Knowledge of Essence

The conferralist story

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Abstract: Realist essentialists face a *prima facie* challenge in accounting for our knowledge of the essences of things, and in particular, in justifying our engaging in thought experiments to gain such knowledge. In contrast, conferralist essentialism has an attractive story to tell about how we gain knowledge of the essences of things, and how thought experiments are a justified method for gaining such knowledge. The conferralist story is told in this essay.

1 Introduction

Many philosophers think that objects have some properties essentially and some only accidentally and construct elaborate thought experiments to figure out which ones might be essential to an object or class of objects and which accidental. When it comes to giving an account of what grounds this essentialism—what makes a property essential to an object—what is on offer is rarely more than a gesture towards the object itself: somehow the source of the essentiality is to lie in the nature of the object itself. When pressed, we are told that there is a way the nature of the object is independent of human thought and practices and that nature is the source of the essentiality of the properties of the object. This view I call 'realist essentialism' and since the publication of Kripke's lectures, *Naming and Necessity*, it has steadily acquired the status of the default position.[1] Not so long ago, though, embracing realist essentialism would have been met with skepticism,

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1 See, e.g. Kripke 1980, Wiggins 1980, and the discussion by Della Rocca 2002. A notable exception is Sidelle 1989.

if not ridicule.[2] Such reactions might have been fueled by one of two worries about the metaphysical status of essences. The first is a worry about existential commitment: do we want to allow into our ontology such phenomena as *essences*? The second concerns the *nature* of these essences: even if we allow them into our ontology, might they be dependent on human thought, language, or practices?

Elsewhere I have argued for an essentialist position that is not realist, and which speaks directly to the second worry above.[3] This account is what I call "conferralist". A conferralist embraces the idea that objects have some of their properties essentially and some accidentally, but suggests that a property's being essential to an object is an expression of our values and interests rather than having its source in an independent nature of the object. In this paper I want to address how such a position deals with the problem of our knowledge of essence.

Giving an account of essentiality —what makes a property essential to an object— is a metaphysical project. But as is the case with many other metaphysical projects, the plausibility of it is tied up with the plausibility of the epistemological story that accompanies it. Just as it is a strike against an account of, say, what makes an action right or wrong that the analysis is such that it is nigh impossible to know of a particular action whether it is right or not (say if it involves immensely complicated calculations of the actual effects of a proposed action), so it is a strike against an account of essentiality if it leaves it a complete mystery how we are to gain knowledge of the essences of things. In this paper, I want to tell the epistemic story of my conferralist account. More precisely, I want to show how the conferralist account vindicates our epistemic practices of engaging in thought experiments to gain knowledge of the essences of things.

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2 Recall, e.g. Quine 1966, where he objects to necessity *de re* on the grounds that it seems to him to commit one to Aristotelian essentialism and what he saw as the trappings of scholastic metaphysics. This seemed to Quine to be a wholly unacceptable commitment largely because the source of this *de re* necessity–what made the property necessary to an object–could not be accounted for in a way congenial to the empiricism of the day.

3 Sveinsdóttir 2008.

2 The Issues

Let me take an example so we get a more intuitive grasp of the issues. Consider Descartes and some of his properties: he was born in a town called "La Haye en Touraine" in France in 1596; died of pneumonia in Stockholm in Sweden after an unsuccessful stint as Queen Christina's tutor; invented analytic geometry; wrote a host of philosophical works, including the *Meditations*; and however surprisingly it might sometimes seem when one ponders his life work, he was human. Let's say that we think that some of Descartes' properties are essential and some accidental. For example we might think that it isn't essential to him to be born in a town called "La Haye en Touraine"—in fact, that very town now bears the name "Descartes". Similarly, we might think that it wasn't essential for him to die of pneumonia. We can imagine his dying tragically by falling in front of a horse carriage or being poisoned by religious fanatics (there have indeed been rumors of his being poisoned). But perhaps Descartes' being human is essential to him. What accounts for this distinction between essential and accidental properties? In virtue of what is a property essential to an object? And how are we to know whether a particular property is essential or not?

The prevalent method for gaining knowledge of the essences of things in philosophy is through thought experiments, just as we did a moment ago when we considered whether Descartes could have been born in a town with a different name, fallen in front of a horse carriage, or been poisoned. To cite some familiar examples from the literature, in his lectures,[4] Kripke invites us to consider whether Queen Elizabeth could have been born of different parents from those she actually was. We attempt to imagine such a scenario and based on whether we think we have succeeded in doing so judge that she is essentially born of her actual parents or not. Similarly, we ask whether this very table could have been made of ice; whether this puddle of water could have been made up of H_2O. We further ask: Is it essential to me that I have the very body I have? Could I step into one tele-transporter on Earth and walk out of another on Mars, if my body

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4 Kripke 1980 pp. 110 ff.

has not traveled with me, only a blueprint of my cerebral makeup has made it through electronically?[5]

How else are we to gain epistemic access to what is essential if not through thought experiments? To be sure we can investigate an object, say, a particular tiger, Tigo, and determine that it has certain properties, say, four legs and a tail, and black stripes on an orange coat. But how are we to discover that Tigo has these properties *essentially* (or not)? Our empirical investigations reveal only what is, not what must or might be. Or so it seems. This holds for properties such as essentiality, properties that an object has not merely in virtue of its status or arrangement here and now, but in virtue of its status or arrangement in counterfactual situations.

It thus seems that for anyone offering an account of what makes a property essential to an object, offering a vindication of our practices of engaging in thought experiments about the essences of things would be a key component in the defense of the account.

Of course, the fact that we engage in certain practices does not conclusively show that a theory that cannot justify those practices easily, or even at all, is wrong. It isn't out of the question that our practices are in error. But here, as in other areas of metaphysics, we do well to follow Aristotle in taking the appearances seriously and search for a theory that can make sense of those appearances. If no such theory can be found, then the theory we favor should ideally explain why the appearances are misleading. The appearances are thus both the starting point of inquiry and provide constraints on our theory. In our case, then, we do well to start with our practices of gaining knowledge of the essences of things through thought experiments and look to see if our favorite theory of essentiality can show those practices to be justified. In the absence of an independent argument to the effect that our practices are unjustified we had better take them seriously.

It is here that I think realists face a challenge. The challenge can be stated thus: 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? How is my thought experiment about Descartes or Tigo to reveal what

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5 To cite an example from Parfit 1984.

properties are essential to them? 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. For, by hypothesis, essentiality is completely independent of our imagination and conceptual powers. *Prima facie*, then, the realist faces the challenge of explaining how thought experiments about essences are to be vindicated, given the kind of property *essentiality* is, its status as real, and the peculiar method that thought experiments are.

Realists can respond to this challenge in one of three ways. The first way is to say that we do have access to the essences of things via our faculty of intuition. There are variations on this story. One could say that we plainly intuit essences of things or that we perceive them with that faculty. The view that we can call "modal intuitionism" faces similar challenges as does *moral* intuitionism: one needs to explain how our intuition is to give us access to the essences of things.

What about the claim that we *perceive* essences with our faculty of intuition? The idea here is that just as we perceive through our senses objects whose existence is independent of our perceptual powers, *pace* Berkeley, so we perceive essences of things through our faculty of intuition, even though essences and essentiality are independent of those intuitive powers. How exactly is this supposed to work? One idea is that we construct a mental image and judge which modifications to that mental image are permissible, where what is guiding that judgment is the real essence of the thing. Either of these views, modal intuitionism or modal perception theory, which seems to me to be a modern version of rationalism, can be coupled with an evolutionary story to the effect that we humans have evolved so as to perceive or intuit the essences of things.

The second way to meet the *prima facie* challenge is simply to accept that it cannot be met adequately and say that engaging in thought experiments is, at best, a very bad method of gaining knowledge of what nature is like. This reaction is tantamount to giving up on the hope of vindicating those practices altogether. This is a popular view to take these days, although its popularity does not seem to have had any effect on how prevalent the practices we are talking about are. Thought experiments in philosophy are as *en vogue* as ever.

The third way of responding is to acknowledge that thought experiments are a very bad way of gaining knowledge of the essences of things, but say that that is alright because *science* discovers the essences of things. Although scientists do not do so merely by empirical investigation, one might say that essentiality best explains certain regularities in nature, law-like behavior and so on.

Some, like David Chalmers, bridge the epistemic gap by insisting that all our modal notions are really rational notions, that there isn't a separate sense of "possible", "necessary", and "essential" that is real and outside the reach of our conceptual powers.[6] As it may appear that Chalmers' modal rationalism is akin to the conferralism advocated for here, I will delay a discussion of it until I have given an exposition of conferralism.

My aim here is not to linger with the details of how realists attempt to meet what I call the "*prima facie*" challenge. I call it that precisely because I am not asserting that it cannot be met; simply that work is to be done. That such a challenge faces the realist is evident from the recent insurgence of literature on the relationship between conceivability and possibility and the uses of thought experiments in modal epistemology more generally.[7] In contrast, the conferralist has a very natural story to tell, to which we now turn.

3 The conferralist account of essentiality

I have defended a conferralist account of essentiality elsewhere[8] so will limit myself to an exposition of that account and the epistemology that accompanies it.

Conferralism about essentiality locates the source of the distinction between essential and accidental properties in our conceptual practices, as opposed to the nature of things as they are independent of us. It is in virtue of something about us and our conceptual practices that a property is essential to an object. In virtue of what exactly? The key

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6 See, e.g. Chalmers 1999 and 2002.

7 See e.g. Szabó Gendler 2002; DePaul 1998; Sorensen 1992; Wilkes 1988; Yablo 1993.

8 Sveinsdóttir 2008.

idea is that essentiality is what I call a *conferred* property. The idea is familiar from Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates asks the dialogue's namesake: Is what is pious so because it is loved by the gods, or is it loved by the gods because it is pious? Or, as I would put the question: does the gods' love confer the property of being pious onto the action or do the gods merely detect the property and as a result love the action? Euthyphro's initial position is that the gods' love *confers* the property of being pious on an action, and being pious is thus a *conferred* property, in my sense.

When one offers a conferral account of a property four components need to be specified:

> **Property** : what property is conferred, e.g. being pious
> **Who** : who the subjects are, e.g., the Greek gods
> **What** : what attitude of the subjects matter, e.g., their love
> **When** : under what conditions the conferral takes place, e.g., normal, ideal, or some specified conditions

So, when one offers a conferralist account of essentiality, it isn't enough to say that essentiality is a conferred property, one has to specify in what way. Because I think that a property's being essential to an object is an expression of our values and interests, as manifest in our conceptual use, the first step is to say that it is our *conceptual commitments* that confer essentiality. The idea is that we are committed to using a concept to track certain features and not others, even if we have never had the occasion to use the concept under those conditions, and perhaps never will. Conceptual commitments are helpfully elucidated by appealing to the conditions under which we would apply the concept, were we maximally attentive to what we are trying to track. [9] For this reason I want to flesh out the claim that it is our conceptual commitments that confer essentiality in the following way:

> **Property** : being an essential property of a particular object, such as Descartes, or Tigo, or my desk

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[9] *Conceptual commitments* are not quite *application conditions*, even if understood liberally. Application conditions are the conditions under which the concept applies, irrespective of whether we do or would apply it under those conditions. By focusing on conceptual commitments, we focus on our conceptual behavior, actual and hypothetical, but not some conditions under which such behavior would be correct. For what I take to be a standard understanding of *application conditions* see Johnston 1993.

Who : ideal versions of us normal 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

Let me flesh this out. Consider Descartes again and his being human. The idea is that Descartes' being human is essential just in case ideal versions of us users of concepts such as that of being human would find it inconceivable that he not be human. Just as it is the gods' love that confers the property of being pious on an action, so it is the ideal concept users' finding it inconceivable that Descartes not be human that confers essentiality onto his being human. Descartes' being human is essential because ideal versions of us *would* find it inconceivable that he not be human.

On this account of essentiality, 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 such as forgetfulness, inconsistency, lack of attention, tiredness, and so on. The guiding idea is that the ideal representatives are ideal versions of *us*, normal users of shared concepts such as that of being human and the like. These are *non-actual* subjects and their act of conferring essentiality is a *hypothetical* act. That is because they are a construction offered to flesh out what it is for us to be committed to using concepts in the ways we are. In turn, essentiality is conferred by our conceptual commitments, which is a way of fleshing out how it is that our values and interests in using concepts are the source of essentiality.

Now that we are drawing this exposition of conferralism to a close, it is worth bringing out the difference between it and two prominent accounts in the literature which at first glance may appear conferralist, so as to assure the reader that the account presented here is distinct enough from other accounts to be worthy of attention. These are David Chalmers' modal rationalism and David Lewis' counterpart theory.

5 Comparison with David Chalmers' modal rationalism

Given that Chalmers[10] attempts to bridge the epistemic gap by insisting that all modality, including presumably essentiality, is, at base, rational, it might seem that the conferralism outlined above isn't distinctive enough to be worthy of a separate defense. Let me thus draw out the key differences between Chalmers' position and my own.

Chalmers' modal rationalism is the view that all modality is really rational in nature, that there isn't a separate metaphysical notion of possibility or necessity as distinct from the logically possible or necessary. Traditionally, the modal rationalists[11] have had an easy time offering the epistemology for their view: since modality is rational and we have direct epistemic access to our reason, the epistemic gap between what we can conceive of and what is possible is bridged completely. So, traditionally modal knowledge has been on a par with knowledge of mathematics or logic. Also traditionally, the modal rationalist faces the challenge: why think the modal structure of the world is rational? Although Chalmers is post-Kripkean in his rationalism and wants to make sense of the necessary *a posteriori* as well[12] that traditional challenge is still one he has to face.

So, even though on Chalmers' view Descartes' being human is essential just in case Descartes' not being human is ideally inconceivable, his is not a conferralist view. The reason for that is that all modal notions are stipulated to be logical modal notions, notions of consistency, coherence, and the like. And ideal conceivability is reached when our conceptual apparatus is fully in tune with the logical structure. Given the identification of the modal with the logical, we have modal knowledge to the extent our minds are in tune with the logical, which is at the ideal limit of conceivability, just like we have mathematical knowledge to the extent we can tune our conceptual apparatus and fully grasp the mathematical structures there are.

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[10] Chalmers 1999 and 2002.

[11] Descartes is, of course, an example.

[12] This he does by an appeal to two-dimensional semantics, which together with the rational modal notion of logical possibility and nonmodal facts are to yield such modal knowledge. The details of that aspect of Chalmers account do not concern us here.

In contrast, conferralism about essentiality is the thesis that what makes a property essential to an object is our human commitments, as expressed in our thought and language. The conferralist does not identify essentiality with some rational modal notion such as the denial of conceivability. The ideal concept users made use of in fleshing out the theory are a heuristic device to spell out what it is for *our commitments* to confer essentiality. The motivation behind conferralism is to demystify essentiality by showing it to be a product of how and what we *value* in the world. It is not an attempt to reduce essentiality to the denial of conceivability on ideal reflection. And because such identification is not what conferralism relies on, the traditional challenge facing modal rationalists is not the conferralist's burden.

6 Comparison with David Lewis' counterpart theory

As is well known[13], whether a property is essential to an object for Lewis depends on the counterpart relation chosen. So P can be essential to O given R_1, and not given R_2. Doesn't it then seem that whether P is essential to O or not depends on our own interests? And doesn't it then suggest that Lewis' is really a conferralist account; that essentiality is conferred by our interests as expressed in the counterpart relation chosen? And if that is so, then it seems hard to see how the conferralist view outlined above differs in any crucial respects from Lewis' account so as to require a separate treatment and defense.

But is Lewis' account really an account of essentiality? Here is a reason to think not: on any standard characterization of an essential property, P is essential to O just in case P would cease to be (either entirely or by become something else) were it to lose it. But such is not the fate of Lewis' objects. Consider Descartes and his properties on Lewis' account. Descartes is essentially human just in case all Descartes' relevant counterparts in other possible worlds are human, and not essentially human if at least one such counterpart is not. What determines the relevance here is the counterpart relation chosen, and it is the conversational context that determines that relation. However, Descartes turns out to be essentially human relative to certain conversational contexts, and not relative some others on this account. And if that is the case, what is the sense of "essential" here? If some

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[13] See Lewis 1986, pp. 248-263.

counterparts of Descartes lack the property of being human (say one is a very beautiful blue dragonfly, another a badly poached egg) and yet they count as Descartes' counterparts then what is the sense in which the property of being human is essential to Descartes at all? *Essential relative to context* just isn't the same as *essential*.

Crawford Elder[14] thinks that Lewis does not offer an account of essentiality at all, but a way to make sense of our essentiality talk. I agree partly with Elder in that *being essential* does not turn out to be a property but a disguised relation to context, although I don't think that Lewis is merely offering us a way to make sense of our ways of speaking about objects. Lewis is offering a metaphysics as well as a semantics that is to make sense of essentialist attributions. But on the account he offers, objects don't turn out to have essential properties. It is rather that some of their properties are invariant relative to certain contexts. The distinction between essential and accidental properties thus comes down to a distinction between invariant and variant properties relative to context.

A crucial difference between the conferralist account of essentiality and Lewis' is that on Lewis' P can be essential to O relative to R_1 and not essential to O relative to R_2. On the conferralist picture, if P is essential to O_1 and P is not essential to O_2 then O_1 isn't the same object as O_2. O_1 and O_2 may live in the same spatiotemporal region, but they are not identical. Lewis has no patience with objects that live in the same spatiotemporal region yet are not identical, such as the statue and the piece of marble that constitutes it.[15] On the conferralist account, however, objects have essential properties *simpliciter*, i.e. not relative to context, and it is the difference in the essential properties had by the statue of David and the hunk of marble that constitutes it that individuates those two objects. They occupy the same spatiotemporal region, but are distinct objects.

Lewis' position is, despite its powerful explanatory force, not to my mind an option for someone wanting to combine a commitment to essentialism with an attractive epistemology. The epistemology that accompanies the metaphysics that underwrites our modal talk on Lewis' account may be very attractive; it is not my aim to evaluate

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[14] Elder 2004, pp.17-20.

[15] See Lewis 1986, p. 252.

that here. Rather, my aim was to bring out the most salient differences between conferralism about essentiality and the account Lewis offers. Conferralism is not a way to avoid being essentialists, but to embrace it. And on my reading of Lewis, we have to give up key components of essentialism to follow him.

7 Vindicating our practices of engaging in thought experiments

Making sense of our practices of acquiring knowledge of the essences of things is not the only virtue of the account of essentiality I have sketched above, but it is an important virtue. It is an account that takes our practices seriously and seeks to tread a fine balance between two extremes: grounding our practices in real essentiality conceived of as independent of us and our practices and giving up on the idea of grounding our practices altogether. It does so by rethinking the nature of essentiality and its relation to us. This balancing act is similar to attempts by moral or political philosophers who wish to give an account of moral or political value as that which grounds our practices of value attribution.[16] Let us now see how the account of essentiality can ground these practices.

Consider our various questions as to whether a property is essential to an object -- a particular chair, for example. We ask: Is having four legs essential to this chair? We engage in thought experiments. We ask: Would the chair still be the same chair, if it acquired one more leg? Got painted bright red? These are questions about how the object could change and still be the same. We also ask questions about how the object could have been: Could this very table have had five legs? Similarly, we ask how Tigo, the tiger, could have been: Could Tigo have had no tail? Spots instead of stripes? Been a robot controlled remotely from the evil inhabitants of Mars? What are we doing when we engage in these thought experiments? What is the proper subject matter of our experiments? What exactly is being tested?

For the sake of comparison, consider the model of experiment offered to us from elementary physics. When the beginning physics student tests the effects of tinkering with the components of a cart that slides down a designated incline the experiment runs like this: she tinkers

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16 See, e.g. Wallace 1994.

with the components, lets the cart loose and records the time it takes the cart to slide down.

Contrast the typical thought experiment. We don't add a leg to our table and then wait to see what happens to the table—whether it is still the same or whether it has turned into something else, or perhaps gone out of existence. The subject of our experiment, I suggest, *isn't the table at all*. It is, instead, our *own reactions* to the suggested change. The point of our exercise is to see what *we would say* about those circumstances:[17] Would we still find it to be the same old table; would we still recognize Tigo as the same tiger?

It isn't that controversial to say that what we are testing in thought experiments is our own intuitions.[18] The problem just is that that doesn't say very much. What exactly is it to consult our intuitions? Intuitions about what? We cannot fully evaluate whether the method is a good one for gaining knowledge about the subject matter before we get clearer about the nature of the subject matter itself. If we are testing our intuitions about something intuition has access to we don't have a problem on our hands. And that is precisely what I suggest we are doing: *We are testing our intuitions about what we are committed to in our use of concepts.* We are, as it were, making an educated guess as to what we are committed to in our use of the concepts involved. We may not have direct epistemic access to our commitments, just as we may not have direct epistemic access to our fears and desires. And just as it may take years of prodding on the psychoanalyst's couch to own up to our desires, so it may take a lifetime's worth of thought experiments to own up to our commitments. But what determines whether a property is essential to an object or not is, nevertheless, those very commitments. Hence, when we engage in thought experiments, we make an educated guess about two things: what our conceptual commitments actually are and then, what follows from those commitments.[19]

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17 Cf. Sorensen 1992 p.4.

18 Cf., e.g., Sorensen 1992 and DePaul 1998.

19 Aside from testing our own concept commitments, thought experiments can also serve the function of gathering all our knowledge of related matters together and enabling us to make an educated prediction of what the empirical findings may turn out to be, but I won't dwell on that function here.

How exactly does our educated guessing work? Consider the thought experiment involving Tigo, the tiger. We ask, for example, whether Tigo could have had no tail, had dots instead of stripes, been a robot controlled by the evil Martians. What are we guided by in our thought experiment about Tigo? What is our access to the essential properties of Tigo? According to the conferralist story, we represent in our mind what we take ourselves to be committed to. Let's say that we are fairly ignorant of our concept commitments in using the concept of being a tiger and the only things we start with is that Tigo is a tiger. Given that, we ask ourselves if we can imagine scenarios in which Tigo had no tail or spots instead of stripes or where Tigo was a robot controlled by the evil Martians. In entertaining these scenarios we get clearer about how we are committed to using the concept of being a tiger. For instance, we come to realize that we don't merely intend to use the concept to capture the property of being a tailed orange four-legger with black stripes, but rather some internal structural property. And we may come to realize that we cannot make sense of Tigo's continued existence as anything else than a tiger; in other words, that we are committed to using the concept of being a tiger in such a way that whatever is a tiger is so throughout its existence and that Tigo is thus essentially a tiger. Having gotten clearer about our own conceptual commitments, we can rule certain scenarios out as incompatible with our use. Given that Tigo is a tiger, and tigers are tigers throughout their existence, he couldn't be a Martian-controlled robot, for example. Clearly, being a remote-controlled robot is incompatible with being a tiger. What about having spots instead of stripes? We are supposing that in using the concept of being a tiger we are not attempting to track the property of being an orange four-legger with black stripes but rather some internal structural property, but we don't quite know if that internal structural property, say some genotype G, can express the phenotype of spots rather than the phenotype of stripes under some circumstances. We don't quite know what is entailed by our conceptual use and thus our understanding of our concept commitments should leave us silent on the matter; it is a matter of empirical investigation.

Could Tigo have had no tail? Well, some tigers are born without a tail and, tragically, some lose their tails in traps. Thus, we conclude that it is compatible with our usage of the concept of being a tiger that Tigo have no tail and that Tigo isn't essentially tailed. What is guiding our educated guess as to the essence of Tigo is what we take

to be our conceptual commitments in using concepts such as that of being a tiger, but envisioning these hypothetical scenarios is a way of testing to see if what we take to be our commitments are our actual commitments. On the conferralist view, then, when we engage in these thought experiments, we aren't testing Tigo or the table at all, but our own commitments. The physics student's subject matter is the cart and its travels, ours is our own commitments.

The knowledge we gain of our conceptual commitments is fallible knowledge, of course, but that is how it should be. It is fallible both because we may not be completely aware of what our use of concepts is tracking and also because we may not know what follows from the fact that in our use we are tracking a certain property and not some other one—what is compatible with our conceptual use and what isn't. Our story here thus makes sense of our actual practices of essentiality attribution and gives support for the claim that the thought experiments that we engage in are a justifiable, if fallible, method for gaining knowledge of the essences of things.

8 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present the epistemic story accompanying conferralism about essentiality. The epistemic story takes seriously our practices of engaging in thought experiments to gain knowledge of the essences of things and shows how conferralism can vindicate those practices. According to this story, thought experiments are legitimate methods of philosophical argument precisely because they are tests of *our commitments* and, on the conferralist account of essentiality, what matters to whether a property is essential to an object or not is our actual conceptual commitments.[20]

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