

Essential properties and the necessary a posteriori

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How could essential properties generate examples of the necessary a posteriori? Let n be a name, and F be a predicate which expresses an essential property of the referent of n . Then our explanation of the essential/accidental distinction is enough to show that ‘ n is F ’ will express a necessary truth. (Here we are ignoring the question of what to say about this sentence relative to worlds in which the relevant object does not exist.)

But the proposition expressed by this sentence might well be a posteriori as well, since it might take empirical investigation to find out whether the referent of ‘ n ’ in fact has the property expressed by ‘ F ’. As Kripke puts it:

‘...other considerations ...about an object having essential properties, can only be regarded correctly, in my view, if we recognize the distinction between a prioricity and necessity. One might very well discover essence empirically.’ (110)

We can approach a similar point another way (this is discussed by Kripke in his paper, ‘Identity and Necessity’). It might be the case that for some property, we can know a priori that, if some object has that property, it has that property essentially. For example, it might be the case that I know of each of you that, if you are human, you are necessarily (essentially) human. But it might take empirical work to determine that you are in fact human, rather than a cleverly disguised robot. In this case, we will have a necessary and a priori claim combining with a contingent and a posteriori claim to yield an example of the contingent a posteriori.

Consider, for example, the following argument:

1. The object before me is a human being.
 2. o is the object before me.
 3. o is a human being. (1,2)
 4. For any object x, if x is a human being then x is necessarily a human being.
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- C. Necessarily, o is a human being. (3,4)

Premises (1) and (2) are ordinary contingent claims that are, presumably, knowable only a posteriori. But if one knows (1) and (2), one is then in a position to deduce (3), which is an instance of the necessary a posteriori (ignoring for now issues about o's possible nonexistence). But you might still wonder how we could know that (3) is a necessary truth; how could we ever know, of some a posteriori proposition, that it is necessary? Well, we might begin with a claim like (4), which seems like a necessary and a priori truth. Once we know (3) and (4), we are in a position to deduce (C), which says of our necessary a posteriori proposition (3) that it is necessary.

This argument thus shows how, on the basis of knowledge of necessary a priori truths and contingent a posteriori ones, we can come to know that a certain a posteriori truth is necessary.

If this tells us how essential properties might give rise to necessary posterior claims, we still need to know whether there are any interesting true claims about the essences of things. Kripke goes on to discuss two ways of generating true essentialist claims.

1 Essentiality of origins (111-114)

Kripke suggests as a plausible essentialist principle the view that if a material object has its origin in a certain bit of matter, then it could not have existed without having that origin. He discusses the case of a particular table:

‘In the case of this table, we may not know what block of wood the table came from. Now could this table have been made from a completely different block of wood, or even of water cleverly hardened into ice water taken from the Thames River? We could conceivably discover that, contrary to what we now think, this table is indeed made of ice from the river. But suppose that it is not. Then, though we can imagine making a table out of another block of wood or even from ice, identical in appearance with this one, and though we could have put it in this very position in the room, it seems to me that this is not to imagine this table as made of wood or ice, but rather it is to imagine another table, resembling this one in all external details, made of another block of wood, or even of ice.’
(113-114)

Is this plausible?

2 Essentiality of constitution (114 n. 57, 126-127)

Kripke defends a similar principle about the material constitution of things. Could something composed of molecules have existed could it have been that thing without being composed of molecules?

3 More trivial examples

There's been much discussion over the question of whether essentialist claims of these sorts are true. Here it is less important to focus on this question than to see how these claims, if true, would be instances of the necessary a posteriori.

You might also think that there are other, less interesting examples of plausible essentialist claims. Consider, e.g. the following:

Saul Kripke is essentially not a fried egg.

I am essentially non-identical to Saul Kripke.

It seems plausible that these can be used to generate examples of the necessary a posteriori, using the formula sketched above.