The possibilities surrounding your life are shaped like a giant tree, uncountable untaken paths continuously branching from the central timeline of your life. But, all of these branches are ones that diverge from some point in your actual life, and, as we trace these branches backward in time, they all inevitably trace back to your beginning. Intuitively, though, here is a piece of your timeline that could not have gone differently. That is, while many things about your life could have been different, your origin is not one of these things—this starting point is something that all of your possible lives share in common.

2. Origin Essentialism and the Uniqueness of Identity

Alternatively, we are driven to origin essentialism if we believe that there is some unique, identifying property of you that makes you you. That is, if there is some property, X, such that anything which has this property is you, then X is most likely your origin. For, none of your other properties seem up to the task.

For instance, X cannot be your life experiences. While it is probably the case that no one else in fact has had all of the same experiences as you have had, surely it is nevertheless possible (if, say, you were switched at birth with some other infant, and that infant then grew up to, by some great coincidence, have exactly the same experiences that you have ever had). Your experiences, then, are not necessarily unique to you; i.e., they are not something that you and only you could ever have.

Furthermore, X cannot be your genetic code. For, identical twins have the same genes, and yet they are distinct individuals. Again, your genetic code is not something that you and only you could ever have.

Plausibly, the one thing about you that you and only you have is your origin. Saul Kripke (1972, 1980) famously offered “something like proof” of this conclusion.² What follows is a brief sketch: 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 you. But, this is implausible. You could not be two distinct

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1. Origin Essentialism and Branching Possibilities

Origin essentialism seems quite appealing given a branching conception of possibilities. Consider: It seems true that things could have gone differently for you today. For instance, you could have gone for a walk instead of reading this. One way of picturing this possibility (where you went for a walk) is as a “fork in the road”—a diverging path along the course of your life, a path you did not take.

There have been many forks in the road during the course of your life. You could have studied harder for that exam. You could have been nicer to that stranger. You could have done that thing which you later regretted not doing. Each of these “could have beenes” were forks in the road which you did not take.
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.

3. The Recycling Problem

Many philosophers find origin essentialism to be incredibly attractive. Whole bodies of philosophical literature even seem to presuppose it (see, e.g., The Non-Identity Problem). Unfortunately, your zygote is not necessarily as unique as you might think.

Imagine that, as your zygote grew into a fetus, it gained some new atoms, and shed some others. Now imagine that, by some incredible coincidence, some of these atoms formed another zygote. Remarkably, this other, second zygote contains all and only the same atoms that your zygote originally contained—and arranged in exactly the same way.

Here, we seem to have a scenario where your zygote exists twice over; there is the first zygote, and then the second, "recycled" one. If both of these zygotes are carried to term, then two children will be born. If you and only you have the particular origin that you do, then apparently both of these children are you. This will not do.  

4. Conclusion

The idea that you have your origin essentially is intuitively appealing. It seems true, for instance, that if your parents had never met, then you would never have existed. It is common for philosophers to propose that originating from a particular zygote, or sperm-egg fusion, is one of your essential properties—this is a feature of you that is yours and yours alone; nor could it be a feature of anyone else. However, in light of the possibility of zygote duplication (as illustrated in recycling cases), even our origins may not be as metaphysically unique as we would have hoped.

Notes

1Here, my focus will be upon origin essentialism for biological organisms. But, it is quite plausible (perhaps even more so) that inanimate objects have their origins essentially too. For instance, it seems true that the table in front of me, which was made from a certain hunk of pine wood, could not have originated from, say, a block of ice. Rather, it must have originated from that particular hunk of pine and no other. Note that everything that I say here about organisms applies to inanimate objects as well.

2Since Kripke’s original proposal, there have been several attempts to defend various versions of this proof in much greater detail (see, e.g., Salmon, 1979, 1981; Forbes, 1980, 1985).

3This problem has come to be known as The Recycling Problem (found in McKay, 1986, and Robertson, 1998). Another problem for origin essentialism lurks in the vicinity: For simplification, imagine that your actual zygote (call it Z₁) contained 100 atoms, {A₁ – A₁₀₀}. Surely, though, your zygote could have differed by one atom, originating instead from atoms {A₂ – A₁₀₁}; call this zygote Z₂. So, anyone originating from Z₁ could have originated from Z₂ instead.

But, surely, anyone originating from Z₂ could have originated from a zygote that differed by only one atom, originating instead from atoms {A₃ – A₁₀₂}; call this zygote Z₃. So, anyone originating from Z₂ could have originated from Z₃ instead.

You might see where this is going. Repeat this inference enough times and we get the result that Z₁ = Z₂ = Z₃ = … = Z₁₀₀, where Z₁₀₀ is composed of atoms {A₁₀₁ – A₂₀₀}. But, then, by the transitivity of identity, Z₁ = Z₁₀₀ (that is, the zygote composed of atoms A₁ – A₁₀₀ is one and the same zygote as the zygote composed of atoms A₁₀₁ – A₂₀₀). Here, we have a case where two material objects can be one and the same object, even though they are composed of completely different material. This will not do. This problem has come to be known as The Tolerance Problem. For more, see Penelope Mackie’s excellent discussion of the major problems for origin essentialism in her (2006).

References


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