

Penelope Mackie, *How Things Might Have Been. Individuals, Kinds, and Essential Properties*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 212.

This book offers insightful discussions on topics that have long been central to the metaphysics of modality. It is written with laudable clarity, and designed to satisfy both expert and less expert readers.

Mackie defends here, with a Lewisian methodology, a rather unorthodox and controversial essentialist view about individuals that she labels ‘Minimalist Essentialism’ (ME), and also ‘Fairly Extreme Haecceitism’ (166). According to ME, essential properties are minimal both in terms of quantity and in terms of the constraints they impose on how things might have been. In relation to its title, the book argues that things might have been in far more ways than we usually believe—although Aristotle could not have been a number, he could have been a poached egg (155).

Theories on the metaphysics of modality can be ordered by strength in terms of their consequences as regards to the existence of essential properties. The strongest theories in this spectrum are those committed to *individual essences*; i.e., essential properties that are also unique to the individual that possesses them (18). Following them, there are theories that, while not committed to individual essences, are nonetheless committed to non-trivial essential properties such as, for instance, those derived from principles like Necessity of Origin (37). In a weaker position there is Sortal Essentialism. ME is a rather weak thesis: although it entails the existence of some essential properties, it entails very few of them. ME is therefore somewhat stronger than (Extreme) Extreme Haecceitism (EEH), understood as a thesis that denies even those few essential properties that ME entails. According to Mackie, EEH is indefensible (166), and she emphasizes that ME must not be equated with it (165-6). Mackie uses this ordering to structure her book, especially the eight central chapters that contain her main argument for ME. Chapter 1 offers some preliminaries, while Chapter 10 discusses *natural kind essentialism* (NKE) and concludes that semantic theories of natural kind terms like Kripke’s or Putnam’s do not commit us to NKE.

I will focus here on the argument for ME, as developed in Chapters 2-9. Mackie starts by considering the strongest thesis she wants to argue against; namely, the thesis that there are individual essences. This first argument is four chapters long (Chapters 2 to 5), and is structured as follows. By using Forbes’ contribution to the debate, she argues, in Chapter 2, for the following disjunctive claim (39): Either we (i) abandon *de re* modality in terms of identity across possible worlds, or (ii) find plausible candidates to fill the role of individual essences, or (iii) allow for Bare Identities, or (iv) allow trans-world identities to be extrinsically determined. Her option, in line with ME but not yet equivalent to it, is (iii).

Chapter 3 argues, against option (ii), that there are no plausible candidates to fill the role of individual essences. Mackie uses here Forbes’ treatment (in [2]) of the *reduplication argument*, but draws opposite conclusions by casting doubts on two premises of Forbes. The first premise

(the thesis that identity cannot be extrinsically grounded) is discussed, and accepted, in Chapter 4. With this, Mackie rules out option (iv). She considers Counterpart Theory in Chapter 5 and argues that, on examination, Counterpart Theory is no real alternative to (iii): “[Lewis] does, in effect, allow that there can be haecceitistic or ‘bare’ differences between *possibilities*” (89). At the end of Chapter 5, therefore, the only option still available is her own, the option of endorsing Bare Identities. This option amounts to the negation of Forbes’ second premise (the *No Bare Identities Principle*) and it also amounts to the denial of *individual essences*. At this stage of the book, Mackie has already argued against the strongest of the theses rival to hers.

However, position (iii) is still compatible with theories stronger than ME: “Even if there are no conditions that are non-trivially sufficient for an individual’s identity in all possible worlds, there might nevertheless be non-trivial necessary conditions for its identity in all possible worlds” (92). Consequently, Chapter 6 makes one more step towards ME by arguing against Necessity of Origin, or, more precisely, by arguing against arguments for it. Typically, arguments for the Necessity of Origin make use either of sufficiency principles (which, in combination with essential properties, generate *individual essences*) or of a Branching Model of *de re* possibilities. Examples of the first type of argument are Kripke’s and Salmon’s, whereas McGinn offers an example of the second kind. Given the content of the preceding chapters (against individual essences), Mackie is able to ignore in Chapter 6 the former kind of arguments (which she would have dealt with indirectly), and this is probably the reason why she only focuses here on McGinn-style arguments. She concludes that we have no good reason to accept Necessity of Origin. But again, the not-yet-ruled-out truth of Sortal Essentialism would still be stronger than ME and, furthermore, its truth would not be incompatible with the falsity of Necessity of Origin (i.e., even if Aristotle’s origins were contingent, it could still be the case that he is essentially a human being). Accordingly, Chapters 7 and 8 are Mackie’s final steps to ME. In Chapter 7, she argues against Brody’s arguments for Sortal Essentialism, whereas Wiggins’s arguments are examined, and rejected, in Chapter 8.

The negative case for ME ends here and, in Chapter 9, Mackie follows Lewis’ suggestion ([3], 239) of positively arguing for ME by saying that, although the far-fetched possibilities are indeed possibilities, “they are, for normal purposes of counterfactual speculation, ignored” (155). Like Lewis, Mackie is aware that her position lacks intuitive appeal, and to counter this she addresses, at the end of this chapter, the “incredulous stare”, making serious efforts to explain away (essentialist) intuitions against ME.

Mackie is also explicitly aware that the argument she offers for ME is basically a negative argument: she considers and rejects alternative theories, intending to leave only ME standing. But how exhaustive is Mackie’s negative case? Not exhaustive enough, I suspect. Let me elaborate this by first addressing a different, but directly related, issue. Given the ordering mentioned above, one may worry that Chapter 6 is redundant. For, if Sortal Essentialism is the weakest of the theories stronger than ME that Mackie wants to reject, Chapters 7 and 8 should themselves imply the conclusions Mackie is arguing for in Chapter 6. That is, if Sortal Essentialism is false, then surely Necessity of Origin is false as well. But do Chapters 7 and 8 imply the falsity of Necessity of Origin? They would, if Mackie’s arguments against Sortal Essentialism provided *principled* reasons against it, rather than merely countering particular arguments for it. Indeed,

even if Mackie's rejection of Brody's and Wiggins' arguments for Sortal Essentialism is adequate, Sortal Essentialism might still be true. It is probably to make this gap smaller that Chapter 6 is not redundant after all. Its non-redundancy, however, comes at the cost of exhaustivity, and this substantially affects Mackie's overall argument for ME. Another way in which the lack of exhaustivity threatens her strategy comes from the fact that she does not consider routes to Necessity of Origin other than, directly, the McGinn-style one and, indirectly, the Kripkean one (based on sufficiency principles). Other, more recent routes, however, have been suggested¹, and, although I myself think that they are problematic in other ways, Mackie should include them in her discussion to strengthen her negative arguments for ME.

The final worry I want to mention is epistemological. Mackie convincingly shows that the essentialist theories she considers do not succeed in proving the existence of essential properties. A modal agnostic might take this as supporting the claim that we might not be able to know *whether there are* essential properties. Mackie's reaction is not as moderate. She concludes, incompatibly with modal agnosticism, that *there are not* substantial essential properties. One might well suppose that here Mackie is reading too much into the failure of the theories she considers.

References

- [1] Chalmers, David. 2002. Does Conceivability entail Possibility? In *Conceivability and Possibility*, edited by Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne, 145-200. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Forbes, Graeme. 1985. *The Metaphysics of Modality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Lewis, David. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [4] Rohrbaugh, Guy and deRosset, Louis. 2004. A New Route to the Necessity of Origin. *Mind* 113:702-725.
- [5] Yablo, Stephen. 1993. Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53:1-42

¹ According to Chalmers [1] and Yablo [5], conceivability exercises would allow us to establish Essentialist Principles. Rohrbaugh and deRosset [4] offer an argument for Necessity of Origin that explicitly tries to avoid both sufficiency principles and the branching model by using instead what they call 'the locality of prevention thesis'.