Origin Essentialism

**Question:** Could Queen Elizabeth II have had different parents? Could she have been, say, the daughter of Harry and Bess Truman?

Or: Could this wooden table—which originated from a certain hunk of wood—have originated instead from, say, a hunk of ice?

These are questions about trans-world identity (or “de re” modality—this translates as modality “of the thing”). That is, is there any possible world where the Queen is the daughter of Harry Truman? And is there any possible world where THIS table was made of ice? Intuitively, the answer to these questions is “no”. This is essentialism about individuals (e.g., humans and tables). That is (in possible worlds speak), originating from your actual parents, or from a particular combination of sperm and egg, is a property that you have in every possible world where you exist.

We will look at two arguments for this view.

1. **The Branching Argument:** An intuitive way of thinking about de re modality is as a branching view of possibilities. For instance, as Kripke points out,

   Ordinarily when we ask intuitively whether something might have happened to a given object, we ask whether the universe could have gone on as it actually did up to a certain time, but diverge in its history from that point forward so that … that object would have been different from that time forth. (footnote 57)

For instance, think of all the ways you could have been. You could have been a truck driver. You could have gone to Virginia Tech. When we think about these possibilities, we typically think of some actual point in your life, where you were at some FORK in the road, and then imagine how things would have gone, had you taken that path instead of the actual one that you took. That is, we think of all of the possibilities for your life as BRANCHES from some point in your actual life.

But, how far back in your timeline can we go? If you could have become a truck driver when you were 18, it stands to reason, that you could have run away from home when you were 10. Going further back still, it seems true that you could have even been switched at birth, to be raised by another family. So, as we travel back and back along your timeline, it seems true that things could have branched from there. But, could even your ORIGIN have been different? Intuitively, this could NOT have been different.
Penelope Mackie believes that this conclusion follows from two plausible assumptions:

**The Assumption of Open Futures** There are times at which various alternative futures are open to, or accessible to, individuals.

**The Overlap Requirement** Any alternative possible history of an individual must have some segment (however small) that is the same as some portion of that individual’s actual history.

Intuitively, the future is “open”. That is, the future is not “set in stone”. Presently, there are various ways that the future could unfold; and, in 1900, there were also various ways that the future could have unfolded.

Furthermore, it seems that any possible way that things could be for an actual individual (for instance, YOU), must OVERLAP—at least a little bit—with your actual life. Possibilities seem to be divergences from actuality. As Mackie writes,

> The idea behind the overlap requirement is, roughly, this: when you are considering how Julius Caesar might have been different, you have to take Julius Caesar as he actually was at some time in his existence, and consider what possibilities there are for him that are consistent with his being as he actually was at that time in his existence. (I intend the overlap requirement to represent a principle about de re modality that has some intuitive plausibility, corresponding to the idea that we can ‘keep hold’ of an actual individual in a possible situation only by ‘anchoring’ it to its actual history. (108)

Imagine that we gave up The Overlap Requirement. The result would allow for the possibility that you could have been born in 4000 BC, to different parents, from a different sperm-egg combination, looked completely different, and led a completely different life than the one you are actually living. That seems counter-intuitive. For, in what sense would this person we are describing be YOU!?

But, notice that, if the future could have unfolded differently, but all divergences into the future are divergences from some point in your ACTUAL history, the resulting picture is one where all of the possibilities for your life form a branching “tree”, where the “trunk” (i.e., your origin) is the one thing which could not have differed (it is your ultimate source—the fountain from which all of your de re possibilities spring forth).

In the figure below, the solid line represents your actual life—the way things ACTUALLY went for you. The dotted branches represent the ways things could have gone for you. The furthest node to the left represents your origin.
Why only forward branching? The picture above is accurate only if there is forward branching, but not backward branching. We appear to have smuggled in another implicit assumption: The possible divergences from your actual history extend only into the FUTURE (i.e., in the FORWARD direction), but not into the past (or, the BACKWARD direction). Note that, keeping the Overlap Requirement, there are four possibilities regarding branching:

1. There is both forward and backward branching.
2. There is forward, but not backward branching.
3. There is backward, but not forward branching.
4. There is neither forward nor backward branching.

We have assumed that option 2 is correct. Options 3 and 4 are very counter-intuitive, for The Assumption of Open Futures demands that the future is open. But, why rule out option 1? We can at least IMAGINE different pasts for individuals. If you meet someone new, you might speculate about all of the various ways their past could have been (including their parents, their birthplace and time, etc.). In short, isn’t the following question meaningful?

Given the way that Julius Caesar was in 49 BC, what are the various ways in which he might have started from a different origin and ended up at that point in his career? (Mackie, 111)

The conclusion that you could not have had a different origin follows only if we build in the assumption that there is no backward branching into our assumptions. But, that begs the question.
But, imagine that we accept option 1, but retain The Overlap Requirement. This would entail that, if Caesar’s life had started out differently (i.e., if his origin had been different), then his life must inevitably converge with his actual life for at least a little bit. However, if forward branching is allowed, then his life could then diverge from there. In effect, accepting both forward AND backward branching entails that there could be “single-node overlap”, as represented by the node at time $t_1$ in the picture below.

![Single-Node Overlap (Backward and Forward Branching)](image)

If such a possible life (represented by the dotted line) for Julius Caesar is metaphysically possible, one wonders what incentive remains for maintaining The Overlap Requirement at all. If The Overlap Requirement can be fulfilled by worlds which share only one single causal node in common with the actual world, then why not just jettison the requirement altogether? For, once single-node overlap is permitted, we obtain the conclusion that there is a possible world in which things were different from the very beginning up until $t_1$, and forever after $t_1$, but exactly the same as the actual world at exactly one moment ($t_1$); and meanwhile, there is not a possible world where things are different at all times (including $t_1$), since this would violate The Overlap Requirement. This is a very counter-intuitive result.

**Conclusion:** Accepting the possibility of backward branching renders The Overlap Requirement implausible. But, if we deny the possibility of backward branching, then we are driven to the necessity of origin thesis. Mackie concludes that we must either:

- Reject The Overlap Requirement
- Accept the necessity of origin thesis

In her mind, it is not clear that the second option is the better one. For, we must still give an account of what SORT of overlap is required. Is it just a few properties that one has at a certain time? Or all of them? Intrinsic properties only? Or extrinsic, relational ones too? Note that origin seems to involve EXTRINSIC properties (for which parents you came from, or what sperm+egg, are NOT intrinsic properties of you).
2. The Uniqueness Argument: Mackie’s primary claim is that the branching view only explains why we find the necessity of origin INTUITIVE. But, it does not really provide an account of what SORT of overlap of your past is required. In short, what we need is a more explicit account of the relevant kind of overlap. This more explicit account is usually offered in terms of supplying some necessary and/or sufficient conditions for your existence. Let’s define those terms:

**Necessary Condition:** X is a necessary condition for Y when X must occur in order for Y to occur. In other words, without X, Y will not occur. (For instance, buying a lottery ticket is a necessary condition for winning the lottery.)

**Sufficient Condition:** X is a sufficient condition for Y when the occurrence of X guarantees the occurrence of Y. In other words, wherever X occurs, Y does too. (e.g., jumping into a swimming pool is a sufficient condition for getting wet.)

Notice that, unlike sufficient conditions, necessary conditions do NOT guarantee their results (buying a lottery ticket does not GUARANTEE that you will win the lottery—it is just that you cannot possibly win the lottery without one). And sufficient conditions, unlike necessary conditions, do not HAVE to occur in order for their results to still occur (you do not HAVE to jump into a swimming pool in order to get wet; running around in the rain or stepping into the shower will also do the trick).

Many philosophers believe that we are driven to origin essentialism if we believe that there exists any sufficient condition for trans-world identity. If there IS any such condition, it must be UNIQUE to you (that is, it must be impossible for anything else to share it). Otherwise, we will get a contradiction.

For instance, imagine that **having your genetic code** were sufficient for being you. That is, out of all the ways things could be (possible worlds), if any individual that has the same genes as you, then that individual IS you. Surely, this is false. For, then there could exist multiple, distinct individuals who all have an equal claim to being you. Imagine, for instance, that we create two clones of Anne, and name them Belinda and Carrie. All three of these individuals have the same genome. If “having genome X” is sufficient for being Anne, then, we get the impossible result that Belinda = Anne, Carrie = Anne, and therefore (by transitivity) Belinda = Carrie. Clearly, these three individuals are not all numerically one and the same person.

Thus, philosophers conclude that, whatever defines your existence, it must be UNIQUE.

Alternatively, suppose that your **life experiences** are a sufficient condition for being you. That is, out of all the ways things could be (possible worlds), if any individual has
the same experiences as you (going to the schools you’ve attended, learning exactly what you’ve learned, having the same friends that you’ve had, sharing the same conversations with them, etc.), then that individual IS you. Surely, this is false. For, imagine the possibility where you were switched at birth with someone who presently lives in Nebraska. If that had happened, it is POSSIBLE (unlikely, but POSSIBLE) that they could have had exactly the same life experiences as you’ve actually had. But, then, that person WOULD BE YOU in that world (and, if you grew up to have the experiences that THEY actually had), you would be them! This doesn’t seem right. It does not seem to be our EXPERIENCES that are unique to us—for these too are shareable by others.

Plausibly, the one thing about you that you and only you have is your origin. Saul Kripke famously offered “something like proof” of this conclusion (in his footnote 56).

**The Proof Explained:** Graeme Forbes took Kripke’s brief suggestion and elaborated. If individuals COULD have different origins, then the following paradox would follow:

**The Four Worlds Paradox**
Consider three possible worlds:

- **w** – Suppose that, in the actual world (w*), there exists a particular oak tree (O1), which originated from a particular acorn (A1) which was planted in a particular place (P1).
- **w1** – Intuitively, it is possible that our particular oak tree (O1) originated from the same acorn (A1), but had been planted in a different place (P2). This possibility is represented by possible world w1.
- **w2** – But, if individuals could have different origins, then it is ALSO possible that our particular oak tree (O1) originated from a DIFFERENT acorn (A2), but planted in the same place particular place (P1). This possibility is represented by possible world w2.

But, then, there is ALSO a 4th possible world, as follows:

- **w4** – It is possible that there exist two oak trees: The first (O2) originates from acorn A2, planted in the place P1. The second (O3) originates from acorn A1, planted in the place P2. This possibility is represented by possible world w4.
Intuitively, at least one of the oak trees in world-4 is trans-world identical to our actual oak tree. But, now as: Which one is it? O₂ or O₃? Or neither? Or both?

It can’t be both. For, then, by transitivity we would get an impossible result. For, if O₁=O₂ and O₁=O₃, it would follow that O₂=O₃. In other words, it would follow that the “two” oak trees in world-4 are really **numerically one and the same oak tree**!

Intuitively, the answer is also not “neither”. For, in that case, what we’re really saying is that worlds 2, 3, AND 4 are all impossible. But, surely at least ONE of them is possible! Which one? Forbes says that, of the two trees in world-4, the tree that clearly has the stronger claim to being trans-world identical to O₁ is O₃. Why? Because, both O₁ and O₃ originate from one and the same acorn (A₁).

He concludes that world 2 turns out to be metaphysically impossible. So, while O₁=O₃, it turns out that O₁≠O₂. So, the tree in world w₂ in our graph above is actually mislabeled. It **CANNOT** be the same tree (O₁) since it does not originate from the same acorn as O₁.

**For humans:** Here is a brief sketch of how this proof would go if we were asking about HUMAN origins instead of TREE origins: Let us call the zygote (sperm-egg fusion) from which you actually originated *Alpha*, and call the zygote from which I actually originated *Beta*. If it is possible for you to have had a different origin than the one you actually had, then it is possible for you to have originated from Beta instead of Alpha. But, then, if both Alpha and Beta could be your origin, then there is a possible scenario where one individual originates from Alpha, and another individual originates from Beta, and **both of these individuals are trans-world identical to you**. But, this is implausible. For, then (by transitivity), these two individuals would ALSO be identical to each other! But, they are two distinct individuals, in two places at once. We may conclude that you could not have originated from any zygote other than the one from which you did in fact originate.

It seems that origin here is both a necessary AND a sufficient condition for being a particular individual. That is:

**Necessary:** You could not have existed in the absence of your particular origin (e.g., some particular zygote—a fusion of sperm and egg). That is, there is no possible world where you have a different origin.

**Sufficient:** Any possible individual that originates from your particular zygote must be you. That is, every possible world where some individual has your particular origin is one where that individual is you.
But, what does it mean to “have some particular origin”? We must provide details. So, Forbes says that your particular origin is defined by (i) some particular collection of matter, (ii) arranged in a certain way, (iii) at or around a certain time. These features of your origin constitute your essence (i.e., they are necessary and sufficient conditions for your identity).

**Two Objections to Origin Essentialism:** This seems initially plausible. There are problems with the proposal, however.

1. **The Recycling Problem:** The first problem is derived from the plausible assumption that the exact time of your origin is not essential to your identity. Intuitively, you could have been conceived an hour earlier or later. But, then, this problem follows:

   **Recycled Zygote** Consider the following two possible worlds:

   w\* – In the actual world, you originate from a zygote (Z\*), composed of a particular collection of matter (M), with a particular initial configuration (C), at a particular space-time location (L).

   w2 – In world w2, a zygote (Z1) originates from the same matter (M) and configuration (C) as Z* in w*, but at a time five hours earlier than L. Zygote Z1 quickly begins cell-division, taking in new matter as nutrients, and shedding some original matter as waste. As it happens, the material that Z1 sheds as it divides comprises all and only that same set of matter (M) that Z1 was originally composed of. Ten hours after Z1 begins to exist (that is, five hours later than L), by some unlikely turn of events, this collection of matter (M) coalesces to form a second (re-constituted, or ‘recycled’) zygote, Z2, with the same configuration (C) that Z1 had.

   Now ask: In world w2, from which zygote (if any) do you originate? Z1 or Z2? That is, which of these two zygotes is numerically trans-world identical to the one that you actually originated from (Z*)? We have not been equipped to answer this question, for both of the zygotes in w2 seem to meet the three criteria of individuation that the origin essentialist has given us. For, both zygotes originate (i) from the same matter, M, (ii) with the same initial configuration, C, (iii) at approximately the same space-time location, L. But, surely the individuals originating from Z1 and Z2 in w2 are distinct individuals—after all, they are two distinct human beings. Thus, the recycling problem is quite damaging to origin essentialism, since the three given conditions do not by themselves sufficiently ground one, unique identity.

   The conclusion is that origin (as defined above) is not sufficient for your identity.
2. The Tolerance Problem: The second problem is derived from the plausible assumption that the EXACT matter from which your zygote was formed is not essential to your identity. Intuitively, your zygote could have been made of slightly different material. But, then, this problem follows:

**Tolerant Zygote** Consider the following four possible worlds:

\( w^* \) – In the actual world, you originate from a zygote (Z*), composed of a particular collection of matter (M*). For simplicity, imagine that this collection has only three parts: A, B, and C.

\( w_2 \) – In world \( w_2 \), a zygote (Z\(_2\)) originates from a collection of matter (M\(_2\)), which is composed of three parts: D, B, and C.

\( w_3 \) – In world \( w_3 \), a zygote (Z\(_3\)) originates from a collection of matter (M\(_3\)), which is composed of three parts: D, E, and C.

\( w_4 \) – In world \( w_4 \), a zygote (Z\(_4\)) originates from a collection of matter (M\(_4\)), which is composed of three parts: D, E, and F.

Now, if your actual zygote (Z*) could have been made of slightly different matter, then it could have been made of \{D, B, C\} instead of \{A, B, C\}. On this assumption, it turns out that \( Z^* = Z_2 \).

But, \( Z_2 \) could have been made of slight different matter too. So, it could have been made of \{D, E, C\} instead of \{D, B, C\}. On this assumption, it turns out that \( Z_2 = Z_3 \).

But, \( Z_3 \) could have been made of slight different matter too. So, it could have been made of \{D, E, F\} instead of \{D, E, C\}. On this assumption, it turns out that \( Z_3 = Z_4 \).

But, now, by transitivity, it turns out that \( Z^* = Z_4 \). That is, it turns out that you could have originated from a zygote with ENTIRELY DIFFERENT MATTER!

The conclusion is that origin (as defined above) is **not necessary** for your identity.

**Conclusion:** Mackie concludes that, once we take a closer look at origins as potential candidates for grounding your trans-world identity, the view seems to fall apart under scrutiny. We must conclude (according to her) that your origin is neither necessary nor sufficient for your identity across worlds.