Bird on the Regress Argument

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> According to dispositional essentialism, the essence of a property is given by some dispositional characterization in terms of stimulus and manifestation conditions. Dispositional monism holds this to be true of *all* properties, including, therefore, the properties involved in the stimulus and manifestation conditions. Thus the essence of the first property involves at least two further properties, whose essences in turn involve yet further properties, and so on. There is thus an infinite regress of properties. Or, if not, it looks as if there must be a circularity of a vicious nature, by analogy, for example, with the view that all words are given their meaning by explicit definitions (which entails that the chains of definitions would have to be viciously circular). (Bird, 2007, p. 516)

Bird's focus is on *dispositional* essentialism, which he formulates thus:

Dispositional monism All (scientific, or sparse) properties have dispositional essences. For P to have a dispositional essence is for it to be the case that, for some other properties S and M, P is essentially such that: anything that instantiates P thereby has the disposition to instantiate M if it instantiates S

Bird's preferred statement of the regress argument:

> I shall follow Aristotle (*Met.* H 7) in taking the essence of an entity to be that whereby a thing is what it is. Thus we should expect the essence of a property, its dispositional character if it is an essentially dispositional property, to determine the identity of the property. According to the dispositional essentialist, therefore, the essence of such a property is determined by its relations to other properties. And as I have pointed out above, if one is a dispositional *monist* then those other properties also have dispositional essences. Consequently the identity of any property is determined by its relations to other properties. Hence either there is an infinity of properties or there is circularity in this relationship of identities. (Bird, 2007, p. 524)

What conception of essence is at work here? Perhaps Fine's. Where P and Q are properties, say that P "involves Q in its essence" iff some statement of the form $\Box_P \ldots Q \ldots$ is true. The argument then might be this:

1. If (nomic or causal or dispositional) essentialism is true, then every property involves some other property in its essence.

2. If every property involves some other property in its essence, then either there are infinitely many properties, or else there is a "cycle" of essence-involvement: i.e., there are properties $P_1 \ldots P_n$ such that P_1 involves P_2 in its essence, P_2 involves P_3 in its essence, …, and P_n involves P_1 in its essence.

3. There aren't infinitely many properties

4. There are no cycles of essence involvement

5. Therefore essentialism is not true

One issue is then whether "reciprocal", or perhaps instead "collective", essences are possible. But Bird doesn't raise such issues. He focuses instead on:

S. The identity and distinctness of the elements of a set e of entities supervene on the instantiations of some relation R (or set of relations $\{R_i\}$) on the elements of e.

Why the shift to modal vocabulary?

References

Bird, Alexander (2007). "The Regress of Pure Powers?" *Philosophical Quarterly* 57(229): 513–534.