Essence and Lowe's Regress

NICOLA SPINELLI[1]

ABSTRACT: Some philosophers believe that entities have essences. What are we to make of the view that essences are themselves entities? E.J. Lowe has put forward an infinite regress argument against it. In this paper I challenge that argument. First, drawing on work by J.W. Wieland, I give a general condition for the obtaining of a vicious infinite regress. I then argue that in Lowe's case the condition is not met. In making my case, I mainly (but not exclusively) consider definitionalist accounts of essence. I make a requirement to which definitionalists such as Lowe are committed and which, I venture, should also be palatable to non-naïve modalists. I call it the Relevance Principle. The defence trades on it, as well as on the distinction, due to K. Fine, between mediate and immediate essence.

KEYWORDS: E.J. Lowe – essence – essentialism – Kit Fine – metaphysics – regress.

1. Introduction

Lowe (2008) defends a view he calls Serious Essentialism (Lowe 2008, 45). It is the conjunction of the following claims:

(SE1) Every entity has an essence.

✉ Nicola Spinelli
   Hertswood Academy, King's College London
   Cowley Hill, Borehamwood, WD6 5LG, United Kingdom
   e-mail: nicola.spinelli@kcl.ac.uk

(SE2) No essence is an entity.

(SE3) No entity is identical with its essence.

(SE4) Essence precedes existence.

(SE5) Essence grounds metaphysical modality.

'Entity' here means any thing at all, from any category in one's ontology; 'essence' means what an entity is; and identity is numerical identity. In Lowe's paper, (SE1) is not explicitly listed as one of the principles of Serious Essentialism. That Lowe endorses it, however, is very clear. Whilst arguing for the reality of essence and essentialist knowledge—i.e., for the claim that things have essences and that we know about the essence of things—he remarks that, in order to 'talk or think comprehendingly' about any thing at all, we must first know 'what the thing is' (Lowe 2008, 35)—which, for him, is just to know its essence. He is therefore committed to claiming that everything liable to be thought or talked about comprehendingly has, in principle, an essence knowable to us, and, a fortiori, that it has an essence.

(SE3) is also not listed among the principles of Serious Essentialism. However, it is implied by Lowe's view that, whereas knowledge of essence is required to talk or think comprehendingly about something, it is not required to see, smell, hear, or be in any way acquainted with the thing in an epistemically impoverished sense (Lowe 2008, 35, footnote 22; also Shalkowski 2008, 56). In other words, so the view goes, when we see a pencil, we do not necessarily know what the pencil is. But we would, if the pencil and its essence were identical. Therefore, they are not. (SE3) also follows straightforwardly from (SE2): if entities were identical with their essences, the latter would be entities, too; but, by (SE2), essences are not entities; therefore, entities and their essences are not identical. One consequence is that (SE3) is not an independent principle of the view. Still, it will help to keep it explicitly listed.

(SE4) means, roughly, that a necessary condition for something to exist is that its existence should not be incompatible either with its own essence or with the essences of existing things (Lowe 2008, 40). So, for example, the round square cupola on Berkeley College fails to meet the first disjunct of that condition, and therefore to exist. The existence of the greatest prime,

on the other hand, is incompatible with the essence of the (existing) integers, i.e., with their characterising properties and relations—an incompatibility that is precisely what the standard Euclidean proof bears out. As for (SE5), though it is paramount to Serious Essentialism as such, it plays no major role in this paper.

I call Eccentric Essentialism the view resulting from taking (SE2) out of Lowe's picture and substituting it with its negation:

(EE1) Every entity has an essence.

(EE2) Every essence is an entity.

(EE3) No entity is identical with its essence.

(EE4) Essence precedes existence.

(EE5) Essence grounds metaphysical modality.

Just like (SE5), (EE5) plays no role in this paper; it is only listed as part of the view for the sake of symmetry and completeness. Now Lowe's opinion is that Eccentric Essentialism should be shunned. The reason is that he holds its characterising principle (EE2) responsible for much metaphysical mischief throughout the history of philosophy (Lowe 2008, 23). This is indeed one of the motivations for Serious Essentialism in general and for (SE2) in particular. Shalkowski (2008) agrees: he thinks that expressions like *the essence of x* lead to the 'mistaken impression' that the essence of—say—Socrates is a genuine thing, on a par with Socrates's beard (compare *the beard of Socrates*), and that they should be avoided ere they hinder our philosophical progress (Lowe 2008, 56-57). I had better make it clear that I will not try to refute that point: trouble may indeed come from the view, and perhaps the culprit is in fact (EE2). Yet the question is: is the impression really mistaken? Or is (EE2) true after all and despite what Lowe and Shalkowski would like to think? If it is true, we should accept it, mischief or no.

Lowe, of course, would agree, and so would Shalkowski. That is why the former endeavours to produce an argument against Eccentric Essentialism, and against (EE2) in particular. It is an infinite regress argument. If it goes through, then Eccentric Essentialism should be discarded—regardless, notice, of any undesirable consequences it may or may not have

on metaphysics or indeed philosophy as a whole. At its barest, the argument is as follows:

> Eccentric Essentialism entails a vicious infinite regress.
> Therefore, Eccentric Essentialism should be discarded.

I submit that Lowe's argument does not go through, and that reasons to reject Eccentric Essentialism should be sought elsewhere (if at all).

More specifically, my position is that Lowe's regress does not follow from Eccentric Essentialism, and that the overall argument is therefore unsound. I mean the full-blown view: no characterising claim needs to be weakened to avoid the regress. If I am right, the Eccentric Essentialist is able to get everything their serious counterpart can achieve while remaining true to the notion—which is the only source of disagreement between the two—that essences are entities in their own right. Or if they cannot, it is not because of Lowe's regress.

Here is my strategy. I first reconstruct Lowe's argument, which in the original paper is somewhat underdeveloped, based on J. Wieland's work on infinite regresses (Section 2). I also distinguish two possible construals of the regress, and pick one as my target (Section 3). I make a requirement on essentialist discourse by invoking what I call the Relevance Principle— which is widely accepted and to which Lowe is committed anyway (Section 4). I then elaborate on essence and propose a distinction, due to Kit Fine, between immediate and mediate essence (Section 5). Strictly speaking, this is not required for my case; but it does help make the logical situation more articulated and nuanced. Finally, I argue that Lowe's overall argument is unsound (Section 6).

2. Lowe's Argument

Is Eccentric Essentialism a tenable view at all? According to Lowe, it is not. Here is the argument:

> If the essence of an entity *were* just some further entity, then *it in turn* would have to have an essence of its own and we would be faced with an infinite regress that, at worst, would be vicious and, at best, would

make all knowledge of essence impossible for finite minds like ours. To know something's essence is not to be acquainted with some *further thing* of a special kind, but simply to understand *what exactly that thing is*. (Lowe 2008, 39)

The premises of the regress are (EE1) – (EE3). By (EE1), every entity has an essence. Thus, for any arbitrary entity x there is $E(x)$, the essence of x. By (EE3), $E(x) \neq x$. So far, so good. By (EE2), however, $E(x)$ is itself an entity. And since quantification in (EE1) is unrestricted, so that it applies to *all* entities, $E(x)$ has its own essence, $E(E(x))$. By (EE3), $E(E(x)) \neq E(x)$. Also, since $E(x) \neq x$, $E(E(x)) \neq x$: there are no essentialist cycles. It is easy to see that, with all the premises in place, every entity generates an infinite sequence of essences.

We have then, says Lowe, two scenarios. The best-case scenario for the Eccentric Essentialist is that knowledge of essence becomes impossible, at least for finite creatures. This side of the argument is epistemological. If grasping the essence of an arbitrary entity x involves grasping infinitely many essences, then it seems that, our minds being unable to cope with an infinite amount of information, we are never in a position to grasp the essence of anything. This, of course, is a challenge for Eccentric Essentialism, and one of great importance. Yet I will not discuss it. That is because I am more interested in what Lowe takes to be the *worst*-case scenario for the eccentric essentialist: being faced with a vicious infinite regress. This, on the face of it, and as Lowe seems to think, is a metaphysical rather than an epistemological issue. What is at stake here is not the claim that the essence of an entity a is knowable to us, but rather the claim that a has an essence to begin with. Obviously, if the latter claim turns out to be false, then the former will be false too. The converse, however, does not hold. Priority, then, lies with the metaphysical side of Lowe's argument.

But there is work to do to understand what Lowe's metaphysical argument exactly is. It is clear why, by (EE1) – (EE3), for every entity we have an infinite sequence of essences. But there is no principled reason why an infinite sequence should, as such, be a regress—let alone a vicious one. Lowe, on the other hand, does not explicitly say what he means when he suggests that this particular series is a vicious infinite regress. But what *is* a vicious infinite regress?

Wieland (2014) is the state of the art when it comes to regimenting infinite regress arguments. Wieland gives two theories of infinite regress arguments. On the Paradox Theory (Wieland 2014, Ch. 2), an infinite regress argument yields a conclusion that is shown, by independent means, to be paradoxical. The arguer is then in a position to refute the core premise of the regress (the claim that gets the regress going). Consider, for example, the following version of the classic guardian regress. There is at least one reliable person. But a person is only reliable if they are guarded by a guardian. Yet a guardian is a person, and for them to be a well-functioning guardian they have to be reliable. They will then need to be guarded by a guardian of their own. And so on. Therefore, there are infinitely many people. If there is one reliable person, then, there have to be infinitely many reliable people. But this is a paradox, because there aren't infinitely many reliable people (this needs to be assumed or proved independently: it does not follow from the regress). Therefore, there is no reliable person.

On the Failure Theory (Wieland 2014, Ch. 3), an infinite regress argument shows that an alleged solution to a problem fails because it requires solving infinitely many further problems of the same nature as the first. Consider the following version of the (also classic) reasons regress. In order to justify a proposition (problem), you provide a reason for it (alleged solution).[2] (We assume that reasons are propositional in nature.) But for a proposition p to be a reason for proposition q, p has to be justified first. You then have to provide a reason for q first. And so on. Thus, you will never justify any proposition: because, before you do so, you have to provide infinitely many reasons. Therefore, the alleged solution (providing reasons) fails to solve the problem (justifying propositions).

On the face of it, Failure regress arguments are stronger than Paradox ones, because the arguer need not, in addition to developing the regress, independently assume or show that the conclusion of the latter is paradoxical (Wieland 2014, 26). The failure regress, in other words, is self-sufficient. It is not immediately clear how Lowe thinks of his (again, somewhat underdeveloped) argument. Considerations of charity, however, suggest that, if a Failure version of it is available (and, as I will show, it is), it should be preferred.

---

2   Another version of the regress features beliefs rather than propositions.

Failure infinite regress arguments come in two varieties, depending on whether the problem, whose alleged solution the argument is meant to refute, is a universally or an existentially quantified problem. In our case, a problem of the first sort would be how we can say of every entity what the entity is. A problem of the second sort would be how we can say of *any* entity what it is. The solution Lowe wants to refute is: we say what a thing is by appealing to a further entity, the essence of the thing of which we wish to say what it is. Note that if this solution fails to deliver in the case of the existentially quantified problem—whereby if we appeal to the essence of entities, understood as a further thing, to say what entities are, we cannot in fact say what any entity is—then it follows, as a sheer matter of logic, that the solution will not deliver in the case of the universally quantified problem (Wieland 2014, 29). Simply put, if the solution does not work for any thing, it will not work for every thing. As a consequence, if an existential version of the Failure version of the argument is available, it should be preferred.

Among Wieland's argument schemas, the relevant one is thus Failure Schema B (Wieland 2014, 22). Let S be an agent, x,y objects in the relevant domain K, and φ,ψ predicates. Then:

Failure Schema B

1) For all x in K, if S has to φ x, then S ψs x.

2) For all x in K, if S ψs x, then there is a new item y in K and S first has to φ y in order to φ x.

3) For all x in K, if S has to φ x, then there is a new item y in K and S first has to φ y in order to φ x. [from 1-2]

4) S will never ψ any item in K. [from 3]

5) If S ψs any item in K that S has to φ, then S will never φ any item in K. [from 1-4]

Though rigorous, the schema is only semi-formal. It can, however, be wholly formalised. Wieland gives a natural-deduction version (31). Semi-formal, however, is precise enough for present purposes.

Lowe's regress can be naturally reconstructed as an instance of Failure Schema B. Let S be an arbitrary agent, K an unrestricted domain, x,y

unrestricted variables ranging over K, φ the predicate *say what x is*, and ψ the predicate *appeal to a further entity, the essence of x*. (EE1) is rendered by the unrestrictedness of K and x,y, while (EE2) and (EE3) are built into ψ. We then have:
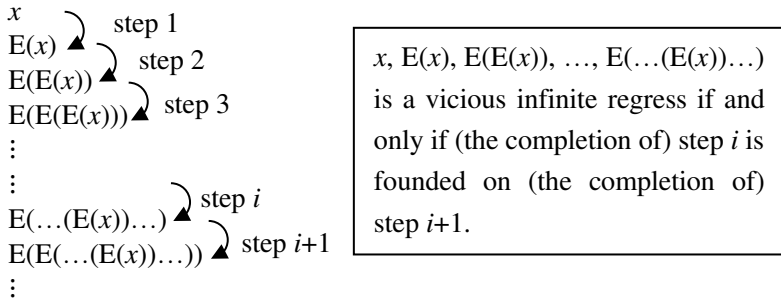
Lowe's Regress

1) For all entities x, if S has to say what x is, then S has to appeal to a further entity, the essence of x.

2) For all entities x, if S appeals to a further entity, the essence of x, then there is a new entity y (the essence of x), and S first needs to say what y is in order to say what x is.

3) For all entities x, if S has to say what x is, then there is a new entity y (the essence of x), and S has to say what y is in order to say what x is. [from 1-2]

4) S will never say what any entity is. [from 3]

5) If S appeals to the essence of any entity of which S has to say what it is, then S will never say what any entity is. [from 1-4]

On this reconstruction of the argument, the initial problem is saying what an arbitrary entity x is. To do so, we appeal to its essence, $E(x)$, construed—as per (EE2)—as a further entity, distinct—as per (EE3)—from x. But since $E(x)$ is an entity, in order to appeal to it to say what x, we first need to know what $E(x)$ is (otherwise, what would we be appealing to?). That is to say, we need to appeal to its own essence, $E(E(x))$. And so on, *ad infinitum*. The solution to the initial problem is indefinitely postponed, the problem is never solved, and the regress is vicious.

Note that while the wording of the Failure Schema, and thus of my reconstruction of the regress, is somewhat epistemological, the argument itself is not. The reason is that the regress does not trade at all on the agent's cognitive abilities. What gets it going (and keeps it going) is not the agent and what they can or cannot come to know, but the relations between an entity and its essence (if the latter is a further entity). It is because of them, not because of the agent's epistemic profile, that the alleged solution fails. x is what it is only due to $E(x)$. But if $E(x)$ were not what it is, it would not be in a position to determine what x is. Thus, x is what it is only if $E(x)$ is

what it is. Therefore, x is what it is only due to what $E(x)$ is, namely, due to the essence of $E(x)$: a further entity $E(E(x))$. But if $E(E(x))$ were not what it is… and so forth. It follows that, to be what it is, x needs infinitely many essences of essences. The latter are logically and metaphysically prior to x, in the sense that they are a necessary condition for x to be what it is. It is this priority that makes the regress vicious—and, again, not epistemological. Here is a way to represent the situation:

x
$E(x)$　step 1
$E(E(x))$　step 2
$E(E(E(x)))$　step 3
⋮
⋮
$E(…(E(x))…)$　step i
$E(E(…(E(x))…))$　step $i+1$
⋮

> x, $E(x)$, $E(E(x))$, …, $E(…(E(x))…)$ is a vicious infinite regress if and only if (the completion of) step i is founded on (the completion of) step $i+1$.

The arrows, head to tail, should be read '… is the essence of …'. E.g., the first arrow says that $E(x)$ is the essence of x. While every entity is a term of the sequence, every arrow is a term-to-term step. Steps may or may not be founded on one another. According to (my reconstruction of) Lowe, each step i is founded on step $i+1$. Foundedness is to be cashed out as follows: 'If … were not the essence of __, __ would not be the essence of ---'. So step 1 is founded on step 2 because if $E(E(x))$ were not the essence of $E(x)$, $E(x)$ would not be the essence of x. The box on the right, specifying what it is for an infinite sequence to be a vicious regress, is a rendering of Wieland's 'first needs to' wording in Failure Schema B. Lowe's claim is that the sequence x, $E(x)$, … meets the condition.

I should mention that, on an alternative reconstruction (based, however, on the same schema), the initial problem is not saying *what* an arbitrary entity x is, but *that* the entity is—i.e., that it exists. By (EE4), that too involves appealing to its essence, to the essence of its essence, and so on. Call this the 'existential alternative' to my official reconstruction. There are reasons to think it leads to a weaker case for Lowe, but they will be better appreciated if presented at the end of the paper, after the official essentialist reconstruction has been discussed in full.

3. Two ways to construe the regress

There are two ways to construe the essence of an essence, and therefore two ways to construe Lowe's regress (in its official, essentialist form). By (EE2), given an entity x, its essence $E(x)$ is itself an entity. $E(x)$ may be thought of as a property, perhaps a complex one, or as a complex of properties (a set, a structure, or what have you), or a proposition. Relations may be allowed in essences, too. Assume, for the sake of simplicity, that the essence of x is a property, and that so is the essence of $E(x)$, $E(E(x))$. Let x be Socrates, and $E(x)$ the property of being human. What property is $E(E(x))$? One option is: the property of being an abstract object—for the property of being human is essentially an abstract object. Call this the *objectual* essence of $E(x)$. Another option is: the property of being an animal—for to be human is essentially to be an animal. Call this the *generic* essence of $E(x)$. Lowe's regress can be developed in two ways, depending on whether the essences of properties figuring in it are objectual or generic.

There are reasons to prefer the objectual to the generic construal of the regress. One is that if generic essence is chosen then Eccentric Essentialism becomes implausible regardless of whether Lowe's argument is or is not successful. For if essence is generic, then the thought that there may be some entities that have no essence gains plausibility. Take for instance the property of being good. If G.E. Moore is right, it is unanalysable; that is to say, there is no simple or complex property F such that 'To be good is to be F' is true (Moore 1993). What is, then, the essence of being good in the generic sense? Plausibly, there is no such essence. This, notice, is true of any unanalysable property (if there are any, which sounds plausible to me). But then (EE1) is likely to be false, and the whole view goes with it. Incidentally, and this is a second reason to go objectual rather than generic, (EE1) and (SE1) are identical; so that, if the generic construal is preferred, and the above reasoning is sound, Lowe's Serious Essentialism is in trouble, too.

A possible response is as follows. It is true that, on the generic construal, if there are unanalysable properties, then some properties have no essence and (SE1), as well as (EE1), must go. But it need not go entirely. To accommodate the difficulty, it is enough to say that only *some* entities have no essence. Others, however, do. These are all the properties that are not unanalysable. And since, by all appearances, they will be neither scarce

nor uninteresting, this may be a bullet that the Serious Essentialist is prepared to bite. (SE1) can then be modified as follows:

(SE1*)   Some, but not all entities have an essence.

But the move is unsuccessful. If (SE1*) is true, then there is at least one regress, setting off from some entity x, that involves an entity that has no essence. (I say at least one, but, unless there is only one unanalysable property, there will be more.) If that entity is x itself, then there is, in fact, no regress. Otherwise, the regress stops as soon as the entity that has no essence is reached. Therefore, if the Serious Essentialist opts for the generic construal of the regress and, as they must, for (SE1*), they end up with a heavy loss of generality: at least in some cases either the regress does not even get started or, if it does, it is not infinite (nor, therefore, vicious). In all this, notice, (EE2), the Serious Essentialist's bête noire, is completely idle: the regress flounders without the need arising of defending the claim. The Eccentric Essentialist, then, if at all interested in generic essence, might as well follow suit and weaken (EE1) to:

(EE1*)   Some, but not all entities have an essence,

Leaving everything else untouched, including the controversial principle, they would be no worse off than their Serious counterpart.

All things considered, then, charity suggests we should pick the objectual construal of Lowe's argument and leave the generic to one side.

4. Essence and the Relevance Principle

In this section I pave the way for my defence of Eccentric Essentialism by introducing what I call the Relevance Principle. This is intended to make official a restriction that, as the recent literature shows, sensible essentialist discourse ought to be subjected to. These days, when it comes to essence, the two main camps are the definitionalist and the modalist. The restriction first surfaced within the former, but was then endorsed by quite a few modalists. I will review the two accounts, and then work my way to the principle.

The essence of an entity is what the entity is. The modal account of that notion has it that an entity x is essentially F (where F is a property) if, necessarily, if x exists, it has F. In an article, Fine (1994a) levelled a number of charges against the view. While I cannot hope to do justice to them, let alone expound them comprehensively, it is possible to get a feel for the overall case from the following.[3] If the essence of an entity is supposed to be what the entity is, to endorse the modal account of essence is to believe that an essentialist truth about an entity—a truth that spells out what the entity is—is just a (*de re*) necessary truth about it. But, intuitively, not every (*de re*) necessary truth about an entity spells out its essence: some are simply not informative as to what the entity is. For example, Socrates is necessarily distinct from the Eiffel Tower if he exists, and necessarily belongs to singleton Socrates (i.e., to the set whose sole member is Socrates). He is also such that if the 2008 financial crisis was the result of a global conspiracy, then the 2008 financial crisis was the result of a global conspiracy. Yet it seems that none of the following exchanges would make a sensible discussion of essence:

- – What is Socrates?
- – He is distinct from the Eiffel Tower.

- – What is Socrates?
- – He belongs to singleton Socrates.

- – What is Socrates?
- – He is such that if the 2008 financial crisis was the result of a global conspiracy, then the 2008 financial crisis was the result of a global conspiracy.

Whatever Socrates's essence is, being distinct from the tower, belonging to the set, or the 2008 disaster cannot be part of it. And that is because, by all appearances, they have nothing to do with what Socrates is.

---

3   Hale (1996) and (2013), Lowe (2008) and Mulligan (2004) all offer additional arguments against the modal account. All of them (except perhaps Hale 1996) also share Fine's specific worries.

As I have said, the modal account faces yet other difficulties, more or less proximate to the foregoing, on which I cannot expand. The upshot, however, is that necessity, though it may well be a necessary condition for essentiality, is not a sufficient one. Hence, the modal account, or at least the unqualified version of it that the definitionalists criticise, should go. The suggestion is that we should instead think of the essence of *x* simply as *what x is*, and take this as a primitive notion to be understood on the model of real definition.

The definitionalist case against modalism turns on the idea that *relevance*, beside perhaps necessity, is a necessary condition for essentiality. This is never argued for by definitionalists, and is rather left to intuitions. It has, as one might say, the value of a principle:

> **Relevance Principle**: Whatever belongs to the essence of an entity has to be *relevant* to the question as to what the entity is.

The modal account fails, so the definitionalist argues, because necessity (or modality in general) is insensitive to relevance. Now, there is more than one way to cash out relevance, of course, and some will be more welcome to the metaphysician than others. Fine talks of necessity being too coarse-grained to capture essence—and perhaps the concept of *grain*, being less compromised with pragmatics and information structure theory, has more metaphysical appeal than that of relevance. Be that as it may, what the definitionalist arguments make clear is that, if a statement of essence is an answer to the question, 'What is…?', anything that has little or nothing to do with the latter cannot be part of the former.

Several modalists have tried to resist the definitionalist's charges. Yet, interestingly, most of them defend the modal account by qualifying it in a number of ways—all of which are meant to, among other things, accommodate relevance (or fine-grainedness, or some form or other of having-to-do) by making modality sensitive to it. It is the case of, among others, Della Rocca (1996), Gorman (2005), Zalta (2006), Correia (2007), Wildman (2013).

The Relevance Principle is paramount to my defence of Eccentric Essentialism against Lowe's regress. It is therefore welcome both that Lowe, a definitionalist (2008, 2012), accepts it, and that the principle, or some version of it, is in fact endorsed by several modalists. It allows me to remain

agnostic as to which notion of essence I work with in this paper: *prima facie*, any will do—providing it satisfies the principle.

6. The defence

Here is an interesting point from Fine (1994b). It is in the essence of Socrates that he is a man; it is in the essence of the property of being a man that it is a property; is it then in the essence of Socrates that his essence is a property? Or: it is in the essence of singleton Socrates that it contains Socrates as its sole member; it is in the essence of Socrates that he is a man; is it then in the essence of singleton Socrates that its sole member is a man? Fine suggests we should answer these questions in the negative, and I think he is right. To state the essence of Socrates is to answer the question, 'What is Socrates?' But there seems to be a difference between the bearing that being a man on the one hand, and having a property as (part of) his essence on the other, have with respect to the question as to what Socrates is. To answer the question, 'What is Socrates?' by saying that he is a man is acceptable; to answer it by saying that he is something whose essence is a property is intuitively infelicitous. It also seems to me that purveyors of qualified modalism should agree (it will then be a question of cashing out the distinction in modal terms).

We should, then, Fine suggests, distinguish between *mediate* and *immediate* essence. Briefly put, the immediate essence of an entity *x* only includes what has a direct bearing on the question as to what *x* is. The immediate essence of any entity in the immediate essence of *x*, on the other hand, which has only an indirect bearing on what *x* is, is only in its mediate essence. Mediate essence, Fine points out, is subject to chaining: if the immediate essence of the immediate essence of *a* is in the mediate essence of *x*, so is the immediate essence of the immediate essence of the immediate essence of *x*—and so on. More about this in a minute. Immediate essence, however, is not subject to chaining: everything that is directly relevant to what *x* is, is already in it, and nothing else is (Fine 1994b, 1995).

This leads me to my first objection to Lowe's argument. If we buy the Finean distinction, and I think we should, then there is a sense of essence with respect to which the notion that the essence E(*x*) of *x* is an entity

distinct from *x*, and has its own essence, does not involve any vicious regress: immediate essence.

The problem from which the regress supposedly starts is saying what *x* is. In order to solve the problem, we appeal to a further entity, the essence of *x*. If, however, by 'essence' here we mean 'immediate essence', then no regress sets off: because what E(*x*) is, the immediate essence of *x* and an entity in its own right, is, has no direct relevance to what *x* itself is. Think again about Socrates, the property of being human, and the property of being a property. Therefore, although E(*x*), the immediate essence of *x*, is itself an entity and thus has its own essence E(E(*x*)), the latter is not required in order to specify what *x* is: only E(*x*) is. In other words, *x*'s being immediately essentially E(*x*) is not founded on E(*x*)'s being (immediately) essentially E(*x*)—just as Socrates's being immediately essentially human is not founded on the property of being human's being (immediately) essentially a property: because, again, what the property of being human is, is not directly relevant to what Socrates is. If that is so, then our problem—saying what *x* is—is solved right at the outset.

This is not to deny that if E(*x*) were not what it is, then *x* would not be what it is either—so that there is a transitive dependence of *x* on each E(…) in the sequence. But that dependence is a modal fact. By the Relevance Principle, that does not make it an essentialist fact. Instead, the test for essentiality is relevance. And the test for immediate essentiality is direct relevance. And it seems that what E(*x*) is, i.e., E(E(*x*)), just *isn't* directly relevant to what *x* is—even though, in the absence of E(E(*x*)), and of all the E(…) behind it, and if they were not what they are, *x* would not be what it is. The reason, then, why Lowe thinks that step *i* of the sequence is founded on step *i*+1 is disconnected from the question as to what *x* is: for what E(*x*) is, and what would happen if it weren't what it is, and so forth, is not directly relevant to that question. If the issue is immediate essence, those modal facts, sacrosanct as they may be, are immaterial.

At this point the Serious Essentialist might say: this is all very well, but there still is a sense of essence which *is* subject to Lowe's regress, namely, mediate essence. Because even if it is only E(*x*) that is *directly* relevant to what *x* is, all the other terms of the sequence are still *indirectly* relevant, and therefore in *x*'s mediate essence. So that, at the very least, the solution to the problem of saying what *x* is in the mediate sense is indeed beyond reach.

There is, however, a case against this. The mediate essence of x does indeed involve an infinite chain of essences. However, recall Section 2, the infinite chain is also a vicious regress only if the completion of each step i is grounded on step $i+1$ being first completed. In other words, the chain is a vicious regress only if the fact that, e.g., $E(E(E(x)))$ is in the mediate essence of x is what the fact that $E(E(x))$ is the mediate essence of x is founded on. But, it seems to me, that is not so. Take $E(E(x))$. It is in the mediate essence of x *not* because of the relations it has with $E(E(E(x)))$, but because $E(x)$ is the immediate essence of x and $E(E(x))$ is itself the immediate essence of $E(x)$. In other words, what makes $E(E(x))$ indirectly relevant to what x is, and thus what makes it true that $E(E(x))$ is in the mediate essence of x, is not the fact that $E(E(x))$ stands in some relation (immediate essentiality) with $E(E(E(x)))$, but the fact that x is immediately essentially $E(x)$ and $E(x)$ is immediately essentially $E(E(x))$. This, note, despite the fact that if $E(E(x))$ did not stand in the relevant relation (immediate essentiality) with $E(E(E(x)))$ it would not be in a position to be the immediate essence of $E(x)$. In general, it is step i and those preceding it that ground step $i+1$, not the other way round. The essentialist chaining starts from x and proceeds, immediate essence after immediate essence, 'what it is' after 'what it is', direct relevance after direct relevance, through the $E(\ldots)$—it does not go throughout the $E(\ldots)$ to x, which would indeed make it impossible for x to be reached (because there are infinitely many $E(\ldots)$). But then there is no vicious infinite regress as far as mediate essence is concerned: only an innocuous infinite chain.

A final remark on the existential alternative mentioned at the end of Section 2. Recall (EE4): essence precedes existence. That is, an arbitrary thing x, in order to exist, has to have an essence which, moreover, must be internally consistent and compatible with the essence of other things. But, by (EE2), essences are entities. Hence, for the essence of x to exist it too must have an essence, in turn internally consistent and compatible with the essence of other things. And so on. But then it looks like we have a new regress. The initial problem to solve is not saying what x is, but that x exists. And since solving it requires solving infinitely many problems of the same sort type (one for each of the essences involved), the essentialist solution fails. This is why we have a regress, and a vicious one. The reason why it is a new regress is that essences are needed not so much because they determine what entities are, but because, by doing so (and under certain

conditions), they allow them to exist. The 'what' (*quid*) contribution of essences, so to speak, is bypassed, and it is only important in that it makes the 'that' (*quod*) contribution possible. So, in the existential alternative, every essentialist step (recall the arrows in the Section 2 diagram) is founded on the next *not* because of what entities and essences are, but because, whatever they may be, the existence of each of them requires the existence of its essence. Here is how to cash out this foundedness modally: 'If … did not exist, it would not be the essence of ___, and therefore ___ would not exist'. For example, if E(x) did not exist, it would not be the essence of x, and therefore x would not exist.

My defence has no bite, here. For, if successful, it only shows: 1) that essences beyond E(x) are not immediately essential to x; 2) that, even though they are mediately essential to x, that is because of the preceding, not the following, essentialist steps. But the new difficulty, as far as x is concerned, is purely existential and, as such, is not touched by issues of relevance. The reason why the existence of x requires the existence of infinitely many essences is not that these are all somehow essential *to x*— which is the notion the Relevance Principle is meant to undermine. It is, rather, that each essence in the sequence must exist and therefore, by (EE4), requires *its own* essence. Essentialist steps are here, from the *quidditas* point of view, independent of one another: it is only existence that is transmitted through the chain.

It thus looks like (EE2), although it does not indefinitely postpone essence, does, with a little help from (EE4), indefinitely postpone existence. Yet, I think, appearances deceive. The main reason is that, recall, we are dealing here with objectual essence. But incompatibilities between essences are all and only about generic essences. Take the property of being the greatest prime. It is incompatible with the essence of the integers, and that is why there is no greatest prime. But the incompatibility has nothing to do with the objectual essence of the property—which includes items like the property of being a property, the property of being an abstract object, and so on. What does the work is the generic essence of the property of being the greatest prime, which includes the property of being such that any integer greater than the greatest prime will have other divisors than 1 and itself. But then we are back to the problems of the generic regress— and, as we have seen, they are problems for the Serious as well as for the Eccentric Essentialist. Moreover, finessing the point, (EE2) can be

amended so that it requires that it is only necessarily existing entities that can be objectual essences. That way, once incompatibilities have been sorted out by generic essence, the existence of objectual essences is guaranteed. The amendment, I conjecture, is not foreign to the spirit of Eccentric Essentialism: someone so keen on seeing essences as entities—such as properties and so on—would probably not refrain from seeing properties as necessarily existents.

If all of this is correct, then Lowe's regress is not a good reason to discard Eccentric Essentialism. True, the epistemological side of Lowe's argument still needs addressing (though it looks like the distinction between mediate and immediate essence could go some way towards doing so). My aim here, however, was never to secure the view against all of its difficulties, but only to show that Lowe's regress is not among them.

Acknowledgements

References

CORREIA, F. (2006): (Finean) Essence and (Priorean) Modality. *Dialectica* 61(1), 63-84.

DELLA ROCCA, M. (1996): Essentialists and Essentialism. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43, 248-266.

FINE, K. (1994a): Essence and Modality. *Philosophical Perspectives* 8, 1-16.

FINE, K. (1994b): Senses of Essence. In: Sinnott-Armstrong, W. et al. (eds.): *Modality, Morality and Belief. Essays in Honor of Ruth Barcan Marcus.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FINE, K. (1995): Ontological Dependence. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95, 269-290.

GORMAN, M. (2005): The Essential and the Accidental. *Ratio* 18(3), 276-289.

HALE, B. (1996): Absolute Necessities. *Philosophical Perspectives* 16, 299-319.

HALE, B. (2013): *Necessary Beings. An Essay on Ontology, Modality, and the Relations between Them*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LOWE, E. J. (2008): Two Notions of Being: Entity and Essence. *Philosophy* 83, 23-48.

LOWE, E. J. (2012): What is the Source of our Knowledge of Modal Truths? *Mind* 121(484), 919-950.

MOORE, G. E. (1993): *Principia Ethica. Revised Edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MULLIGAN, K. (2004): Essence and Modality: The Quintessence of Husserl's Theory. In: Siebel, M. & Textor, M. (eds): *Semantik und Ontologie. Beiträge zur philosophischen Forschung.* Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.

SHALKOWSKI, S. (2008): Essence and Being. *Philosophy* 83, 49-63.

WIELAND, J. W. (2014): *Infinite Regress Arguments*. Dordrecht: Springer.

WILDMAN, N. (2013): Modality, Sparsity, and Essence. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 63(253), 760-782.