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On the Inflation of Necessities

Peter Baumann

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If Kripke (1980, 110-115) is right, then every human being has their parents essentially. That is, it is true for every human being and their parents that by necessity that human has those parents. All parents of human beings will thus also have their parents essentially. Thus, every human being has their grandparents essentially. And so on: Our contemporary Jack has his whole past family tree (all his human ancestors) essentially.¹

This easily generalizes to the ancestorship-relation between organisms. Everyone has their ancestors essentially:

$$(1) \forall x \forall y [xAy \rightarrow \Box (x \text{ exists} \rightarrow (y \text{ exists} \ \& \ xAy))]$$

(with ‘A’ standing for the ancestor-relation “_ has _ as an ancestor”). Suppose a has b as ancestor. Then

$$aA^e b$$

(with ‘A^e’ standing for “_ has _ as an ancestor essentially”). Now, if a has b as an ancestor essentially and b has c as an ancestor essentially, then a has c as an ancestor essentially. This is due to the transitivity of “_ has _ as an ancestor essentially”:

$$(2) \forall x \forall y \forall z [(xA^e y \ \& \ yA^e z) \rightarrow xA^e z].$$

It can be easily seen from this, that an organism like Richard Nixon has the whole tree of his ancestors essentially, even as this tree reaches back to the earliest phases of biological

1 We can ignore the complication here that, strictly speaking, it is (according to Kripke) the numerical identity of the gametes and not of the parents which determines identity of origin. We can also ignore the further question what determines the numerical identity of the gamete: the numerical identity of the molecules it is composed of or something else? Finally, we are assuming that every human (every organism) has ancestors and, more generally, that every ordinary physical object has an origin.

evolution. Hundreds of millions of years ago, there were then very many very primitive early organisms such that Richard Nixon has them as his ancestors essentially.

Kripke holds (1980, 110-115) that one can generalize once more to the origin-relation (let us call it “OR”) between objects in the world.² If a has b as its origin essentially and b has c as its origin essentially, then a has c as its origin essentially (due to the transitivity of “_ has _ as origin essentially”). Again, it can be easily seen from this that Richard Nixon comes out as having the whole tree of origins essentially, leading back to the big bang. Richard Nixon would not have existed had a sufficiently different big bang started this universe. Richard Nixon – like everything that has an origin - has even the remotest of his origins essentially.

So far, we have followed the implications of Kripke’s thesis on the necessity of origins “backwards in time” (see for other aspects McGinn 1976). We can also follow them “sideways” as well as “forwards in time”. Jack does not only have his past family tree (all of his human ancestors) essentially. For analogous reasons, something similar holds – as is easy to see - for human relatives which are not his ancestors: All of Jack’s actual human relatives, that is, all humans past, present and future with whom Jack has some ancestors in common (in the actual world) are such that in all possible circumstances where both Jack and a given relative exists, they both have these same ancestors in common and are thus relatives (via their common ancestors). They are, as one could call it, “essentially members of the same family”.

This can easily be generalized to all kinds of organisms, human or non-human, past present or future. Let “B” stand for the biological relative-relation “_ has _ as a biological relative” where a biological relative is any organism, human or non-human, past, present or future with whom some ancestors are shared in the actual world.³ We can then say that

$$(3) \forall x \forall y [xBy \rightarrow \Box ((x \text{ exists} \ \& \ y \text{ exists}) \rightarrow xBy)].$$

2 - where what counts as an “object” is anything that is a proper part of the physical universe as well as younger than the physical universe. We can ignore the question here what kinds of origin different kinds of things have (tables might originate in material stuff while organisms originate in genetic material).

3 We can add that any two organisms which stand in the A-relation to each other also stand in the B-relation to each other (assuming that there is no such thing as a first organism):

$$\forall x \forall y [xAy \rightarrow xBy].$$

Not only does an organism like Richard Nixon have the whole tree of his ancestors essentially (reaching back to early phases of biological evolution). Also, given any biological relative of Nixon (past, present or future), in all possible circumstances in which both exist they are relatives. A particular bird which will fly around some particular spot in Siberia in 8 million years and is a biological relative of Nixon is also a biological relative of him in all possible circumstances in which both exist. We can call any two organisms for which (3) is true “essentially related”. It turns out that organisms (like, e.g., Richard Nixon) have very many essential relatives.

We can extend all this one more time to the origin-relation between objects in general (see above). Let “O” stand for the relation between any two objects which share a common origin in the actual world.⁴ Two tables, for instance, may have been made from the same chunk of wood, coming from the same tree (which itself originated from the seeds of another tree and so on back to early plants and way beyond). Kripke does not define the relation of sharing the same origin but we do have a clear enough idea about what the origin-relation for objects is and can thus understand well enough what it is to share the same origin. We can then say that

$$(4) \forall x \forall y [xOy \rightarrow \Box ((x \text{ exists} \ \& \ y \text{ exists}) \rightarrow xOy)].$$

Let us say that any two objects for which (4) is true that they are “essentially connected”. Richard Nixon, Jack and everyone and everything would be “essentially connected” to very many objects past, present and future. A star coming into existence millions of years from now might be essentially connected to Jack, Richard Nixon’s dog or the reader of this paper – simply because their chains of origin lead back to the same primal soup or to the same big bang. It would be hard to imagine that or how any two things could not be essentially connected. It would be hard to think of any two objects as merely “contingently coexisting” (where this means that either (4) is false of these objects or they do not stand in the O-relation in the first place).⁵ If one wanted to block such consequences, one would

4 We can add that any two objects which stand in the origin relation OR to each other also stand in the O-relation to each other:

$$\forall x \forall y [xORy \rightarrow xOy].$$

5 One would have to assume that there are at least two classes of objects such that no element of one class stands in the O-relation to any element of the other class. Metaphorically speaking, there would have to be at least two independent branching trees of origins. If one assumes, for instance,

have to develop a very special and still plausible conception of origin for objects in general; I am not aware of any such conception which could block the threatening consequence that all objects are essentially connected.

Does this constitute a plausible argument from Kripkean premises to implausible conclusions? To be sure, some would welcome all this as a nice variation of the idea that there is something like a “great chain of being”, connecting each thing with (almost?) each other thing. Others would be thrilled by how interesting the implications of Kripke’s ideas are (though not as strong as, say, Williamson’s recent claims in 2002). Still others, however, would at least be mildly alarmed (on Kripke’s behalf) about all this, given that it so strongly goes against our intuitions. The last view should be taken very seriously, not only because Kripke himself so often appeals to our “intuitions” in semantic and metaphysical issues but also because there is a considerable lack of plausibility in these implications of Kripke’s thesis on the necessity of origins: Doesn’t it confront us with an enormous “inflation” of necessities?

References

- Kripke, Saul 1980, *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press.
- McGinn, Colin 1976, *On the Necessity of Origin*, in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, 127-135.
- Williamson, Timothy 2002, *Necessary Existents*, in: Anthony O’Hear (ed.), *Logic, Thought and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 233-251.

that our universe originated in exactly one big bang (not in more than one), then it is very hard to make sense of the idea of at least two independent branching trees of origins.