a *k*-type entity that originates from *m* (with constraints *C* satisfied) could have originated from some non-overlapping hunk of matter *n* (with constraints *C* satisfied).

The rest of the argument will now go through. The schematic conclusion will of course be the negation of (6´). In the particular case we are concerned with, that will be this.

(10)   If a given table is the only table to originate from *m* according to *P* while no table originates from any *m*-variant according to *P*,

[8] See also Hawthorne and Gendler 2000, p. 285, p. 289, and p. 293. This is false of Salmon's argument because his original addition of a plan constraint does not alter the conclusion. (For more explanation, see Robertson 1998, p. 734 and Salmon 1981, p. 211.)

then it is necessary that the given table is not the only table to originate from some nonoverlapping hunk of matter *n* according to plan *P* while no table originates from any *n*-variant according to plan *P*.[9]

This conclusion is more limited than the one generated using (13) (below)—which is like (2) in spirit–as the sufficiency premise of an argument more like Salmon's.[10] The rough idea in such an argument is this: if *x* is *F* and can coexist with something, *x* , that is *G*, then *x* could not instead have been *G*; for any *G* would have to be *x* . (The sufficiency premise "acts on" *x* and not on *x*, so to speak).[11] Such an argument in all its detail follows. I use the notion of an *m-variation* (instead of an *m*-variant) to indicate matter that overlaps *m* (*in whole* or in large part).

(11) Compossibility: If (it is possible that)[12] a table *x* is originally constructed from *y* and it is possible for a table to be constructed from nonoverlapping matter *z* according to *P* while being the only table originally constructed from any *z*-variation according to *P*, then it is also possible for table *x* to be originally constructed from *y* and in addition some table or other *x* to be originally constructed from *z* according to *P* while being the only table originally constructed from any *z*-variation according to *P*.

(12) Impossibility: It is impossible that a single table *x* is originally constructed from *y* and in addition is originally constructed from nonoverlapping matter *z*.

(13) Sufficiency: If it is possible that a table *x* is originally constructed from *z* according to *P* while being the only table originally con-

[9] In saying "only table to originate from *n*" (rather than "*m*") and "*n*-variant" (rather than "*m*-variant") in the consequent, I have interpreted Hawthorne and Gendler's constraints *C* as indexical, as seems intended.

[10] In light of my (Ed and Fred) counterexample, Salmon (in correspondence of 25 January 1999) immediately suggested a revision much like this one. (Salmon's revised argument had a slightly weaker conclusion than does this one. Compare note 4 (above).)

[11] See Robertson 1998, pp. 733–4 for a detailed explanation of how the argument works.

[12] Including "it is possible that" allows one a correspondingly stronger conclusion. (See note 3 (above).) It is perhaps preferable conceptually to think of the statement of the argument not as containing the parenthetical "it is possible that" in (11) nor in the conclusion (14). Instead one should think that (11)–(14) (without the parenthetical material) express conceptual truths. Conceptual truths are presumably thought by anyone—no matter what her view as to the proper logic for metaphysical modality—to be necessary, necessarily necessary, and so on. Let (11)–(14) then be like (11)–(14) except that they omit the parenthetical material and add initial (wide scope) "it is necessary that"s. (11) and (11) are *S5* and *S4* (but not *B* nor *T*) equivalent, as are (14) and (14). More importantly—since neither *S5* nor *S4* appears to be the proper logic for metaphysical modality (see Salmon 1989)—both (11) and (11) are true, at least where ordinary matter is concerned (on extraordinary matter, see Hawthorne and Gendler 2000, p. 287, n. 5) and each (together with the other corresponding premises) gives rise validly—even in *T*—to its corresponding conclusion.

structed from any z-variation according to P, then necessarily, any table that is originally constructed from z according to P while being the only table originally constructed from any z-variation according to P is the very table x and no other.

(14)   Conclusion: If (it is possible that)[13] a given table x originates from y, then it is necessary that x is not originally constructed from nonoverlapping matter z according to any plan P while being the only table originally constructed from any z-variation according to P.[14]

This conclusion asserts a restricted kind of origin essentialism for tables *in general* whereas the conclusion of the Hawthorne-Gendler argument asserts a restricted kind of origin essentialism *for tables of a restricted sort*. Alternatively, utilizing the interdefinability of "it is possible that" and "it is necessary that", we see that the contraposition of (14) (with parenthetical material) yields the following.

(15)   Conclusion: If it is possible that x is originally constructed from matter z according to any plan P while being the only table originally constructed from any z-variation according to P then it is necessary that x does not originate from nonoverlapping matter y.

This conclusion asserts *a general kind of origin essentialism* for tables of a restricted sort. Both (14) and (15) are less limited than the conclusion generated by a Hawthorne-Gendler-style argument.

The advocate of this argument is of course still saddled with the need to embrace order essentialism in order to resist my first counterexample (now applied to (13)). If order essentialism seems too much, there is still another option for the origin essentialist to pursue—one that, *pace* Hawthorne and Gendler (2000, p. 297), does not involve additional undesirable essentialist commitments. This is their option (iv), according to which the sufficiency premise is further weakened and then utilized as a premise in a different style of argument, whose conclusion (Hawthorne and Gendler's (21)) is yet more restricted than even (14) or (15). Perhaps there is a compelling argument from (14) or (15) or their (21) to a more general claim of origin essentialism; perhaps there is a compelling direct argument. This issue though is a subject for another paper. For now, I join Hawthorne and Gendler in echoing my earlier claim that a solid case for a general claim of origin essentialism has yet to be made. [15]

[13] See note 12 above.

[14] Note 4 (above) may help to make the meaning of this conclusion more intelligible.

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