
The Reduction of Essence to Dispositions

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Résumé

Essentialism and modal dispositionalism are two rival theories of metaphysical modality. According to essentialists, modality is grounded in the essence of things, but, according to modal dispositionalists, it depends on the dispositions they instantiate. My aim will not be to settle which theory is better suited to account for modality, and whether they may be combined. My aim will be to investigate in the relationship between the notions of essence and dispositions, and suggest the hypothesis that essence could be reduced to dispositions. If successful, this reduction would be a crucial element in the theory choice. For dispositions to reduce essence, they must play three major roles: 1) to distinguish between two sets of properties had by an object, corresponding to the essential/accidental properties distinction; 2) to provide real definitions; and 3) to be hyperintensional notions, or at least not closed under logical implication, that is providing more fine-grained distinctions than modal notions. This could be achieved in three steps. The first consists in extending considerably the scope of dispositional properties. In the standard conception of dispositions (especially Bird 2007; 2016; 2018), they are fundamental physical properties, such as mass or charge, which only applies to fundamental objects. Essence, on the other hand, may characterize everything whatsoever. It seems to be a much more flexible notion. I argue a) that dispositions can be extended to non-fundamental objects; b) are not only causal, but also normative, teleological, compositional, probabilistic among others; and c) may be instantiated by abstract objects (following Vetter 2015, 2018). The second step consists in presenting the notion of structural dispositions. I argue that this kind of dispositions could play the same theoretical roles as essence. The final step consists in showing that those structural dispositions are not closed under logical consequence.

Mots-Clés: Dispositions, Essences, Metaphysical Modality, Structural Dispositions, Hyperintensionality, Properties, Real Definitions

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