Evaluating Essentialist Theories of the Epistemology of Metaphysical Modality

by

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**Abstract:** If there is a real distinction, rather than a mere illusion, between what is contingent and what is necessary, then we face *the modal sorting question*: how do we knowledgably sort the contingent from the necessary? From 2000 to 2010 *mental-operation* accounts of how to answer the modal sorting question received critical attention. *Conceivability-based* versions answered the question by offering a novel semantical account of how our capacity or incapacity to conceive of various states of affairs could provide us with evidence of possibility and impossibility. *Counterfactual-based* versions answered the question by offering an account of how our capacity to reason with ordinary counterfactuals, which are logically linked to modality, could provide us with evidence of possibility and necessity. One controversial criticism of mental-operation accounts is that in some cases they are *circular* or provide only an *incomplete* account of the epistemology of metaphysical modality because they problematically depend on knowledge of essences. *Essence-based* accounts avoid the problem by maintaining that essence is the *ground* of modality, and as a consequence, knowledge of contingency and necessity *flows* from knowledge of essence. These accounts are in the early stages of development and discussion. As a way of generating a critical literature on these accounts I present two problems they might face: *the relational problem* and *the unity problem*. I discuss ways of solving the problems. I argue in favor of a modified essence-based account that is grounded in *understanding*, rather than *knowledge*, of *essences*, and chart out challenges it faces. Finally, I distinguish between *cognitively adequate* and *epistemically adequate* answers to the modal sorting question. I argue that we should endorse *pluralism* about *modal heuristics*, and separate the debate over cognitiveadequacy from the debate over whether mental-operation accounts or essence-based accounts are epistemically adequate.