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Trouble for Hybrid Contingentism

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The necessitist claims that necessarily, everything exists necessarily. In an attempt to moderate necessitism, the hybrid contingentist claims that higher-order objects (e.g., properties and propositions) exist necessarily, while first-order objects exist contingently. Necessitism, however, has posed some significant challenges to hybrid contingentism. Williamson (2013), perhaps the most ardent recent defender of necessitism, has argued that hybrid contingentism runs afoul of what he calls the haecceities objection. In defense of hybrid contingentism, Skiba (2022) responds to this objection by treating higher-order objects (such as properties) as grounded in their essences rather than the individuals whom they are about. So, the haecceitistic property "being Socrates" would not depend on Socrates but rather on that haecceity's essence. If this is correct, then when we get clear on what is essential to that haecceitistic property, and we find no commitment to Socrates's existence.

Unfortunately, I will argue this strategy won't work. Skiba's strategy is in tension with a plausible and substantive view about the nature of ordinary objects. I will show that Skiba's strategy is at odds with essential bundle theory, the view that ordinary objects just are essentialized property bundles. In §1 I provide some initial motivations to adopt hybrid

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contingentism. In §2 I present Williamson's haecceities objection as well as Skiba's defense of hybrid contingentism. Here we will pay very careful attention to when we incur existential commitments in the course of characterizing what is essential to a haecceitistic property. Having done all this, in §3 I introduce essential bundle theory as well as some preliminary motivations for it as a view about the ontology of ordinary objects. I will then show that if one adopts an essential bundle theory, then the essences of the haecceitistic properties will license inferences to the existence of the ordinary objects they are about.

1. Hybrid Contingentism

Consider a particular table, T_1. Possibly, T_1 did not exist. The materials constituting the table could have been assembled differently into a chair; the table-making factory could have gone out of business before making T_1; the wood could have rotted prior to assembly; or the universe could have evolved in a slightly different way, so humans did not exist, thus no tables. Conversely, other objects could have existed that do not currently exist. Possibly, some other table, T_2, exists. The table-making factory could assemble some different wood together making T_2.

Now, consider a slightly different case: the property of being self-identical. Could any set of facts have been different so that self-identity would fail to be a property of an object? It seems that no counterfactual conditions threaten the existence of the property of self-identity. Even though there may be different objects that exist in our universe, as long as there are objects, every object must be identical to itself.[1] Since no difference in the set of facts comprising a world could make it the case that self-identity does not exist as a property, it exists necessarily.

There is a very natural way to distinguish the modal statuses of these two kinds of objects. First-order objects like T_1 exist contingently. Higher-order objects, like the property of self-identity, seem to exist necessarily. This just is hybrid contingentism: the view that first-order objects are contingent whereas higher-order objects are necessary. What is immediately attractive about hybrid contingentism how it accommodates our pre-theoretic judgment about the modal nature of objects.

[1] Here, we set aside considerations for an empty world in which no objects exist. For discussion regarding the role the empty world plays in our counterfactual reasoning on higher-order objects, like properties see Efird and Stoneham (2005), Efird and Stoneham (2009), and Clarke-Doane (2019).

2. Skiba and the Haecceities Objection

2.1 Haecceitistic Properties

Despite the initial appeal of hybrid contingentism, there are strong arguments against the view that threaten hybrid contingentism's stability. Consider the first-order object Socrates. Socrates exists contingently. His parents could have decided to not have kids, they could have never met, or the universe could have evolved so that there are no humans. So, Socrates possibly did not exist.

Socrates also seems to have properties that exist necessarily. For example, the property of being identical to Socrates. What seems special about this property is that only Socrates and no one else would have this property. We can identify these unique properties by way of standard comprehension principles. But Socrates is not special. In fact, we can in general for any condition of interest define a property had by and only by things that satisfy that condition. In other words, we can define them by way of comprehension principles. Williamson introduces a typical comprehension principle as follows:

Comprehension: $\exists X \forall x (Xx \leftrightarrow A)$

Comprehension tells us that there is a property X had by all and only those things that satisfy some condition A. In the case where the condition is "being Socrates," there will be only one object that satisfies that condition. So, our comprehension principle yields the property S, the property of being identical to Socrates. Since, we are particularly interested in the *necessary*, not merely actual, properties had by objects that satisfy certain conditions, we need to introduce a modal comprehension principle. This sort of condition is a modal comprehension principle[2]:

Modal Comp: $\exists X \Box \forall x (Xx \leftrightarrow x = y)$

Informally, there is some property X had necessarily by all and only those things which are identical to y. When we apply the modal comprehension principle to Socrates, we get a property that is necessarily held by and only by things identical to Socrates. The standard term for properties of this sort are haecceitistic properties.

[2] For further discussion on modal comprehension principles, see Williamson (2013), 227–30.

We can think of haecceitistic properties as properties that track an individual (or collection of individuals) across modal space. Following Skiba (2022), we can regiment a haecceitistic property as follows[3]:

$$\text{Haec}(X, y) =_{df} \Box\exists X\Box\forall x(Xx \leftrightarrow x = y)$$

Informally, this says that *y*'s haecceity is the property had by everything that is identical to *y*. In the case of Socrates, presently under consideration, that property is the property of being necessarily identical to Socrates. So, using our conventions for regimenting talk about haecceities we can write:

$$\text{Haec}(S,s) =_{df} \Box s = s$$

Where *s* represents the individual Socrates, and S represents the property of being identical to Socrates (i.e., $s = s$). So, Haec (S,*s*) says that the property S necessarily tracks *s* across modal space and nothing else. Haec(S,*s*) is definitionally equivalent to $\Box s = s$ because they both capture the same modal restraints and uniquely track Socrates as well.

2.2 The Haecceities Objection

We are now in a position to articulate Williamson's objection to hybrid contingentism. Observe that it appears we are licensed to existentially generalize on $\Box s = s$. From $\Box s = s$, we can conclude that $\Box\exists x x = s$. In other words, we appear to have a context that involves genuine predication. A context involves genuine predication when as a matter of fact one is entitled to existentially generalize in the way demonstrated above. On a natural view, genuine predication requires that there must be an object. If we ascribe a property to some object, that object must exist. Consider the sentence "Socrates is beautiful," symbolized in (1):

1. Bs

Since (1) is a context that involves genuine predication, we are licensed to make the following existential generalization:

2. $\exists x(Bx \wedge x = s)$

This inference is licensed when a name occurs in a context that involves genuine predication, then that object designated by that name

[3] See Williamson (2013), 267.

exists. Williamson formalizes this observation into a principle that he calls *the being constraint* (Williamson 2013, 148–58):

Being constraint: $\Box\forall x\Box(Fx \rightarrow \exists y x = y)$

The being constraint captures what we have been saying all along: that when there is a genuine predication, the objects being predicated on must exist. Recall Socrates's haecceitistic property of being self-identical. If $\Box s = s$ involves genuine predication, then it appears Socrates must necessarily exist. To see why, consider the following argument:

1. $\Box s = s$	*Modal comprehension*
2. $\Box(s = s) \rightarrow \Box(\exists x x = s)$	*Being constraint*
3. $\Box\exists x x = s$	*MP 1,2*

So, whenever Socrates' haecceity exists, so too must Socrates. This conflicts with the first order commitments of hybrid contingentism, since they deny the necessary existence of Socrates. Although the hybrid contingentist claims that the property of being identical to Socrates exists necessarily, they also hold that Socrates possibly doesn't exist. Given that this property triggers the being constraint, we seem to have contradiction:

1. $\Diamond\neg\exists x x = s$	*Hybrid contingentism commitment*
2. $\Box$(Haec(S,*s*))	*Modal comprehension*
3. ($\Box$ Haec(S,*s*)) $\rightarrow$ ($\Box\exists x x = s$)	*Being constraint*
4. $\Box\exists x x = s$	*MP 2,3*
5. $\bot$	*Contradiction 1,4*

This is the argument developed by Williamson called *the haecceities objection*.[4] Williamson thinks the most plausible response is to reject (1). On his view, the argument teaches us that, contrary to appearance, first-order objects all necessarily exist. The proponent of hybrid contingentism will instead be tempted to reject (3). But Williamson notes, "Denying the being constraint would amount to the claim that something is propertied on and that something does not exist. In other words, how does the haecceitistic

[4] See Williamson (2013), 267–77.

property track the individual when there is no individual?" (Williamson 2013, 269).

2.3 Skiba's Defense of Hybrid Contingentism

Skiba (2022) has two responses to the haecceities objection. First, he argues that the being constraint does not apply to haecceitistic properties. Second, he argues that haecceitistic properties are grounded in their essences.

We will begin with his first response that he can reject (3), without giving up the being constraint. Recall that the being constraint requires *genuine predication*. A context is genuinely predicational when it entails an existential commitment given some property. Williamson and Skiba agree that if there is no such context, then no being constraint applies. According to Skiba, statements involving haecceitistic properties are just such contexts. Here's why. Consider the following kinds of constructions that are not genuine predications:

1. $\Box(s = s \vee s \neq s)$

2. $\Box(s = s \rightarrow s \neq s)$

3. $\Box(s = s \leftrightarrow s \neq s)$

These are not genuine predications because they have embedded truth-functional statements, not predications. Recall the being constraint, $\Box\forall x\Box(Fx \rightarrow \exists y x = y)$. Again, Williamson and Skiba agree that Fx requires genuine predication. Since the occurrence of truth functional connectives in (1)–(3) are not genuine predications, the being constraint does not apply. So, construction with truth functional connectives occurring as they do in the above constructions force the context to be merely apparently predicational and not genuine predications (Williamson 2013, 156).

Skiba draws our attention to how we regiment the haecceitistic property, via the modal comprehension principle, as follows:

Haecceities: $\Box\exists X\Box\forall x(Xx \leftrightarrow x = y)$

Observe that the haecceitistic property is syntactically analogous in the relevant sense to the merely apparent predication of (3), since the haecceitistic property involves an embedded truth-functional connective. From this we can conclude that, at the level of logical form, haecceities are not genuine predications. So, we can still endorse the being constraint without it applying to the haecceitistic property.

Having shown the being constraint no longer applies, we are left needing some kind of explanation for how haecceitistic properties can exist independent of their constituents. What would it mean for a property S that tracks Socrates and no one else to exist in the absence of Socrates's existence? What follows will be the second part of Skiba's response to the haecceities objection. Skiba's proposal is that haecceitistic properties are grounded in their essences. It will be here that we will discover the tension that arises between Skiba's account of hybrid contingentism and essential bundle theory.

Concerning essence, the essence of an object (as we will understand it) is a class of truths which express how that object is "at its core." Consider the following standard example, along with its standard essentialist variations:

> 1. Socrates is essentially human.
>
> 2. It lies in the nature of Socrates to be human.
>
> 3. That Socrates is human flows from the nature of Socrates.
>
> 4. It is true in virtue of the nature of Socrates that he is human.

Following Fine (1995), we will use the sentential operator "$\Box_x \Phi$", read: it is essential to *x* that Φ. So, (1) – (4) would be regimented as:

$$\Box_{\text{Socrates}} \text{Socrates is human}$$

Many have argued that what's essential can enter into grounding explanations.[5] Again following Fine (2012), we will regiment grounding claims as follows:

$$\Phi_1, \Phi_2, \ldots \Phi_n < \Psi$$

So grounding claims will also be a sentential operator. On the left, there will be a collection of sentences, and, on the right, there will be exactly one sentence. A plausible principle characterizing the kind of grounding explanations essences canonically enter into is what we might call essence grounds prejacents[6]:

[5] See Rosen (2010), Kment (2014), Carnino (2014), Denby (2014), and Dasgupta (2016).

[6] See Rosen (2010) and Kment (2014).

Essence Grounds Prejacents (EGP)[7]: $\Box_x \Phi < \Phi$

Skiba invokes EGP to establish an essential ground for the haecceitistic properties. Invoking EGP yields:

Hybrid Haecceity: $\Box_S \text{Haec}(S,s) < \text{Haec}(S,s)$

On this proposal, it's the haecceitistic property's essence that serves as the full ground and no grounding appeal needs to be made to the existence of Socrates. If that's true, Skiba has provided a plausible explanation for how a haecceitistic property tracking Socrates and no one else can exist without Socrates existing.

Summing up, hybrid contingentism can deny (3) of the haecceities objection for two reasons. First, the haecceitistic property is not a genuine predication (i.e., not existence demanding), so the being constraint does not apply. Second, hybrid contingentism claims that the essences of haecceitistic properties can explain how haecceitistic properties can exist independent of the relevant first-order object's existence. It is in virtue of the haecceity's essence that the haecceity exists.

3. Essential Bundle Theory

We are now in a position to see the tension that emerges between hybrid contingentism and a type of bundle theory. Bundle theories are views about the metaphysics of ordinary first-order objects. It's the view that ordinary objects are just bundles of properties. We express this view with the bundle operator: $B(P_1, P_2, \ldots P_n)$. This says that for every collection of properties $P_1, P_2, \ldots P_n$, there exists a bundle of those very properties in a specific region of space and time. The obvious problem that bundle theory characterized in this way faces is the problem of identity persistence. For example, in the winter Socrates is pale, and in the summer he is tan. By the lights of the bundle theorist, these are two distinct persons named Socrates (Jago 2018, 3). So, the bundle theorist cannot make sense of the persistence of an ordinary object's identity across modal space (or across any space). A solution to this worry is to adopt essential bundle theory.

Essential bundle theory modestly extends classical bundle theory by treating ordinary objects as bundles of essential properties. Since being tan or pale are not essential to Socrates, essential bundle theory avoids the

[7] While EGP may be better regimented as a partial grounding relation, we will follow Skiba in regimenting it as a full grounding relationship.

problem of identity persistence. So now, an ordinary object like Socrates is identical to the bundle of his essential properties. Since we are already committed to using a sentential operator for our essentialist talk, we will need to regiment essential bundle theory using lambda abstraction. So, given some first order object, such as Socrates, Socrates is identical with the following property bundle: $B(\lambda x.(\Box_x P_1(x) \wedge, \ldots, \wedge \Box_x P_n(x))$, where B, the bundle operator, functions the same as conventional bundle theories:

Essential Bundle Theory:
$\exists y x = y \leftrightarrow B(\lambda x.(\Box_x P_1(x) \wedge, \ldots, \wedge \Box_x P_n(x)))$

But this isn't merely accidentally true. Given that it's a characterization of the nature of ordinary objects, it can be modally strengthened in the following way:

Essential Bundle Theory* (EBT*):
$\Box(\exists y x = y \leftrightarrow B\ (\lambda x.(\Box_x P_1(x) \wedge, \ldots, \wedge \Box_x P_n(x))))$

This is an attractive view about ordinary objects. When someone points to an object and asks what that object is, a reasonable response would be a description of all the essential features of that object. So, when asking what Socrates is, we could list all the properties that are essential to Socrates, i.e., the properties that belong to all and only those things which are identical to Socrates. One striking result of considering EBT* is that while we thought it was neutral with respect to the modal nature of ordinary objects, EBT* turns out to not be neutral with respect to the modal nature of ordinary objects, that would be surprising.

Since, according to EBT*, Socrates just is the bundle of properties essential to Socrates, then the haecceities of Socrates are going to track Socrates in exactly the same way that the total collection of essential features of Socrates will. Given this, we have reason to believe that EBT* and hybrid contingentism (as defended by Skiba (2022)) are metaphysically equivalent, i.e., an ordinary object is equivalent to a collection of properties that belong to all and only those things identical to that object. For hybrid contingentism, the haecceitistic properties are the properties that track all and only things identical to Socrates. Similarly, EBT* will identify all the essential properties that belong to all and only those things identical to Socrates. This metaphysical equivalence entails that these two views are modally coordinated. Call this observation *modal coordination*:

Modal coordination:
$\Box\ (\text{Haec}(S,s)) \leftrightarrow \Box B\ (\lambda x.(\Box_x P_1(x), \wedge, \ldots \wedge \Box_x P_n(x)))$

This should be unsurprising. After all, there shouldn't be any meaningful difference between those features that make Socrates Socrates

(his haecceity) and the features that make Socrates Socrates (the bundle of his essential features). Given this package of commitments, the necessary existence of Socrates seems to follow. We can now demonstrate this tension between hybrid contingentism and EBT*:

1. $\Box(\text{Haec}(S,s))$	*Hybrid contingentism*
2. $\Box(\text{Haec}(S,s)) \leftrightarrow \Box B(\lambda x.(\Box_x P_1(x) \wedge, \ldots \wedge \Box_x P_n(x)))$	*Modal coordination*
3. $\Box(B(\lambda x.(\Box_x P_1(x) \wedge, \ldots \wedge \Box_x P_n(x))) \leftrightarrow \exists x x = s)$	*EBT**
4. $\Box \exists x x = s$	*Standard modal logic*
5. $\Box(\text{Haec}(S,s)) \rightarrow \Box \exists x x = s$	*1–4 → Intro*

Call this argument *the bundle puzzle*. What the bundle puzzle shows is that we end up committing to the necessary existence of Socrates in a way that the hybrid contingentist was not anticipating. Hybrid contingentists thought that the only thing that mattered for avoiding the consequence that Socrates necessarily exists is whether there is genuine predication occurring at the level of logical form of the haecceitistic properties. Strangely, the bundle puzzle shows that there are other routes to the necessary existence of Socrates. In other words, there are additional ways for the being constraint to come into force and the haecceities objection to introduce trouble.

Recall that Skiba and Williamson agree that we only have to worry about the being constraint when there is genuine predication. If there is no genuine predication, the being constraint doesn't apply. But, from the bundle puzzle, we learn that there are more ways to satisfy the conditions for applying the being constraint than just merely whether those properties involve genuine predications. (4) of the bundle puzzle is a case in which the being constraint engages without demanding anything that involves genuine predications.

The hybrid contingentist really only has three options. First, reject hybrid contingentism. If the hybrid contingentist does not want to give up their view, then they will not want to give up (1) of the bundle puzzle. Second, they could reject the validity of the modal reasoning, but since the modal reasoning is standard it would be very weird for the hybrid contingentist to somehow call it into question. Otherwise they would have

to adopt a non-standard logic. So, this is not really an option for the hybrid contingentist. The only move left is to reject essential bundle theory and that's surprising given their similar commitments to the modal nature of higher-order properties.

Here's the lesson for the hybrid contingentist to draw from the bundle puzzle: the haecceities objection is more robust than we may have originally thought. The hybrid contingentist appeared to have a principled way out of the haecceities objection. We see, however, that this required the hybrid contingentist to reject substantive theses about the metaphysics of ordinary objects. Some views about the nature of ordinary objects allow for the haecceities objection to re-engage in ways that do not involve an explicitly predicational context.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that the ways in which the hybrid contingentist defend themselves from the haecceities objection is in tension with a substantive view about the nature of ordinary objects: essential bundle theory.

The hybrid contingentist met the haecceities objection by treating haecceitistic properties as not involving genuine predication and that higher-order objects are grounded in their essences as opposed to the individuals whom they are about. So, the haecceitistic property "being Socrates" would not depend on Socrates but rather on that haecceity's essence. All this avoids any commitment to Socrates's existence.

The bundle puzzle shows, however, that hybrid contingentism is at odds with essential bundle theory, the view that ordinary objects just are essentialized property bundles. When considering propositions that involved individuals, the bundle puzzle showed that if we commit the necessity of properties, we commit to the necessary existence of Socrates. In other words, the haecceities objection is more robust than was previously supposed. It turns out that some views about the nature of ordinary objects allow for the haecceities objection to re-engage in ways that do not involve an explicitly predicational context.

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