

What went wrong with modal responses to Fine?

CRISTINA NENCHA 

Abstract

The identification of essential properties with necessary ones – a central commitment of the modal account of essentialism (MAE) – has been widely accepted for decades. Fine's (1994) influential critique, however, revealed that necessity fails to capture essence. Subsequent modal responses have attempted to accommodate this challenge, yet none has delivered a fully satisfactory account. This paper examines the shortcomings of these modal strategies and suggests a constructive alternative.

Keywords: Aristotelian essentialism, Kit Fine, modality, sparse modalism

1. Introduction

For decades, the modal account of essentialism (MAE), equating an object's essential properties with their necessary properties, has been dominant. Kit Fine's (1994) seminal work challenged this view with counterexamples showing that not all necessary properties are essential. Despite many attempts to save MAE, no solution has been entirely satisfactory. This paper identifies issues with current modal responses to Fine and suggests a viable solution, aiming to clarify the problems and guide us in the right direction through theoretical reasoning.

2. MAE and Fine's objections

The modal account of essentialism (MAE) posits that the essential properties of an object *o* are those properties that *o* exemplifies in every possible world in which it exists, namely that are necessary to *o*. This view was dominant until Kit Fine (1994) introduced counterexamples challenging MAE. Drawing on an Aristotelian conception of essence, Fine's counterexamples show that not all necessary properties are essential. Properties like 'membership of the singleton {Socrates}' or 'distinctness from the Eiffel Tower' are necessary to Socrates. However, Fine argues that these properties (the 'Finean properties'), though necessarily instantiated by Socrates, should not count as essential. Essential properties should define Socrates' nature by answering 'what is Socrates?'. The Finean properties do not address this question as they are

irrelevant to Socrates' nature. Therefore, Fine concludes, MAE, which equates essential and necessary properties, should be abandoned in favour of an account of essence based on real definitions.

3. *Reactions to Fine*

Fine's counterexamples to MAE have been highly persuasive, leading many scholars to abandon MAE for definitional accounts of essentialism. Even those attempting to save MAE have conceded that not all necessary properties are essential. The main strategy to save MAE involves narrowing the range of necessary properties deemed essential by introducing a non-modal condition that a property *P* must meet, beyond MAE's modal condition that *P* be necessary. This revised modal account of essentialism (RMAE) follows this structure:

(RMAE) a property *P* is essential to *o* iff (i) *P* is necessary to *o*, and (ii) *P* satisfies condition C.

The goal of RMAE is to distinguish relevant necessary properties from irrelevant ones, by means of a condition C. However, for C to be acceptable, it must meet three requirements (Wildman 2016: 1): (i) it must not render the account circular by presupposing the concept of essence; (ii) it must not be ad hoc, introduced solely to counter Fine's counterexamples; and (iii) it must block all Finean counterexamples and similar. There are, indeed, two types of counterexamples to RMAE: the 'alleged-essential-property-counterexample', where a necessary property satisfies C but should not be regarded as essential, and the 'alleged-non-essential-property-counterexample', where a necessary property does not satisfy C but should nonetheless be deemed essential.

Many attempts have been made to identify the appropriate condition C, but none have fully succeeded. In this paper, I will analyse the flaws in these efforts and propose directions for future solutions. The discussion will be speculative, focusing on theoretical reasoning rather than specific counterexamples or conditions, with the hope of clarifying what went wrong and guiding us toward the right path.

4. *Four ways to reply to Fine*

Condition C in RMAE defines a role a property must play to be relevant. So, a property is relevant if it plays the role designated by C – for brevity, the role C. The specific property that fulfils the role C is the role-filler property. I think there are at least two key factors in identifying a suitable role C that distinguishes, among *o*'s necessary properties, those relevant to *o*'s nature.¹

The first factor concerns how C selects role-filler properties, either *directly* or *indirectly*. In direct selection, the role to be played by a property to be

1 I have identified two main factors, though other relevant factors may exist. While I do not rule out that my proposal could be enriched by incorporating additional factors, I believe the selected ones are sufficient to suggest an interesting path forward.

relevant is simply to be relevant, meaning a property plays role C by being relevant. In indirect selection, playing role C consists in fulfilling a function that indirectly contributes to relevance (e.g. being intrinsic) rather than directly consisting in being relevant. Thus, a property satisfies C by indirectly making for relevance.

The second factor concerns how C qualifies the relevance of role-filler properties, determining whether a property that fulfils C is *individually* or *generally* relevant.

In individual relevance, role C is fulfilled by a property only with respect to a specific object. Whether a property *P* fulfils role C depends on the entity bearing *P*: *P* may fulfil C when instantiated by one object but not another. For example, humanity may play role C for human *o* but not for human *p*. So, we have a general role C that a property must play in order to be relevant, and C is fulfilled by humanity only with respect to *o*. In individual relevance, the properties that fulfil role C can only be determined once the object under investigation is known, as changing the object may change the property fulfilling role C. Thus, individual relevance connects the fulfilment of C by a property *P* to the specific object bearing *P*.

Note that role C is defined independently of the specific object, although the properties that fulfil it depend on the object being considered. This means that the nature of a specific object *o* does not determine the relevance of a property, but only whether that property fulfils C, with C chosen independently of *o*'s nature.

General relevance breaks the connection between role C and the specific object. To determine whether a property *P* fulfils C, one does not need to consider the objects bearing *P*. Changing the object does not alter which properties fulfil role C, as these properties are established once and for all. For example, if humanity fulfils role C, it does so for any human. Thus, if *P* fulfils role C, it comes out as relevant in general, meaning relevant for all objects that instantiate *P*.

The two analysed factors yield four possible combinations:

	Direct selection	Indirect selection
Individual relevance	α	β
General relevance	γ	δ

According to option α (for which condition C directly selects the individually relevant properties): *P* is essential to *o* iff (i) *P* is necessary and (ii) *P* plays the role C (namely, it is relevant) with respect to *o*.

According to option β (for which C indirectly selects the individually relevant properties): *P* is essential to *o* iff (i) *P* is necessary and (ii) *P* plays the role C with respect to *o*.

Option γ (for which C directly selects the generally relevant properties): P is essential to o iff (i) P is necessary and (ii) P plays the role C (namely, it is relevant).

Option δ (for which C indirectly selects the generally relevant properties): P is essential to o iff (i) P is necessary and (ii) P plays the role C.

5. *How the four options perform in relation to the three requirements*

Let us now examine how these four options meet the three requirements.

I believe the second requirement (avoiding ad hoc reasoning) does not significantly differentiate the options. Those that directly select relevant properties (α and γ) can justify introducing condition C based on a reason independent of addressing Fine's objections: it is indeed reasonable to assume that a property must fulfil the role of being relevant to be essential. Options that indirectly select relevant properties (β and δ) can justify introducing C by appealing to the fact that the choice of C is guided by the aim of capturing relevance. Although the specific justification depends on which criterion C is chosen, the underlying idea remains the same: if C makes for relevance, it is reasonable to assume that a property must be C to be essential, independently of Fine's objections. Therefore, the second requirement cannot be used to determine the best option to follow.²

The other two requirements, however, do make a difference. Let us assess how the four options measure up against these requirements to determine the best choice. This discussion will be speculative, without addressing actual counterexamples or conditions. The reasoning may thus invite differing opinions, but I believe it will guide us in the right direction. I will begin with the least contentious option to analyse and then move on to the more challenging ones.

The least controversial option is α , where P is essential to o iff (i) P is necessary and (ii) P plays the role C (is relevant) with respect to o . Option α satisfies the third requirement by being immune to counterexamples, as the strength of Fine's arguments is to show that Finean properties, though necessary, are not relevant to o (in the Finean examples, to Socrates). However, option α fails the first requirement as it is clearly circular: it defines essential properties based on the very notion (the nature of o) it aims to define. Indeed, we might ask: in which sense a property is supposed to be relevant with respect to o ? And the reasonable answer would be: if it is relevant to the nature of o . Thus, while direct selection with individual relevance scores high on avoiding counterexamples, it scores low on avoiding circularity.

If the assessment of option α is correct, then the opposite option (δ), which combines indirect selection with general relevance, should yield the inverse

2 Structuring this paper around Fine's objections might suggest an ad hoc response, as everything is organized to address them effectively. However, the proposed methodological approach yields criteria that will make sense independently of Fine's objections.

result: high on avoiding circularity and low on avoiding counterexamples. I believe this is the case. Option δ (P is essential to o iff (i) P is necessary and (ii) P plays the role C) seems non-circular: it defines essential properties as necessary properties that fulfil role C , where C does not simply amount to relevance to the nature of o , but consists in performing a function that only indirectly contributes to such relevance. Surely, individuating role C requires some prior assumptions about essences. However, I believe that there is nothing wrong in being guided by prior opinions about essences, and this kind of guidance cannot justify a charge of circularity (see [Divers 2002](#): 110). Thus, option δ likely performs better than α on avoiding circularity.

However, option δ seems to struggle with the third requirement, as it appears susceptible to both types of counterexamples. Theoretically, if role C is not fulfilled by a necessary property P with respect to the nature of a specific object o , P might fail to be relevant to the nature of o , despite fulfilling C , or it might not fulfil C even if it is relevant to o 's nature. After all, if one tries to establish an indirect role whose fulfilment by a property does not depend on the nature of a specific object – instead of directly selecting an individually relevant property – it seems as if, as Williamson suggests on another topic, ‘Only lack of ingenuity will prevent [us] from finding an intuitive counterexample to this’ (1988: 487).

This initial analysis shows that direct selection with individual relevance (option α) scores high on avoiding counterexamples but low on avoiding ad hoc reasoning. Conversely, indirect selection with general relevance (option δ) produces the reverse outcome.

Let us now examine option α to determine whether direct selection or individual relevance helps avoid counterexamples. To do this, we will compare options β and γ with regard to this requirement. This comparison should reveal which factor is key to avoiding counterexamples, since β uses only individual relevance, while γ only direct selection. As noted earlier, we started with the simplest option to analyse and are now moving to more complex ones, hence the following analysis is speculative and may invite differing opinions.

Option β (P is essential to o iff (i) P is necessary and (ii) P plays the role C with respect to o) seems better than option γ (P is essential to o iff (i) P is necessary and (ii) P plays the role C (namely, it is relevant)) at avoiding counterexamples. Option γ indeed struggles with the third requirement, being vulnerable to both types of counterexamples for reasons similar to those affecting option δ . If a necessary property P is generally relevant, namely, if P 's relevance is established regardless of the nature of a specific object o bearing P , it might still not be relevant to the nature of o . Thus, despite being classified as essential, it may not be essential. Conversely, if a necessary property is not generally relevant, it might still be crucial to the nature of o , making it essential despite being classified otherwise. On the other hand, option β does not seem easily challenged by counterexamples. If a necessary property P plays C with respect to o , it is hard to imagine alleged-essential-property-counterexamples, because if P 's fulfilment of C depends on o 's nature, it is difficult for P to be

non-essential to *o*. Similarly, alleged-non-essential-property-counterexamples are unlikely, because if *P* does not play *C* relative to *o* (i.e. it is not – indirectly – relevant with respect to *o*'s nature), it is hard to consider *P* essential to *o*.

So, I believe option β is better equipped to handle counterexamples than option γ . If this is correct, it means that individual relevance is key to avoiding counterexamples.

Let us now focus on option δ to see if indirect selection or general relevance helps avoid circularity. We will analyse options β and γ , where β uses only indirect selection and γ uses only general relevance. This should help identify which factor is crucial for avoiding circularity.

Let us start with option β (*P* is essential to *o* iff (i) *P* is necessary and (ii) *P* plays the role *C* with respect to *o*). According to β , the essence of *o* is defined by properties that are not only necessary but also fulfil *C* with respect to *o*. To assess if β is circular, we must consider two points. First, identifying role *C* requires presuppositions about the nature of things, similar to option δ , which I argued is not enough for a circularity charge. However, β differs from δ in that role *C* makes *P* *individually* relevant: *P* needs to fulfil *C* *with regard to o*. Does this change things? I do not think so. Saying that *P* needs to play the role *C* with respect to *o* means that *C* makes *P* (indirectly) relevant to *o*'s nature, but *o*'s nature does not determine the relevance of *P* (as it happens in option α): it only determines whether *P* fulfils *C*, with *C* chosen independently of *o*'s nature. Thus, option β should not be suspected of circularity. Regardless of whether this argument convinces you, option β appears less vulnerable to circularity than option γ (*P* is essential to *o* iff (i) *P* is necessary and (ii) *P* plays the role *C* (namely, is relevant)), which seems more prone to circularity. While not as clear as with option α , it is still evident. Option γ seems to presuppose the concept of essence that RMAE aims to define. Indeed, a property *P*, in this case, fulfils *C* (it is relevant) in general: while its being a role-filler is independent of the nature of a specific object, still it fulfils the role of being relevant with respect to the nature of all objects bearing *P*. In this case, if one asks: in which sense is *P* supposed to be relevant (in general)? The answer would be: if it is relevant to the nature of all objects that bear *P*.

If what I have said is correct, then option β appears better than option γ at avoiding circularity. Since option β relies solely on indirect selection, indirect selection seems responsible for avoiding circularity.

6. *What went wrong with existing modal answers to Fine?*

In the literature, as far as I know, proposal α is discussed but it is not endorsed by anyone. Despite its undeniable ability to counter any kind of counterexample, the clear issue of circularity is the reason why this proposal has not been widely pursued (see Gorman 2005).

The primary attempts in the literature to adhere to scheme RMAE generally follow option δ . I want to emphasize that I did not claim that option δ allows room for counterexamples based on actual ones; rather, I believe this

option is, in principle, undermined by its susceptibility to counterexamples. My point is that, even if we were to identify the ‘perfect’ indirect role C that is fulfilled by all and only the generally relevant properties, we should, in principle, still expect some form of counterexamples, for the reasons previously discussed.

At any rate, as a matter of fact, there are many doubts about whether the proposals that follow option δ effectively address the third requirement. The most notable attempts define role C as non-triviality (Della Rocca 1996), naturalness (Wildman 2013 and Cowling 2013), and intrinsicness (Denby 2014). As the reader can see, whether such roles are fulfilled or not by a property P is independent of which object bears P . For instance, the property of being human fulfils the role of naturalness, regardless of which human we are considering. So, since humanity is a role-filler of naturalness, then humanity comes out, on this account, as generally relevant, and it will be essential to any object whatsoever that is necessarily human. As anticipated, these proposals, for various reasons, fail to fully address the two kinds of Fine’s counterexamples. For instance, Della Rocca’s proposal has been critiqued by Gorman (2005: 280) and Wildman (2016: 180–182), while issues with Sparse Modalism (the theory that appeals to naturalness) are discussed by Wildman (2013: 775–81), Cowling (2013: 259, 265), and Skiles (2015). Consequently, none of these approaches has gained unanimous acceptance, leading to a continuous search for new accounts. Recent contributions include De (2020) and Coates (2022), which suggest new conditions or propose complex combinations of existing ones.

My point is that, given what has been discussed above, it should come as no surprise that these attempts easily lead to counterexamples.

7. Which path should we follow?

Based on the previous discussion, indirect selection is crucial for avoiding circularity. This is evident in option δ and appears to be maintained in option β . Individual relevance helps to prevent counterexamples, as demonstrated by option α and seemingly preserved in option β . Therefore, as the reader should have understood, option β – combining indirect selection with individual relevance – appears to be the most promising approach.

This means that, to establish a suitable condition C , we need to identify a role that indirectly selects the individually relevant properties. If you believe this task is unachievable and accept the other arguments in this paper, it would follow that finding a suitable criterion (ii) within the RMAE framework is impossible. However, I do not believe this task is inherently impossible. While I do not intend to prescribe the exact form of option β , I aim to offer guidance on how it might be shaped.

Let us compare option β to Sparse Modalism within option δ , which identifies C with naturalness. Whether a property P (e.g. humanity) satisfies naturalness is independent of the nature of the specific object bearing humanity. In other words, as I said, whether humanity plays the role of being natural is

not influenced by the object's nature: humanity is deemed natural regardless of whether we are considering Socrates or Plato. Thus, if humanity is deemed natural (namely, if *P* plays the role *C*), it is considered generally relevant. So, naturalness is not suited to individual relevance, at least according to most interpretations: the role-fulfilment of naturalness is played by specific properties, independently of the particular objects instantiating them.

In contrast, option β seeks a role that makes a property *P* relevant to a specific object, not generally relevant. We need to find a role *C* that properties play in identifying objects' natures, such that whether a property *P* (say, humanity) satisfies *C* depends on whether we consider the nature of Socrates or Plato.³

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I diagnosed what went wrong with existing modal responses to Fine. These responses adopted option δ , which avoids circularity (and ad hoc reasoning) but is prone to counterexamples. I argued that avoiding circularity is made possible by a condition that *indirectly* selects relevant properties, whereas vulnerability to counterexamples arises from selecting *generally* relevant properties. Therefore, I proposed exploring option β , which, like δ , *indirectly* selects relevant properties but qualifies relevance as *individual* relevance. I believe there are no principled reasons against establishing such a condition. This option should provide a suitable modal account that addresses Fine's objections within a modal perspective, by being reasonably resistant to counterexamples (due to individual relevance), not easily accused of circularity (due to indirect selection) and not ad hoc. Pursuing this direction seems worthwhile.⁴

University of Bergamo
Italy
cristina.nencha@unibg.it

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3 The idea of a common feature among all essential properties, identifiable by an indirect criterion *C*, is compelling. It underpins both option δ and option β , with the latter requiring a connection between of *C* and the specific object.

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