Essentiality Conferred

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Abstract

In this paper I introduce a certain kind of anti-realist account of what makes a property essential to an object and defend it against likely objections. This account, which I call a 'conferralist' account, shares some of the attractive features of other anti-realist accounts, such as conventionalism and expressivism, but, I believe, not their respective drawbacks.

1 Introduction

Consider the great baseball player, the pitcher Pedro Martínez, and some of his properties: He was born in the Dominican Republic, he won the World Series with the Boston Red Sox in 2005, his ERA in 2000 was an astonishing 1.74, and, however surprising that might sometimes seem when one watches him pitch, he is human. Let's say that we think that some of Pedro's properties are essential and some accidental. For example we might think that it isn't essential to Pedro to be born in the DR (we can imagine a scenario in which Pedro is born into the big Dominican community in Boston). Similarly for his ERA or winning the World Series with the Red Sox (that one is very easy). But perhaps Pedro's 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?

Since the publication of Kripke's lectures, *Naming and Necessity* (1980), realist essentialism has gained new and numerous friends.[1] This view involves two claims:

1) that some of an object's properties are essential to it and those properties play a central role in the individuation of that object; and

2) that the source of that essentiality lies in the nature of things, as it is independent of human thought and practices.

Realists about essentiality claim famous ancestors in Leibniz and other rationalists, medieval scholastics, and of course, Aristotle.

Essentialism, however, need not be realist. In this paper I present an anti-realist account of what makes a property essential to an object that I call 'conferralism'. Such a *conferralist* essentialism involves accepting the first claim above, but rejecting the second. I thus accept that some properties are essential to an object and some not, but this commits me neither to realism about *de re* necessity nor to real essences.[2] My account should thus be of interest to those who have qualms about committing to such phenomena.

The motivation for seeking an anti-realist account of something can vary greatly. Sometimes what is fueling it is fear of ontological commitment; sometimes it is anxiety about epistemic access. In my case, it is a sneaking suspicion that some of what we think is independent of our thought and practices isn't so independent. What is articulated here is the idea that an object's having the essential properties that it has is a reflection of our values and interest, as expressed in our conceptual

practices, as opposed to essentiality residing in an independent reality — or being part of "the fabric of the world", as J.L. Mackie (1977, p. 15) put it. In this, conferralism shares some of the motivations with other anti-realist accounts such as conventionalism and expressivism. However, I will venture to show that conferralism isn't vulnerable to objections often raised against conventionalism and expressivism, although I hope it shares some of their respective virtues.

Conferralism about essentiality is an anti-realist account,[3] but, I hope, a sober one. The aim is to reveal the influence we have on our world, yet be sensitive to the ways in which the world is not of our making. I will draw out ways in which it is a sober account once key notions have been explained. Let us turn to that.

2 Conferred properties

The key idea needed to explain conferralism about essentiality is that of a *conferred property*. I call a property of an object 'conferred' if it is in virtue of some attitudes of subjects that the object has the property. We can say in that case that the attitudes of the subjects *confer* the property on the object. Conferred properties abound, but they are not all created equal: They differ in who does the conferring, under what circumstances, and what attitudes are at work. Let's consider a couple of conferred properties:

Consider a baseball game. The Red Sox are playing the Yankees at Fenway Park. Manny Ramirez is batting. One strike. Two strikes. Three. He is out. The fans boo. "That wasn't a strike, that wasn't even close! ", a fan exclaims. Later the fan is sitting at home, watching the eleven o'clock news and sees that last pitch one more time up close. "That wasn't a strike", the fan mumbles to himself. But it doesn't matter. Everyone may agree that the umpire shouldn't have called a strike. But he did. He judged that the pitch was a strike and that is the end of story. In the game of baseball, the umpire's judgment is final.

On my interpretation of the baseball case,[4] the umpire confers the property of being a strike on the pitch in question and the property of being a strike is a conferred property. It is the umpire's judgment that confers that property on the pitch and, as a result of that judgment, a new fact is created. This is the new baseball fact that the pitch was a strike. This is so, even though the umpire may have been attempting to track another fact, a physical fact about the placement of the ball. We can think of two connected, but distinct, facts:

baseball fact: the fact that the pitch was a strike

physical fact: the fact that the ball traveled through the strike zone

The umpire may have been attempting to track the physical fact. However, his judgment as to what the physical fact is constitutes the new fact, the baseball fact. It is his judgment about the physical qualities of the ball that confer the baseball property of being a strike on the pitch.

Some other conferred properties may not have as close a relationship to physical properties.[5] Consider a ballet dancer's solo. Plausibly, its being beautiful does not merely consist in its being performed in accordance with technical specification. And, also plausibly, the solo's being beautiful isn't something independent of our thoughts, practices, and sentiments. We may not want to be so crude as to say that a particular audience's reaction confers the property of being beautiful on the

solo[6] but perhaps we want to follow Hume (1965) and say that a solo is beautiful in virtue of being pleasing to the appropriate judges, the experts on the matter. On a Humean view, we could say, the attitude of the experts confers the property of being beautiful on the solo.

Now, one can have a conferral account of a property such that it is a particular person, say an actual umpire or expert, who confers the property on the object in question. Or one can have a conferral account where no actual individuals or groups of individuals confer the property, but rather some ideal subjects. Such an account incorporates *constructivist* elements in the following sense: what does the conferring is a construction, since non-actual idealized subjects confer the property on the object. Constructive elements can also occur elsewhere, such as when the conditions under which the conferral is to take place are not actual conditions, but rather involve some element of idealization. A conferral account of a property is thus *constructivist* in my sense, if what does the conferring are attitudes of non-actual individuals under non-actual conditions, where a characterization of those non-actual individuals and non-actual conditions is reached by idealizing actual individuals and conditions in some way.[7]

Some properties are obviously conferred. Other properties may at first appear not conferred, but on closer inspection reveal themselves to be open to such an analysis. Some properties may even be such that there could be reasonable disagreement over whether they are conferred or not. Recall, for example, Euthyphro's argument with Socrates (Plato 1578, 10a) over whether an action is pious because it is loved by the gods, or whether the gods love the action because it is pious. Euthyphro initially insists that the property of being pious is conferred by the gods' love.

My contention here is that the property of being an essential property of an object—essentiality—is conferred. I maintain that essentiality is conferred by our use of concepts, —not by how we as a matter of fact do or have used them, but how we are committed to using them. I capture this idea by saying that essentiality is conferred by ideal versions of us concept users, when they are maximally knowledgeable and attentive to how we are *committed to* using concepts. The details of the account will be explained shortly.

The thesis that essentiality is conferred should not be confused with another similar-sounding thesis, according to which the essence itself, i.e. those properties that are essential, is conferred.[8] To see the distinction, consider two claims:

Aristotle is human

Aristotle is human essentially (= Aristotle's being human is essential)

Whether or not the property of being human is conferred on Aristotle is not my concern here. We can allow that it isn't. Instead, my concern is whether being essential to Aristotle is conferred on the property of being human. On my view, it is. This is why mine is a conferral account of *essentiality* and not of *essence*. For this reason, the conferralism offered here is a modest one; in particular, it does not involve the claim that all properties are dependent upon human subjects in some way. The claim is merely that the second order property of being an essential property of some particular object is. This is the way in which conferralism about essentiality is a sober or modest, anti-realist account: it does not concern the first-order properties that make up the essence of an object, but the second order property of being an essential property of some particular object. Now on to the details of the view.

3 Conferralism about essentiality

When one offers a conferral account of a property there are four components that 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, state, or action of the subjects matter, e.g., their love
When : under what conditions the conferral takes place, e.g., normal, ideal, or some specified conditions

The idea motivating conferralism about essentiality is that a property's being essential to an object reflects human interests and values as expressed in our use of concepts. How so? Our commitment to using a concept to track certain properties and not others expresses our valuing those properties over others, at least for some purposes. For instance, our commitment to tracking molecular structure and not certain functional qualities in using the concept of *being water* reflects our valuing molecular structure. My contention is that essentiality is a reflection of these values: a property is essential to an object because we value certain things over others, not the other way around. We can express this by saying that our *conceptual commitments* confer essentiality upon properties of objects.

How are we to spell out the claim that it is our conceptual commitments that confer essentiality upon properties of objects? I offer a heuristic device to spell this out. Conceptual commitments are characterized by how we *would* use concepts, not merely by how we do use them. A commitment can helpfully be thought of as a disposition to behave in certain ways and not others in counterfactual situations. *Conceptual* commitments can thus be thought of as dispositions to use concepts in certain ways in counterfactual situations.

I now want to flesh this out as follows: we are committed to using a concept in a certain way just in case ideal versions of us would use the concept in that way in the situation at hand. Then, for our conceptual commitments to do the conferring of essentiality upon properties of objects is for ideal versions of us, normal concept users, to find it inconceivable that the object lack the property, when they are maximally sensitive to our conceptual use.

The details of my conferralist account of essentiality are thus as follows:

Property : being an essential property of a particular object, such as Pedro, or Tigo, or my desk
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 Pedro again and his being human. The idea is that Pedro's 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 like it is the gods' love that confers the property of being pious on an action on Euthyphro's initial view, so it is the ideal representatives' finding it inconceivable that Pedro not be human that confers essentiality onto his being 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, so let me say something about the idealization involved. 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. Pedro's being human is essential because ideal version of us *would* find it inconceivable that Pedro not be human. What I am offering is thus a constructivist account of essentiality in the following sense: essentiality is conferred by a hypothetical act of non-actual subjects. But, as I said earlier, that is how I offer to spell out the idea that it is our conceptual commitments that do the conferring.

The conferral account of essentiality that emerges now is a particular kind of conferral account. On this account, our conceptual commitments (spelled out in the way I have done) determines the matter. There isn't a fact of the matter whether a certain property is essential to an object or not, independent of those commitments. The ideal representatives' finding it inconceivable that an object lack the property determines the matter; they are not merely tracking an independent fact.

An analogy with Rawls's account of justice (1971) can help to draw a sharper distinction. On Rawls's account, the principles of justice are arrived at in the original position behind the veil of ignorance through a construction procedure. The role of the procedure is not to detect principles that are already there, waiting to be found, so to speak. Rather, the principles of justice are the result of that procedure, whatever that result may be. Rawls had, of course, firm views about what the result of the constructive procedures would be—his two principles of justice—but that need not concern us here. What does concern us is that he offers a procedural account, as opposed to a substantive account, of the principles of justice. This is in stark contrast to views according to which any kind of decision procedure plays merely an epistemic function, aiding us in getting clearer about what the principles of justice may be, but where their content is determined independently of us and our procedures.[9]

The account that I offer is thus a constructivist conferral account of essentiality. It is a conferral account in that our conceptual commitments do the conferring. It is constructivist in that in spelling out what it is for our conceptual commitments to do the conferring we make use of idealizations of us and our epistemic conditions; i.e., a construction, which is to capture our actual conceptual commitments, does the conferring.

4 Responding to worries

4.1 Idealization

The first worry concerns the details of the account. This critic is concerned about who exactly these *ideal versions* of us concept users are and their relation to us, what those *concept commitments* are anyway, and last, but not least, who these *we* are. Let me address these worries in turn, starting with the notion of *we*.

The *we* worry may be a simple request for clarification, an invitation to say a little more about the details of the account, or it may be fueled by a skeptical worry about the possibility that there are any *we*. The notion of *we* that I need is very minimal: it is relative to a particular concept and picks out those subjects who share that concept. The *we* of one concept may overlap with the *we* of another, but need not. The *we* associated with the concept of being human is the set of subjects sharing that concept, no matter how conscious they are of their use. Two people share a concept just in case they

share the concept commitments. Use of a concept can reach backwards and forwards in time and space or be limited to a particular sociohistorical context, all depending on whether the concept users share the concept commitments or not. Using the same word is obviously not enough. This *we* notion is thus quite unmysterious and should not sustain skeptical worries about its very possibility.

Ideal versions of us concept users are hypothetical subjects constructed by idealizing actual users of a concept along an epistemic dimension. The ideal version or representative is an ideal version of you or me, but smarter, less forgetful, better at rational deliberation, and maximally knowledgeable about how we use the concept under consideration. The ideal version is thus ideally situated to recognize what we are committed to when we use the concept.

The notion of *concept commitments* associated with a concept is closely related to that of the *application conditions* for a concept,[10] with a notable difference. I take it, that a standard account of *application conditions* has it that they are the conditions that a user of a concept *consciously* takes the object as having to meet if the concept is to apply to it (Johnston 1993, p. 103). I want to allow that our concept commitments may be implicit, even deeply unconscious, such that a fair amount of conceptual soul-searching may be required to come to realize what they might be.

Now, my suggestion is that concepts F and G have the same *concept commitments* just in case they share the same *non-negotiable beliefs*.[11] The idea is that a concept is characterized by a cluster of beliefs and some of those beliefs are negotiable and others not. The conceptual commitments are individuated by the set of non-negotiable beliefs. What determines that a belief is non-negotiable is that we would not know what talk involving the concepts in question amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief were false. For instance, we would not know what talk of bachelors amounted to on the hypothesis that some bachelors are not male. Similarly, we would not know what talk of being red or of red things amounted to on the hypothesis that something is red and yet not colored.[12]

What is the difference between the notion of being non-negotiable and those of being knowable *a priori* or being necessary? For a belief to be non-negotiable it is to be knowable *a priori* in principle, i.e., given sufficient prodding one is to be able to own up to holding the belief. The apriority is, however, not to be merely as a result of the fixing of the meaning of the term, such as when I dub my cat 'Cat' and then claim to know *a priori* that my cat is called 'Cat'. I have something slightly stronger in mind. A belief is non-negotiable when it underlies a practice, is presupposed or assumed by that practice. But it need not be necessary in any deep sense: it may be necessary to the practice in the sense of being presupposed by the practice, but nevertheless not necessary simpliciter. What do I have in mind here? Let's say, for example, that the belief that bachelors are human males is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being a bachelor. Arguably, it is knowable *a priori*, since given sufficient prodding one would own up to holding that belief. It is also presupposed by the practice of applying the concept of being a bachelor, but one might not think that it is necessary in any deep sense that a bachelor's being human is fixed by some metaphysical glue. This difference between a belief's being necessary and its being non-negotiable is important. The notion of non-negotiableness is considerably less rigid; we can even conceive of a belief's non-negotiableness getting eroded with slight changes in conceptual practices over time.[13]

I am understanding the set of non-negotiable beliefs to be the set of beliefs concept users are committed to being true when they apply the concept. Those beliefs need not be conscious, but the hypthesis that such a belief is false threatens to make the practice of applying the concept incoherent

or empty: we would not know what our practice of applying the concept amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief were false.

4.2 The nature of the hypothetical conferral

Even if the above discussion alleviates worries there might be about the idealization involved, there may be a residual worry about what the ideal versions are really up to and the work they do for us. Part of the attraction for my account of essentiality is, after all, supposed to be the demystification of essences and essentiality. Yet, the account involves hypothetical acts by non-actual subjects. Demystification indeed!

That a property is conferred by a hypothetical act is, however, not really that mysterious. We are familiar with such acts in the philosophical canon, for example, from Hume's account of aesthetic properties in *The Standard of Taste* (1965). Let us remind ourselves how it goes on Hume's account. We have the experts on a certain subject matter or genre, say Minoean vases, and whether a certain vase is beautiful depends on the opinion of the experts. Thankfully the experts don't have to travel around endlessly to give their opinion on each vase: a vase is beautiful because the experts *would find it pleasing*, were they to encounter it.

An account that involves that a property be conferred by a hypothetical act is also next of kin to a counterfactual analysis of a property, such as a dispositional property (Ryle 1949, p. 43). Consider, e.g., the account of being brittle where an object is brittle just in case it would break if struck. The object is brittle although, with good luck, it never gets struck.

If the hypothetical act is not what is mysterious, perhaps the problem is the conferral of a property by non-actual subjects. But here I see no problem, either. Consider Hume's experts, again. Presumably, the Humean does not want the beauty of a Minoean vase held hostage to whether there are actually any experts around who would find it pleasing. The beauty of the vase does not diminish with the tragic death of the only world specialist on Minoean vases, when no living person is left to appreciate it. It is beautiful, so the story might go, because subjects maximally attentive to its features and relation to things of same and different kinds *would* find it pleasing. No mystery here, either, as long as we know how to perform the idealization that is to go from us, actual, imperfect subjects, to those non-actual subjects who are to represent us and our conceptual commitments.

4.3 Conceivability

I have said that the attitude of the ideal versions that is to do the conferring is that of finding it inconceivable that the object lack the property, but I have said scarcely little about what I mean by 'conceivability'. Let me turn to this.

Is *conceivability* to be a quasi-sensory ability, such as that articulated by Hart (1988). where A's being P is conceivable just in case it can be perceived by the imagination, as it were? Or perhaps it is to be a more externalist notion such as Wiggins's where A's being P is conceivable just in case it is consistent with the concept of A that it be P and where *concept* is understood in a roughly Fregean sense? The notion I have in mind is closer to Hart's: A's being P is conceivable to S if S, when representing A to him or herself in imagination, sees no apparent contradiction in supposing that A is P. This is a suitably internalist notion of conceivability in that the conceiver is to have immediate epistemic access to whether there is an apparent contradiction in supposing that A be P. It is quasi-

sensory in a very modest sense: no more so than seeing a logical contradiction is quasi-sensory, when one represents to oneself in imagination P and not-P. In favoring this notion of conceivability for spelling out my account, I do not intend to take a stand on whether that is the right notion of conceivability more generally.

Let's try to sharpen this internalist notion of conceivability somewhat. What is it for a subject to see or not see a contradiction in supposing that A is P? Is it enough that the contradiction stare the subject in the face? Or need the subject become aware of it? To take an unhappily familiar example, consider the beginning logic student who persists in thinking that P&~P. I want to say about the student that the contradiction stares him in the face, but he does not see it. P&~P is conceivable to him at that time; he represents P and not-P to himself in imagination, but sees no contradiction. The subject needs to be aware or conscious of the contradiction to *see* it. This holds for our ideal epistemic agents as well: they need to be aware of a contradiction to see a contradiction.

The subjects whose conceptual powers count are ideal representatives of us concept users with our current conceptual commitments. They are to have engaged in countless thought experiments to test our use of concepts. Their finding it inconceivable that x not be P thus comes down to their seeing a contradiction in supposing to themselves that x not be P. If we ask the further question what the source of the contradiction is to be the answer is simple: It contradicts our conceptual practices (and what we are committed to tracking with our use of the concept) to suppose that x not be P.

5 How the account differs from conventionalism and expressivism

5.1 Conferralism vs. conventionalism

Consider the traditional anti-realist account of essentiality, the conventionalist one. A conventionalist about essentiality would presumably say that something about us, or our conventions, *actually* conferred essentiality onto properties of objects. Naturally, the conventionalist would have to spell out what exactly did the conferring, but I won't dwell on that here. What matters here is that on the conventionalist account some actual conventions or subjects confer essentiality onto properties of objects. A conventionalist view can thus be properly regarded as a *conferralist* view. However, it is not a *constructivist* conferralism. A constructivist conferralism is such that a *construction* does the conferring. No actual people's attitudes count.

Let me simply state the conventionalist position as the view that essentiality is conferred by our conventions and consider now the familiar argument against conventionalism that goes like this:[14]

> You say that the property of being an essential property of an object is conferred by our conventions. Doesn't that mean that in the absence of these conventions there would not be any essentiality? Let's now assume that being a dinosaur is an essential property of some dinosaur, Dino, excavated by the good scientists of the British Museum. As they gently stroke Dino's bones with their toothbrushes they think "ah, being a dinosaur is essential to Dino". But now we have a problem: when Dino was running around in his prime there were no people and thus no conventions. Doesn't that mean that Dino was not essentially a dinosaur in his prime? And if so, isn't it counterintuitive that Dino was not essentially a dinosaur when he was alive, but when his bones have been excavated he is essentially a dinosaur?

One of the differences between my constructive conferralist account of essentiality and a conventionalist account is that on my view there is no point in time at which the conferral takes place, and thus no time prior to the conferral that poses a problem. We do not, as some

conventionalists, such as Alan Sidelle (1989, p. 54 f.) do, tell a story in which prior to what does the individuation, i.e., the essential properties, there is some primordial stuff or cookie-dough. Our story is not a temporal one.[15] It is a transcendental one in that it starts with already individuated objects and ask in virtue of what they are individuated. The answer we give is: they are individuated by their essential properties. We then ask further what makes a property essential to an object and the answer we give is that the ideal representatives of us concept users confer the property of being an essential property of the object onto the property in question.

Although we are now able to distinguish the constructivist conferralist view that I offer from a conventionalist conferralist view, a worry may arise precisely because there is no point in time at which the conferral takes place. Doesn't that mean that the conferral never takes place? No, it does not. Just as the Minoean vase's being fragile is not hostage to its actually getting struck at any point in time, so Pedro's being human essentially is not hostage to any ideal representatives' actual acts. Just as the vase is fragile because it *would* break if struck, so Pedro's being human is essential because ideal representatives *would* find it inconceivable that he not be human under ideal conditions.

Alright, perhaps the critic agrees that there are no special problems that the constructivist conferralist faces that have to do with temporality and that in that regard, the constructivist has the edge over the conventionalist. There may still linger the general worry facing all conferralist accounts: in the absence of the conventions or conceptual practices or whatever the case may be, would there be no essentiality? This is a generalized atemporal version of the Dino worry above.

I suspect that in most cases the critic who worries that in the absence of our conceptual practices there would be no essentiality is not really concerned about essentiality itself and that the impetus behind the worry is a very deep-felt intuition to the effect that Dino and his friends' *existence* is not hostage to the existence of humans and their thoughts. The critic's real concern is thus, I suspect, that if one accepts conferralism about essentiality lots of things follow that the realist might not want. Let's look at this more closely.

Since the conferralist about essentiality is committed to the view that essentiality is conferred by ideal versions of us concept users, it seems that if there were no people and hence no conceptual practices that people engaged in, then there would be no essentiality, on the conferralist view. This is indeed so. The conferralist idea is that essentiality is not a sign of joints in nature, but an expression of commitments we have in using concepts. The question just is what follows from that about the objects we care about. For instance, if we had had different conceptual practices, would Dino have had different essential properties? Or, perhaps, would there have been no dinosaurs in that case?

The claim that if we had had different conceptual practices, Dino would have had different essential properties is simply false. Given that Dino is individuated by his essential properties, if there were a creature living in the Mesozoic era that had different essential properties from what Dino does have, it would be a different creature from Dino, the dinosaur we are talking about now. Thus, to the extent that conventionalists are happy to allow that which properties are essential to objects is somehow arbitrary, I part company with them.

The claim that if we had had difference conceptual practices, then there would have been no dinosaurs is ambiguous.[16] We seem to be invited to imagine a world in which there are humans much like us, except they have different conceptual practices, and where there are creatures much like the Earthly dinosaurs. The ambiguity stems from uncertainty over whose description we are to adopt. Are

we invited to use our concepts to describe the strange humans and the dinosaurs that are not classified like we do? If so, then clearly that is a world in which there are dinosaurs and strange humans with different conceptual practices. If, on the other hand, we are invited to describe, using our own concepts, what those humans find salient in their world and worth classifying, then we can say that in that world the category of dinosaur isn't useful and nothing corresponds to our concept of being a dinosaur. The strange humans don't think or talk about dinosaurs, but we can, using our own concepts.

So, to the extent that conventionalists are happy to make a historical claim or allow that essentiality is arbitrary, I part company with them, but to the extent that a conventionalist is really a pragmatist at heart and is interested in articulating how our values and interests color the world we encounter, the difference between us starts to look more like a difference in emphasis. Such a conventionalist focuses on the claim that essentiality has its source in our conceptual conventions (which *may* reflect our values). My focus is on the claim that essentiality has its source in our values and interests (as reflected in our conceptual use). To put it bluntly, I think that essentiality is an expression of value. A conventionalist may not be interested in making such a claim, although we are, I think, natural allies.

5.2 Conferralism vs. expressivism

Given that on a conferralist account, essentiality is a reflection of our values and interests, as expressed in our conceptual practices, the reader may wonder how it relates to expressivism. The short answer is that, although it may share some of the motivations behind expressivist (and projectivist) views, in content it is quite different. In particular, it is not vulnerable to the main objection to expressivism, the Frege-Geach objection.

Expressivist accounts are accounts of what is going on when we utter certain sentences.[17] An expressivist about essentialist talk, for example, can be seen to offer a translation procedure for sentences in which 'essential' and its cognates occur. For example, an expressivist may urge us to understand the utterance of

"Aristotle's being human is essential to him"

to be an expression of some attitude we have, say, our commitments—commitments to using words in a certain way, using concepts in a certain way, or something of the like, but not be a statement that allows of truth or falsity. Such a person may, e.g., urge us to translate the above sentence as

"We commit to using the concept of human in such a way that Aristotle can't help but be human"

Uttering the latter sentence isn't stating a fact about how we use concepts; it is an act of commitment. For this reason, nothing is asserted that allows of truth or falsity.

Expressivists about a certain discourse argue that that discourse is not *fact-stating*, i.e., that what appear to be assertions are no assertions at all, but some other speech acts. Such accounts face the Frege-Geach problem, which is how to account for the content of such expressions in embedded contexts, where such sentences don't even appear to be asserted, and thus the standard account of their meaning isn't available (Geach 1960,1965). Whether expressivism can deal with the Frege-Geach problem isn't of my concern here. However, what should be clear is that even though, according to my conferralism, essentiality is an expression of our values and interests, this does not mean that essentialist discourse is not fact-stating. Statements about essences and essential properties

are true or false. Conferralism is not a reinterpretation of essentialist discourse so, although it shares some of the motivations behind expressivism, it isn't vulnerable to the same objections.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have offered a *conferralist* account of essentiality and defended it against likely objections, including objections facing traditional anti-realist accounts, such as conventionalism and expressivism.[18]

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[1] Apart from Kripke (1980), see also Wiggins (1980), and the discussion in Della Rocca (2002). A notable exception is Sidelle (1989).

[2] In this way, I wish to vindicate essentialism. My motivations are not unlike Martha Nussbaum's in Nussbaum (1992) although the projects are in other ways quite different.

[3] In accordance with their motivations, philosophers use the word 'realist' to mean many different things. I want to underscore that the real/anti-real distinction that I am working with is to capture the distinction between being independent and dependent upon human thought or practices.

[4] It is not imperative that the reader agree with me about the interpretation of the baseball case. What is important is that it be clear what a conferred property is, even though we may disagree about the status of particular properties.

[5] The relationship between the conferred property of being a strike and the physical property of having traveled trajectory T is that the umpire confers the property of being a strike on a pitch iff he judges that the ball has traveled trajectory T.

[6] What if the audience were a bunch of unusually aesthetically challenged individuals who insisted on playing video games throughout the whole performance, yelling out periodically how many Martians they had killed?

[7] Philosophers use the word 'constructivist' in many ways. What I have in mind here is that what does the conferring is a construction. In my case what does the conferring is constructed by idealizing us concept users along an epistemic dimension. This is a way to spell out the claim that essentiality is conferred by our conceptual commitments. This will become clearer shortly.

[8] In my subsequent discussion I will talk of *essentiality* and the *concept of essentiality*, instead of the property of being an essential property of object x and the concept of the property of being an essential property of object x. Essentiality is really a relation holding between a property and an object, but for simplicity of exposition I will ignore that and use 'property' in the non-technical sense to cover both properties and relations.

[9] I am here explicitly interpreting Rawls constructivism in Rawls (1971) as a metaphysical position. In later works Rawls does not want to subscribe to metaphysical constructivism, but merely a political constructivism, lest his view itself incorporate a comprehensive view of the good. I take this to be a change in his view, rather than a clarification. In any case, the analogy with a metaphysical interpretation of Rawlsian constructivism should be clear. I should also note that the veil of ignorance also plays an epistemic function in Rawls's work, such as to help the reader, but we can ignore that function now.

[10] See e.g., Mark Johnston's use of *application conditions* in (1993).

[11] The notion of *non-negotiable belief* is borrowed from Mark Johnston (1993, p. 103), with the modification, that like in the case of concept commitments, I want to allow that beliefs, even non-negotiable ones, need not be conscious.

[12] Someone might object now that it is not a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept red that if something is red, then it is colored, and give the example of someone being described as being red because of her leftist political beliefs, as Rosa Luxemburg was ("Red Rosa"). To make the objection even crisper one might say that Rosa's *beliefs* were red, though not colored. But clearly the correct response to such an objection is to insist that such usage of the term red involves a different concept from our ordinary color concept.

[13] Consider, e.g., the case of the–at first metaphorical–use of the concept of being a bachelor as applied to male cats, a use that then starts over time to change the practice of applying the concept of being a bachelor. Over time, the belief that bachelors were human would then cease to be a non-negotiable belief.