The Modal View of Essence[*]
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According to the modal view, essence admits of reductive analysis in exclusively modal terms. Fine (1994) argues that modal view delivers an inadequate analysis of essence. This paper defends the modal view from Fine's challenge. This defense proceeds by examining the disagreement between Finean primitivists and Quinean eliminativists about essence. In order to model this disagreement, a distinction between essence and a separable concept, nature, is required. This distinction is then used to show that Fine's challenge is misdirected and therefore unsuccessful.

§1. Introduction
Views about the metaphysics of essence differ on two main issues. The first issue concerns what we can call the *scope* of essence. This issue divides *hyperessentialists*, who hold individuals to have all of their properties essentially, from *anti-essentialists*, who deny that individuals have any interesting essential properties.

A second issue—our present focus—concerns the *character* of essence. This issue divides the *modal view* of essence, according to which essence is analyzed in terms of properties individuals have necessarily (or in certain possible worlds), from competing views, according to which essence is to be understood in terms of "real definitions" or some other primitive notion.[1]

Despite the prominence of the modal view, there has been something of a sea change in debates about the character of essence. This change can be traced back to Fine (1994) where Fine argues that the modal view is extensionally inadequate and delivers a view unsuitable for systematic metaphysics. Fine's case against the modal view has received a warm welcome and, surprisingly, defenders of the modal view have been slow to directly address his arguments.[2]

Here, my aim is to defend the modal view and restore its reputation as the best analysis of our central concept of essence. This defense of the modal view proceeds as follows. Section Two introduces the modal view. Sections Three and Four present Fine's primitivism about essence and Fine's challenge to the modal view. Section Five introduces Quine's anti-realism about essence and examines the disagreement between Quine and Fine about essence. In order to model this disagreement, a distinction between essence and a separable concept, nature, must be drawn. The resulting distinction is then used to show that the modal view of essence is not the proper target of Fine's challenge. Sections Six and Seven defend this response to Fine's challenge and compare Fine's primitivism with alternative accounts of essence and nature.

This defense of the modal view has methodological consequences. These consequences owe to potential misunderstandings about what Fine's challenge really shows. In particular, those who are blind to the distinction between essence and nature will mistakenly hold Fine's challenge to undercut previous discussions of essence and essentialism that presuppose the modal view. By showing that essence and nature are

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[1] Defenders of the modal view include Marcus (1967), Parsons (1969), Plantinga (1974), Stalnaker (1979), Salmon (1981), Forbes (1985), and Mackie (2006). Fine (1994) and Almog (1991) defend non-modal views.
[2] Some examples: Correia (2006) considers "Fine's compelling objections to the standard modal account of (objectual) essence." Brogaard and Salerno (2007) "agree with [Fine's] critique" of the modal view as "fundamentally misguided." Sider (2012) remarks that "Fine convincingly argues against the standard modal definition of essence."

separable notions, the legitimacy of the modal view can be upheld in a way that leaves the substance of previous discussions—e.g., debates about origin essentialism—intact. These and other methodological consequences are discussed in Sections Five through Seven.

§2. The Modal View of Essence

Reductionists about essence aim to analyze either the concept of essence or a cognate like "being instantiated essentially."[3] *Non-reductionists* about essence make no attempt to analyze essence. For *eliminativists* like Quine (1960), this is because the concept of essence—or perhaps modality in general—is somehow incoherent or unintelligible. For *primitivists* like Fine (1994), talk about essence is in perfectly good order, but does not admit of reductive analysis. This is because essence is thought to enjoy some kind of conceptual primacy, serve as an especially fertile theoretical primitive, or, as Fine argues, resist any reductive analysis.

The modal view of essence is reductionist. Its guiding intuition is that the modal features of reality determine which properties are essential or accidental to individuals. Roughly put, modal views identify an individual's essence with those properties it *must* have or *could not* exist without having.[4]

We can consider the *Simple Formulation* as a first pass at capturing the guiding intuition of the modal view. It runs as follows:

Simple Formulation: a is essentially $F =_{df} \Box Fa$

The Simple Formulation holds an individual, a, to instantiate a property essentially if and only if it is necessary that a instantiate F. In the language of possible worlds, an individual, a, has a property essentially if and only if a has that property at all possible worlds.

The Simple Formulation encounters an immediate challenge.[5] Unless a is a necessary existent, there are worlds at which a does not exist. But, since there are some worlds at which a does not exist, there will be worlds at which a does not instantiate any properties. So, upon pain of denying that contingent existents have any essential properties, the Simple Formulation of the modal view must be rejected.[6]

A natural response to this problem is to modify the Simple Formulation. On the standard modification, an existential condition is added to essence. The resulting view holds an individual, a, to instantiate a property essentially if and only if necessarily, if a exists, a instantiates F.[7] Formally,

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[3] If a reductionist opts for the former approach, the properties included within an individual's essence are those properties it instantiates essentially. On the latter approach, the order of analysis is reversed. Here, these views are treated as interchangeable.

[4] Possible worlds theory and the modal view of essence can come apart. Here, talk of possible worlds is presupposed for ease of exposition.

[5] The concept of an "individual essence" is assumed to be analyzable along similar lines—e.g., as those essential properties uniquely instantiated by a given individual.

[6] This challenge to the Simple Formulation assumes *Serious Actualism* (alternatively, "the modal existence requirement"), which holds that, for any object, x, any property, F, and any world, w, x instantiates F at w only if x exists at w. Serious Actualism precludes actually nonexistent objects from having any properties. In most cases, this seems correct. Non-existent objects do not seem to have properties like *being a material object*, *being twenty pounds*, or *being a round square*. In other cases, this is somewhat counter-intuitive. Nonexistent objects do seem to have properties like *being distinct from Saul Kripke*, *being thought of*, or *being nonexistent*. For discussion, see Caplan (2007), Plantinga (1979) and Salmon (1990).

[7] As Fine notes, there are other potential modifications—e.g., a universally quantified formulation such that a is essentially $F =_{df} \Box(\forall x \ (x = a) \rightarrow Fa)$. These formulations are equivalent provided the domain of a given world

Existential Formulation: *a* is essentially $F =_{df} \Box(\exists\, x\, (x = a) \rightarrow Fa)$

A potential problem for the Existential Formulation requires comment. Since an individual's essential properties are the properties it has in every possible world where it exists, the modal view entails that existence is an essential property of any individual.[8] Although initially surprising, this result requires only a terminological distinction between *necessary* existence—existence in all possible worlds—and *essential* existence. Only the former commitment would be objectionable, and, since the necessary existence of all individuals is no consequence of the Existential Formulation, the defender of the modal view can set aside this problem as a merely terminological issue. So, while Fine (1994) does take this point to count against the modal view, we can set aside this issue in what follows.[9]

§3. Primitivism

Before turning to Fine's challenge for the modal view, it will be helpful to introduce Fine's preferred view: primitivism. Fine (1994) characterizes his version of primitivism as follows:

> [T]he traditional assimilation of essence to definition is better suited to the task of explaining what essence is. It may not provide us with an analysis of the concept, but it does provide us with a good model of how the concept works. Thus my overall position is the reverse of the usual one. It sees real definition rather than *de re* modality as central to our understanding of the concept.[10]

For the primitivist, the essence of an individual is its "real definition", which is something like an inventory of the metaphysically significant properties an individual must have. And, while we can cite certain properties as strong candidates for inclusion within essences (e.g., *being human*, *being immaterial*, and so on), primitivism about essence precludes any reductive account of what distinguishes good candidate properties from bad ones.

Primitivism of any stripe comes at a cost. Unanalyzed notions—fundamental ones, anyways—are theoretically costly. Reductionist theories avoid this cost and are, other things being equal, preferable for their more modest ideology.[11] Still, despite their ideological differences, the modal view and primitivism agree that the concept of essence has modal implications: if some property is essential to an individual, it has that property in any world where it exists. In the opposite direction, these views do part company. The primitivist denies that every property an individual has in every possible world where it exists is an essential property of that individual. The primitivist therefore accepts only the left-to-right

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is coextensive with those individuals that bear the identity relation at that world. If one allows that individuals might bear relations of identity and distinctness at a world without existing at that world, these formulations come apart. Following Kripke (1980, 3), we can waive these "fussy considerations" about identity and distinctness.

[8] We can usefully ignore worries about whether *existence* is a "genuine" property. See Salmon (1990) for discussion.

[9] Since this concern is noted in Parsons (1969) and elsewhere, it is not plausibly viewed as the insight responsible for the influential status of Fine's challenge to the modal view.

[10] Fine (1994, 3).

[11] On ideology in metaphysics, see Sider (2012). On ideological parsimony, see Cowling (forthcoming-A).

direction of the Existential Formulation biconditional. As we will see, this disagreement is the point of departure for Fine's challenge to the modal view.

§4. Against the Modal View

We are now in a position to consider Fine's challenge to the modal view. In doing so, we can assume a moderate view about the scope of essence. This assumption is shared by Fine and precludes responses to Fine's challenge that require commitment to extreme anti-essentialism or hyperessentialism.

We can also take on Fine's methodological assumption regarding the theoretical role of essence: that it is the job of essence to provide answers to certain metaphysical questions about individuals like "What is Socrates?" According to Fine, these questions, which we can call *what-questions*, ask after the metaphysically significant features of an individual and are answered only if they explain what some individual *really* is. For Fine, these what-questions are a central subject matter of metaphysics and properly answered only by appeal to facts about the essences of individuals. Fine marks this assumption as follows:

> For one of the central concerns of metaphysics is with the identity of things, with what they are. But the metaphysician is not interested in every property of the objects under consideration. In asking 'What is a person?', for example, he does not want to be told that every person has a deep desire to be loved, even if this is in fact the case. What then distinguishes the properties of interest to him? What is it about a property which makes it bear, in the metaphysically significant sense of the phrase, on what an object is? It is in answer to this question that appeal is naturally made to the concept of essence. For what appears to distinguish the intended properties is that they are essential to their bearers.[12]

Fine's primitivism identifies essences with definitions that supply the proper answers to what-questions. Accordingly, Fine takes the following to be a requirement for any analysis of essence: if some property is essential to an individual, it should furnish us with a satisfactory, if perhaps only partial, answer to what-questions like "What is man?" or "What is God?" So, if the modal view packs irrelevant or uninteresting properties into the essence of an individual, it will not meet Fine's *desideratum*. Such a view will therefore fail to supply satisfactory answers to what-questions and deliver an inadequate analysis of essence.

Following Fine, we can take Socrates and his essence as our case study and consider whether the properties the modal view deems essential to Socrates provide satisfactory answers to what-questions. If they do not, Fine's methodological assumptions require us to dismiss the modal view of essence as an inadequate analysis.

The first kinds of properties that Fine discusses are *membership properties* like Socrates' property of *being a member of singleton Socrates*. Since modal set theory entails that Socrates is a member of his singleton set, {Socrates}, in any world where Socrates exists, the modal view counts the membership property, *being a member of singleton Socrates*, as essential to Socrates.[13] Against this result, Fine argues:

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[12] Fine (1994, 1).

[13] Another option would reject the necessity of set theory and the claim that individuals do not have singletons at every world at which they exist. On the contingency of set theory, see Rosen (2006).

But, intuitively, this is not so. It is no part of the essence of Socrates to belong to the singleton. Strange as the literature on personal identity may be, it has never been suggested that in order to understand the nature of a person one must know to which sets he belongs. There is nothing in the nature of a person, if I may put it this way, which demands that he belongs to this or that set or which demands, given that the person exists, that there even be any sets.[14]

The second kind of properties are *distinctness properties* like Socrates' property of *being distinct from the Eiffel Tower* and *being distinct from every electron.* According to Fine, these properties are too extraneous to Socrates to provide suitable answers to what-questions, so they cannot be essential to Socrates.[15] Fine says, "Consider two objects whose natures are unconnected, say Socrates and the Eiffel Tower. Then it is necessary that Socrates and the Tower be distinct. But it is not essential to Socrates that he be distinct from the Tower; for there is nothing in his nature which connects him in any special way to it."[16]

The third kind of properties are *necessary properties* like Socrates' property of *being such that 2 + 2 = 4* or *being such that triangles have three sides.* Fine holds that these necessary properties provide unsuitable answers to what-questions.[17] These properties do not single out metaphysically significant features that distinguish Socrates from any other possible individual and are therefore not plausibly included in his essence. Fine says, "it is no part of Socrates' essence that there be infinitely many prime numbers of that the abstract world of numbers, set, or what have you, be just as it is."[18]

The fourth and final kinds of properties are *metaessential properties.* These are properties had in virtue of individuals being such that other individuals have the essences that they do. For example, Socrates instantiates *being such that being human is essential to Plato.* Fine argues against the essentiality of these properties as follows:

> Among the necessary truths, if our modal theorist is to be believed, are statements of essence. For a statement of essence is a statement of necessity and so it will, like any statement of necessity, be necessarily true if it is true at all. It follows that it will be part of the essence of any object that every other object has the essential properties that it has: it will be part of the essence of the Eiffel Tower for Socrates to be essentially a person with certain parents... O happy metaphysician! For in discovering the nature of one thing, he thereby discovers the nature of all things.[19]

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[14] Fine (1994, 5).

[15] Alternatively, one might respond to Fine's worries about distinctness properties along the lines of a *via negativa* by holding that, for any property essential to an individual (e.g., *being a dog*), there is the corresponding property of being distinct from all members of the anti-extension of that property (e.g., *being distinct from every possible non-dog*). Such a response would aim to show that distinctness properties can specify the essence of individuals just as well as so-called "positive" properties.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Another line of response holds that necessary properties are properly viewed as essential to possible individuals, since the existence of possible individuals—unlike impossible individuals—guarantees that these necessary truths obtain. On such a view, it is precisely these necessary properties that mark the difference in essence between the possible and impossible.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Fine (1994, 6).

Fine's argument requires some careful distinctions. Notice, first, that, on the modal view, Socrates' property of *being essentially human* is just the property, *being human if existent*. "Statements of essence" on the modal view are therefore equivalent to claims about how individuals would be if they were to exist. This raises two kinds of problems both of which reduce to problems already noted. The first kind of problem arises because these truths about essences are necessary truths and, like other necessary properties, do not divide any individuals and therefore fail to distinguish their essences. The second kind of problem arises because these truths about essences tie together the essences of distinct individuals—e.g., the essence of Socrates includes the Eiffel Tower-involving property of *being such that if the Eiffel Tower exists, then it is a material object*—in the same objectionable fashion as distinctness properties. So understood, these metaessential properties give rise to problems, but no problems over and above those raised by necessary and distinctness properties.

Having now presented Fine's challenge, we can turn to the task of defending the modal view from it. To do so, we will first look to an unlikely source: Quinean (anti-)modal metaphysics.[20]

§5. Quine versus Fine

Reductionism and primitivism about essence stand in opposition to eliminativism. According to the arch-eliminativist, Quine, talk of essences is, at bottom, incoherent. Quine's case against essence issues from a general skepticism about *de re* modality. This skepticism in turn emerges from a general prohibition against intensional notions and the problems that arise in accommodating quantification into the scope of modal and other intensional contexts.[21] For Quine, *de re* modality proves unintelligible unless one accepts "invidious Aristotelian essentialism", and, since Quine finds "essentialism" fraught with problems, he rejects *de re* modality altogether.[22]

Unlike Quine, many philosophers are happy to accept essentialism. Quine's objections have therefore been by and large dismissed.[23] Despite this, Quine (1960) expresses what amounts to a foundational opposition to *de re* modality:

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[20] There is an issue regarding property-individuation that Fine ignores. According to the *coarse-grained view*, properties are individuated intensionally. According to the *fine-grained view*, properties are individuated hyperintensionally. So, while the coarse-grained view holds that "triangularity" and "trilaterality" are distinct predicates that express the same property, the fine-grained view holds that these properties are cointensive yet distinct. On the coarse-grained view, necessary properties like *being such that 2 + 2 = 4*, certain distinctness properties like *being distinct from any round square*, metaessential properties like *being such that Socrates is essentially human*, and the property of *existence* are one and the same property. So, if we accept the coarse-grained view, we might allow that the universal property—the property had by all possible individuals—is a principled exception to the standard treatment of essential properties. Since the individuation of properties has significant implications for the present dispute, it is puzzling that Fine (1994, 5) assumes the fine-grained view and claims that "any reasonable account of essence should not be biased towards one metaphysical view rather than the other. It should not settle, as a matter of definition, any issue which we are inclined to regard as a matter of substance." Here, we can set aside this individuation issue, since the present defense of the modal view does not turn on this issue.

[21] See Quine (1960).

[22] Matters aren't quite so simple. For careful discussion of what exactly Quine intends by "essentialism", see Burgess (1998) and Nelson (2009). Although both authors suggest that Quine's conception of essentialism is not what most of us now take "essentialism" to be, Quine would nevertheless reject essentialism as most now understand it.

[23] As Burgess (1998) points out, this dismissal is often premised upon misunderstanding.

But in connection with the modalities it yields something baffling—more so even than the modalities themselves; *viz.*, talk of a difference between necessary and contingent attributes of an object. Perhaps I can evoke the appropriate sense of bewilderment as follows. Mathematicians may conceivably be said to be necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged and not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and contingently two-legged or vice versa? Just insofar as we are talking referentially of the object, with no special bias toward a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as necessary and others as contingent. Some of his attributes count as important and others as unimportant, yes; some as enduring and others as fleeting; but none as necessary or contingent.[24]

For Quine, no plausible account of *de re* modal discourse can be given, so there is no place for essence within his metaphysics. He says:

Curiously, a philosophical tradition does exist for just such a distinction between necessary and contingent attributes. It lives on in the terms 'essence' and 'accident'... It is a distinction that one attributes to Aristotle (subject to contradiction by scholars, such being the penalty for attributions to Aristotle). But, however venerable the distinction, it is surely indefensible...[25]

Quine's eliminativism about *de re* modality is striking, and, when set against Fine's views, a puzzle arises. Recall that, for Fine, essences are largely distinguished by their unique methodological role: they supply us with answers to what-questions. But, if we follow Quine in rejecting essences, we would, by Fine's lights, be unable to undertake a central project of metaphysical inquiry: answering what-questions. Notice, however, that Quine advances substantive metaphysical theses and undertakes the task Fine uniquely associates with essence: he provides answers to what-questions. Consider, for example, Quine's remarks on material objects:

Physical objects, conceived thus four-dimensionally in space-time, are not to be distinguished from events or, in the concrete sense of the term, processes. Each comprises simply the content, however heterogeneous, of some portion of space-time, however disconnected and gerrymandered. What then distinguishes material substances from other physical objects is a detail: if an object is a substance, there are relatively few atoms that lie partly in it (temporally) and partly outside.[26]

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[24] Quine (1960, 199).

[25] Quine (1960, 199-200).

[26] Quine (1960, 171). Quine's later defense of a deflationary structuralist ontology abandons this commitment, but, since Quine's role here is primarily to illustrate options for eliminativists, I set aside issues of Quine exegesis.

Quine's views and their departure from Fine's own reveal a contentious assumption at the heart of Fine's challenge to the modal view of essence. Fine assumes that essences and essences alone supply us with answers to what-questions and serve as the basis for metaphysical inquiry. But, in contrast to Fine, Quine holds essences are irrelevant to answering these questions and adopts an alternative strategy for answering what-questions.[27]

Given Quine's pursuit of metaphysics in the face of eliminativism about essences, Fine's methodological assumption regarding essence can now be seen as highly controversial. This separability of what-questions from essence has implications for our present concerns. This is because Fine's case against the modal view turns on the crucial assumption that essence is the only resource suitable for answering what-questions.

Before revisiting Fine's challenge, it will be useful to sharpen the disagreements between Quine and Fine. Let us begin, then, by stipulating that the "nature" of an individual is the collection of properties that supplies us with an answer to what-questions about that individual.[28] According to Fine, natures are to be identified with essences, since essences supply answers to what-questions. Fine therefore accepts the following:

Natures as Essences (NE): F is within the nature of $a =_{df} F$ is essential to a.

According to Quine, there are no essences, but there are still answers to what-questions. For this reason, something other than essences serve as the primary targets of metaphysical inquiry and determine the natures of things. Given Quine's ardent naturalism, the right place to look for natures is to the physical sciences. And, since Quine rejects the intelligibility of *de re* modality, natures are determined by the properties that individuals actually instantiate rather than the properties they *must* instantiate.

Developing a suitably Quinean account of natures would be a considerable undertaking. Here, in service of our broader aims, we can simplify matters by introducing a quasi-Quinean figure, Quine*. Like Quine, Quine* denies the intelligibility of essences and *de re* modality and dismisses them for the purposes of answering what-questions. Instead, Quine* holds that there is a class of elite or "sparse" properties that individuals actually instantiate that uniquely provide answers to what-questions. Quine* therefore accepts the following:

Natures as Sparse Properties (NSP): F is within the nature of $a =_{df} a$ instantiates F and F is a sparse property.

According to NSP, what-questions are properly answered by appeal to the sparse properties that individuals actually instantiate.[29] For the moment, we can take this distinction between sparse properties like *being an electron* and the vast range of "merely abundant" properties like

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[27] For Quine, what-questions are not importantly tied to modal issues, concerning identity across worlds, but are notably connected to temporal issues, concerning identity across times. At the same time, Quine's four-dimensionalist framework precludes numerical identity across times.

[28] I do not claim this terminology is motivated by ordinary language. While it is plausibly consistent with ordinary talk—indeed, Fine himself slides between essence-talk and nature-talk—it is introduced here in order to accomplish the philosophical goal of clarifying the disagreement at hand

[29] Here, we can ignore complications about whether individuals need to instantiate these properties at all or merely some times at which they exist. Again, the connections and differences between Quine's views on trans-temporal and trans-modal identity raise difficult issues left aside here.

being a dog or a planet as a primitive distinction.[30] Despite its primitive status, we can strengthen our grasp on this distinction by noting that sparse properties figure into the causal-nomic joints of the world and ground relations of resemblance between things. In contrast, merely abundant properties play no significant role in the workings of nature; they are shared by gerrymandered collections of things. So understood, NSP holds that, for an individual like Socrates or a given electron, their respective natures are determined by their sparse properties like *being human*, *being an electron*, *being a material object* and so on. At the same time, NSP excludes from natures any abundant properties like *being discussed in the previous sentence*, *being within twenty miles of Earth*, or *being smaller than an elephant*.

Fine and Quine* disagree about essences. Fine accepts them; Quine does not. Fine and Quine* also disagree about natures, but this disagreement cannot be reduced to disagreement about essences. This is because disagreement about natures is a disagreement regarding a subject matter separable from the subject matter of essences. To appreciate this separability, consider a second fictional character, Quine-M.[31]

Quine-M accepts essences and facts about *de re* modality, but holds these facts to be trivial, conventional or, for some other reason, irrelevant to metaphysical inquiry. So, while Quine-M accepts essences (understood along the lines of the modal view), he also endorses NSP, since he holds the sparse properties of individuals—not their essences—to determine their natures.

Quine-M's position demonstrates that, even in the face of agreement about *de re* modal facts, disagreement over natures is possible. For this reason, the disagreement between Quine (as well as Quine* and Quine-M) and Fine is not merely a disagreement over essences. It is also a disagreement about natures *qua* targets of metaphysical inquiry and answers to what-questions. As will become clear, this point is crucial for understanding how the defender of the modal view of essence ought to respond to Fine's challenge.

Recall that, *contra* Fine's assumption of NE, the modal view of essence does not hold that essential properties determine the natures of individuals. Nor does it hold that essential properties furnish us with answers to what-questions. It is neutral with respect to these methodological matters and is committed only to an analysis of the concept of essence and cognate notions like "being instantiated essentially". Fine's challenge, which aims to show that the modal view fails to provide suitable answers to what-questions, is therefore no objection to the modal view of essence. It is only an objection to the conjunction of NE with the modal view of essence.

The proper moral to draw from Fine's challenge is that, if the modal view is conjoined with NE, the modal view is untenable, since it holds properties like *being such that 2+2=4* to be essential to every individual. But this does not show that the modal view is untenable. It shows only that defenders of the modal view must resist NE and the assimilation of natures to essences. This is because Fine has refuted only the following thesis, which is the conjunction of NE and the modal view of essence:

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[30] The relevant conception of sparse properties is defended in Lewis (1983) and (1986), which admits both perfectly natural properties as well "somewhat natural" properties. As noted below, we can admit sparse properties of both macrophysical entities like *being a tiger* as well as the perfectly natural properties of microphysics like *being an electron*. In contrast to the sparse conception of properties, any set of individuals corresponds to an abundant property. Since those individuals that share *being an electron* will be members of a corresponding set, we can use "merely abundant property" to indicate those gerrymandered sets of individuals. Thanks here to an anonymous referee.

[31] The 'M' is for modality.

The Modal View of Natures: F is within the nature of $a =_{\text{df}} a$ instantiates F
at any world at which a exists.

Better, then, for the defender of the modal view of essence to reject the modal view of natures and hold that, while a property like *being distinct from Alcibiades* is essential to Socrates, it is no part of Socrates' nature. Similarly, the defender of the modal view of essence can deny, for any of the properties Fine's challenge appeals to, that those properties are part of Socrates' nature even while they are essential to him. This is because, as the Quine-Fine disagreement shows, the subject matter of essences and what we have been calling natures are in principle separable.

According to the present defense of the modal view of essence, once we draw the distinction between essence and nature, Fine's challenge is misdirected and leaves the modal view intact. We can now consider two potential responses to this defense of the modal view. First, opponents of the modal view might argue that there is insufficient reason for us to accept the distinction between nature and essence and that we are better served to simply collapse of the modal view of essence into the untenable modal view of nature.

Notice, however, that if a compelling case is to be made against the essence-nature distinction, some account must be given of the disagreement between Fine and Quine. After all, the motivation for drawing this distinction emerged from our non-partisan need to understand their metaphysical disagreement. But, if one resists the essence-nature distinction and holds Fine and Quine's disagreement to concern essence alone, we cannot provide a satisfactory interpretation of either Fine or Quine.

Recall that, for both Fine and defenders of the modal view, the concept of essence has modal implications since essential properties must be had by their bearers. Recall also that Quine disavows any commitment to *de re* modality. So, if we take Quine's inquiry into metaphysics to aim at discovering essences, we have two choices. First, we can hold Quine to be guilty of a conceptual confusion, since he fails to recognize that the concept of essence has modal implications and that, in trying to answer what-questions, he thereby aims to discern the essences of things. Second, we can hold that Fine and defenders of the modal view are conceptually confused in holding the concept of an essence to have modal implications.

Both of these interpretive options are unsatisfactory. There is good reason to believe the concept of essence is indeed "modally loaded". There is also good reason to take Quine's disavowal of *de re* modality and essence at face value. For this reason, we are best served to interpret the disagreement between Fine and Quine as one concerning natures—a subject matter in principle separable from essence. There is therefore good reason to view the essence-nature distinction as legitimate, and, granted this distinction, our defense of the modal view stands.

Second, defenders of Fine's challenge might attempt to deflate the present defense of the modal view by arguing as follows: while we can draw the essence and nature distinction, it remains a shallow one, since the choice of how to use the term 'essence' is broadly terminological. Defenders of the modal view simply dislike using 'essence' in the manner Fine suggests, while Fine dislikes using 'essence' when understood along the lines of the modal view.

There are two kinds strategies for meeting the charge that the preceding defense of the modal view of essence is merely terminological. First, we can demonstrate that the distinction is substantive since it is required to ensure the mutual intelligibility of participants to a metaphysical debate. Specifically, as argued above, the concepts of nature and essence

must be separated to render the Quine-Fine disagreement intelligible. Second, the substance of this disagreement can be defended and the charge of terminological proliferation rebutted by noting that the concepts of essence and nature are bound up with fundamentally distinct (although perhaps connected) metaphysical questions. Put broadly, "essence," in its most natural theoretical role, concerns the question of how things could be, while "nature," in its comparably natural role, concerns the question of what it is to be some particular thing.[32] Since these questions are metaphysically significant and importantly different, the concepts of essence and nature are plausibly held to be metaphysically significant and importantly different.[33]

§6. Natures

We can now turn to a methodological objection to the present defense of the modal view. This objection holds that the modal view of essence, once separated from the modal view of nature, is theoretically uninteresting and irrelevant for metaphysical inquiry. But, since essence cannot plausibly be viewed as uninteresting or irrelevant, the essence-nature distinction must be rejected.

The most direct response to this objection shows essence to play a substantial role in metaphysical inquiry even once NE is abandoned. To offer one example of the continued importance of essence, this section proposes an alternative view of natures, which identifies natures with the intersection of an individual's essential and sparse properties.[34] This view provides a plausible candidate for analyzing the notion we are concerned with when we ask what-questions. This view also illustrates the continued importance of essence for determining the natures of individuals without commitment to the problematic thesis of NE. After presenting this view, the theoretical economy of Fine's primitivism is contrasted with views that employ modality and sparse properties to analyze the concept of nature.

For defenders of the modal view of essence, a plausible view about natures holds them to be jointly determined by facts about both modality—in particular, facts about essential properties—and fundamentality—in particular, facts about sparse properties. Specifically, the nature of an individual is the intersection of an individual's essential

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[32] Note that the present claim is not one about the historical or ordinary deployment of these terms, but, rather, that there are two concepts—one distinctively modal, the other metaphysical significant but not uniquely modal—that track substantive metaphysical notions.

[33] Another reason to endorse the distinction between essence and nature: if we reject the distinction, certain plausible kinds of inferences and methodological assumptions must be denied. Suppose, for example, that a Kripke-style proof of the essentiality of origin was successful. The implicit assumption of debates about the essentiality of origin is that, if it can be shown that a particular individual could not have had different parents, then having those very individuals as parents are therefore part of that individual's essence. But, if there is no distinction between essence and nature and the modal view of essence is undermined, then these Kripkean arguments cannot, on their own, demonstrate anything about the essence of individuals: they can only show us that some individuals have some properties in all possible worlds in which they exist. Following Kripke and others, I take it that these arguments would, if successful, demonstrate something about the essences of individuals, but this would be so only if the modal view of essence is correct. Put differently, if essence is taken to be the non-modal primitive of the kind Fine suggests, these Kripkean-style arguments may or may not establish conclusions about the essences of things. But, this should not be an open question, since, if successful, these arguments would plainly demonstrate something about essence. Essence is therefore plausibly held to reduce to modality.

[34] Even if one held essence to play no role in determining natures, essence remains important for a variety of other purposes. For example, the essential-accidental distinction is needed to separate those properties that Kripke's modal argument against descriptivism renders implausibly essential to individuals. See Kripke (1980).

properties—as understood via the modal view—and sparse properties. Put formally, the view is as follows:

> **The Sparse Essence View of Natures** (SEN): F is within the nature of a $=_{df}$ F is instantiated by a in every world where a exists, and F is a sparse property.

SEN raises the difficult question of how we ought to distinguish sparse properties.[35] In this regard, several views are available, none of which we are forced to settle on here. On one view, "sparse" is shorthand for fundamental or perfectly natural properties, so sparse properties are those fundamental properties borne by microphysical entities that form a supervenience base for the rest of the world. Such a view would hold that, while *being an electron* is sparse, *being a mammal* is not. On a second view, "sparse" is shorthand for both perfectly natural as well as *somewhat* natural properties. Sparse properties, so understood, are not limited to the properties of microphysics like *being an electron*, but also include kind properties from higher-level phenomena like biology (e.g., *being a mammal*) and astronomy (e.g., *being a red dwarf*).[36]

The metaphysics of sparseness will have direct consequences for defenders of SEN. For example, those who posit sparseness only at the microphysical level must therefore deny that macrophysical objects have natures. The resulting view entails a version of microphysicalism, according to which only microphysical entities have natures and are therefore the primary targets of metaphysical inquiry. While this is likely to convince some to prefer a more liberal conception of sparseness, it is a virtue of the framework of SEN that it provides a novel resource for expressing theses like microphysicalism, while also clarifying the connections between essence, sparseness, and nature.[37]

To get a better sense of the framework of SEN, consider the case of an entity like spacetime. In asking about the nature of spacetime, we aim to learn its metaphysically significant features and answer the what-question: what is spacetime? Granted SEN, the essentiality requirement excludes contingent features of actual spacetime that, while sparse, are not essential. For instance, if spacetime is actually Minkowskian, but might have been Euclidean, *being Minkowskian* will not belong to the nature of spacetime. Such a property, while perhaps sparse, is not essential. In the other direction, the property of *being empty of round squares* is essential to spacetime, but not a sparse property. It is therefore excluded from the nature of spacetime. The candidates for being both sparse and essential properties of spacetime—the properties that constitute its nature—are therefore properties like *being unified by external relations* and *having intrinsic metrical structure*.

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[35] See Schaffer (2004) for discussion of competing conceptions of sparse properties.

[36] An even broader conception of sparseness includes fundamental non-qualitative properties (e.g., haecceities like *being Saul Kripke* on which other non-qualitative properties like *being Saul Kripke or David Kaplan* supervene). For those sympathetic to haecceitism, the extension of sparseness of to non-qualitative properties is especially plausible. For anti-haecceitists, the natures of individuals are most naturally held to be determined exclusively by qualitative sparse properties and essences.

[37] The question of whether artifacts have natures is a notable one for defenders of SEN. If artifacts like toasters lack sparse properties, they lack natures, which suggests a deflationary metaphysics of artifacts. For anti-deflationists about artifacts, there are two available options: reject the Lewisian conception of sparseness in favour of a more liberal view about the variety of sparse properties, or recast debates about artifacts as debates about the essences rather than the natures of such entities.

SEN delivers plausible answers to what-questions that square with the cases considered in Fine's challenge for the modal view of essence. For Fine, membership properties like *being a member of singleton Socrates* are not suitable answers to what-questions. According to SEN, these properties fall outside the nature of Socrates, since *being a member of singleton Socrates* is not a sparse property. The same goes for other properties of Socrates like *being distinct from Aristotle*, *being such that Aristotle is essentially human*, and *being such that 2+2=4*. Since these properties are essential but not sparse, none of them figure into Socrates' nature so Fine's challenge is handily avoided.[38]

The role of essence within SEN is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it addresses the above objection from irrelevance by demonstrating the importance of essence even once NE is denied. Second, by virtue of its central role in determining natures, the failure to distinguish between essence and nature can be seen as an especially natural error—one that Fine's challenge gains its plausibility from.[39]

Before considering a final issue about the interaction between context and nature, it will be helpful consider some broader concerns of theoretical economy. In particular, it is worth comparing the theoretical costs of the modal view of essence and Fine's primitivism. *Prima facie*, the modal view is a parsimonious alternative to Fine's primitivism, since the former reduces essence to the more general concept of modality. At the same time, this assessment is controversial for the following reason: the modal view of essence presupposes the availability of some antecedent modal concept, distinct from essence, in terms of which essence can be analyzed. And, since the leading form of reductionism about modality is the unpopular modal realism defended in Lewis (1986), almost all parties take some modal concept like necessity or compossibility as a primitive. Since modal notions pervade systematic metaphysics, modal primitivism is a plausible commitment, but this raises the difficult issue of whether modal primitivism, coupled with the modal view of essence, is genuinely more parsimonious than Fine's primitivism about essence. In order to settle this issue, the following question proves crucial: can all of our modal concepts be reduced to the concept of essence?

If modality can be reduced to essence, then Fine's primitivism about essence is the ideological mirror of the modal view of essence, which aims to reduce essence to modality. If, however, modality cannot be reduced to essence, then the modal view of essence is superior to Fine's primitivism, since primitivism about modality is a more fertile commitment. Although I harbor suspicions that modality cannot be reduced to essence as Fine might hope, it is worth marking this issue as a central concern regarding theoretical economy within modal metaphysics.[40]

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[38] One might object that singleton Socrates will have no nature, since *having only Socrates as a member* will be essential to singleton Socrates, but is not a sparse property. Here, I take this to be a feature, not a bug: abstract objects are distinguished from concrete objects precisely because they lack natures. In particular, they bear no sparse properties even while they might have essential properties

[39] It is worth noting, however, that the modal view of essence does not stand or fall with SEN. While SEN might be mistaken, another view in the neighborhood is likely to provide additional evidence that essence plays a crucial role in understanding the concept of natures.

[40] One reason to believe that modality likely resists analysis in terms of essence is that *de dicto* modality resists analysis in terms of the essence of the actual world (or any parts thereof), since there are some ways some world could be that are not ways this world could be. For example, the laws of nature could differ, but our world could not have had different laws, so there are *de dicto* possibilities—e.g., that the laws of nature be different—that are incompatible with the essence of the world (or any parts thereof).

With regard to natures, issues of theoretical economy are still more complicated. According to SEN, natures admit of analysis in terms of a modal notion and the distinction between the sparse and the abundant. Since the latter distinction, when taken as primitive, is a cost over and above a commitment to primitive essences, SEN might initially seem to have a high theoretical cost. But, once we consider the pervasive and ineliminable appeal to sparse properties in systematic metaphysics, the distinction between the sparse and the abundant is a distinction we cannot reasonably do without. Furthermore, SEN can be seen as an intuitive way to answer what-questions by appeal to defensible and antecedently motivated primitives: modality and sparseness. Finally, SEN fares well in comparison to Fine's preferred view, since NE would be preferable only if both modality *and* the sparse-abundant distinction were analyzable in terms of essence. Since the prospects for the latter project seem dim, SEN is at least as theoretically economical as NE.[41]

§7. Nature in Context

There is a final issue regarding nature to be addressed. This issue concerns whether the correctness of answers to what-questions is a context-sensitive matter. Up to this point, we have assumed, following Fine, that there is some context-invariant standard for answering what-questions. Unsurprisingly, some are likely to think this assumption is implausible. Some will hold, for example, that standards for answering what-questions vary with context in much the same way that counterpart theorists hold that *de re* modal claims are inconstant, selecting more or less stringent counterpart relations in different contexts.[42]

If we abandon Fine's assumption that the correctness of answers to what-questions does not vary with context, Fine's conception of essence is likely to be less appealing. This is because Fine's case against the modal view is premised upon the apparently context-invariant inadequacy of various properties as answers to what-questions. The good news for SEN is, then, that there are a range of especially natural ways to model the context-sensitivity of what-questions and their answers. The contextualist defender of SEN can, for example, hold that the correctness of answers to what-questions is determined by contextual parameters that interact with the two axes relevant to natures: the modal and the sparse.[43]

Along one axis of this contextualist version of SEN, our interest in the nature of an individual concerns the modal features of the world and is therefore delimited by an individual's essential properties. Along another axis, our interest in the nature of an individual concerns the sparse or fundamental features of the world and is therefore delimited by an individual's actually-instantiated sparse properties. So, on this version of SEN, in some contexts all or only essential properties will meet the contextually supplied standards and provide correct answers to what-questions, while in other contexts all or only sparse properties will supply correct answers. In what we might think of as the most *eligible*

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[41] The distinction between the sparse and the abundant resists analysis to the essential because sparse properties must be intrinsic, but essential properties need not be.

[42] On the inconstancy of *de re* modality, see Lewis (1986).

[43] More carefully: the contextualist holds that the truth-value of nature-ascriptions—e.g., that it is in the nature of cats to be animals—vary across contexts. This proposal raises several semantic question of how to model the relevant context-sensitivity (e.g., whether nature-ascriptions contain an extra variable or whether 'nature' and its cognates are indexical expressions). On one approach, the relevant contextual parameter is a threshold that imposes more or less stringent requirements on properties for inclusion within the nature of an individual. Other approaches are available, but, plainly, the provision of a suitable semantics for context-sensitivity is a requirement for contextualists about nature, regardless of whether they endorse SEN. Here, my interest is in the general question of whether natures are context-sensitive.

context, it is the intersection of these properties—i.e., the sparse essential properties of an individual—that determines the correctness of answers to what-questions.[44]

The modal view of essence, when supplemented with contextualist SEN, provides a plausible framework for those who hold standards of correctness for what-questions to be context-sensitive. If, for example, our focus is on the modal features of the world, the nature of man is plausibly said to include *being rational* since it is essential but not sparse. Similarly, if sparse properties are our focus and we ask after the nature of a given particle, *being an electron* might be a suitable answer, despite—let us suppose—being sparse but not essential to that particle. So, if we reject context-invariant standards for what-questions, SEN can be modified to plausibly accommodate intuitions about the context-sensitivity of what-questions.

The debate between contextualists and anti-contextualists about nature is a deep methodological concern. Here, it is sufficient to note that contextualists can help themselves to the commitments of SEN. Alternatively, those so inclined can maintain that metaphysical inquiry presupposes an invariant standard for correctly answering what-questions. Either way, the modal view of essence will play a useful role in providing answers to what-questions.

§8. Conclusion

We have now surveyed Fine's challenge to the modal view of essence. As argued above, a distinction between essence and nature must be drawn in order to capture the disagreement between Fine and eliminativists about essence like Quine. Once this distinction is drawn, an assumption behind Fine's challenge becomes clear: that the modal view of essence entails the modal view of natures and that, as a consequence, essence alone must provide answers to what-questions. But, since the modal view of essence and the modal view of natures are separable, there is reason to believe that Fine's challenge to the modal view can be resisted.

Certain defenders of the modal view may hold that too much has been granted to Fine. After all, even if one distinguishes essence and nature, Fine's challenge has still shown something noteworthy: that the modal view of natures is untenable. Properly understood, this is a virtue of the present defense of the modal view of essence, since a response to Fine that holds his arguments to be wholly unsuccessful seems *prima facie* implausible, given their intuitive appeal. One might, however, press this defense of the modal view of essence further, claiming that it degenerates into a merely verbal dispute about what to call essences and what to call natures. As argued above, this is too hasty an assessment. There are theoretical roles uniquely associated with essences, and a theoretical role uniquely associated with natures.

The modal view of essence therefore remains an elegant and economical reduction of essence-talk undeserving of the cold shoulder it has lately received. Furthermore, the modal view of essence, once supplemented with the distinction between sparse and abundant properties, allows for a natural way to answer the what-questions at the heart of Fine's challenge.[45]

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[44] If one accepts inconstancy of *de re* modality, natures will be doubly context-sensitive, since which sentences truly ascribe essential properties will vary across contexts in addition to the context-sensitivity associated with natures.

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