

On a Conception of Essence

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Abstract: It is contended that unless everything is necessarily what it is, the essence of an object cannot be a property of the object which the object could not have failed to have. But if everything is necessarily what it is, then no identity statement is contingent.

Keywords: contingent, could not have, essence, identity, necessity.

If we think of the essence of an object as a property of an object which the object could not have failed to have, then, unless objects are necessarily what they are, no object can have an essence. For although it may be necessary for an object, say a fish, to have fins, if the object could have failed to be a fish, the object could have failed to have fins.

However, the thesis that:

E: Everything is necessarily what it is,¹

which this conception of essence must rely on, implies the necessity of identity, that:

N: If $a=b$ then necessarily $a=b$.²

And it has been shown that N and Tarski's T-schema:

T: A sentence is true if and only if what it says is the case (Tarski 1944, 54-55; see Blum 2023b, note 6).

cannot both be true if some statements of identity are contingent (see Blum 2023a).

Hence it is not clear that objects can have essences on the conception of essence as that property of an object which the object could not have failed to have.

References

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¹ Formally ' $(x)(\Box X=X)$ '. This follows from what would be Leibniz's reading of ' $(x)(x=x)$ ' as 'Everything is what it is.' See Leibniz (1996, 362).

² See Wiggins (1965, 41), and Kripke (1971, 136). E is in fact equivalent to N. See Blum (2023b).

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