Early Modern Philosophy
Locke and Berkeley

Lecture 4: Locke on Essence
The plan for today…

1. Natural kinds and general ideas

2. Real essences and nominal essences

3. The Kripke-Putnam theory

4. Locke’s arguments
§1. Natural kinds and general ideas
It is clear that some of our classifications are just a matter of *convention*…

We group particular things together because this suits our interests…

We don’t think that these groupings reflect the way the things really are…

An example…
Fruit or vegetable…?
Are any of our classifications more than merely conventional…?

Do some of them *carve nature at the joints*…?

Are there *natural kinds*…?

If there are natural kinds…

…what is their metaphysical status?
How do we come by ideas of general sorts of thing…?

…we start off with ideas of particular things…

…which are (at least partly) collections of ideas of sensible qualities…
We notice that some of these ideas have aspects in common…

So we take any one of these similar ideas…

…and remove the aspects that it doesn’t share with the other ideas…

‘[we] make nothing new, but only leave out of the complex Idea…that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all.’ (3.3.7, N 411)
The idea we end up with contains all and only those aspects that the ideas of the particular things have in common…

This is the idea of a general sort of thing.

It is also an abstract idea.
Locke’s semantic thesis...

When we use *general terms* such as ‘animal’, ‘human being’, ‘fish’...

...i.e. when we use words for *sorts* of thing...

...we are just talking about these general, abstract ideas of things.
Locke’s metaphysical thesis…

…it is plain, by what has been said, That General and Universal, belong not to the real existence of Things; but are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only… Words, or Ideas.’
(3.3.11, N 414)
Locke is not an *eliminativist*…

‘…I hope I have no where said, there is no such sort of creatures in nature as birds; if I have, it is both contrary to truth and to my opinion.’

(Letter to William Molyneux, 20\textsuperscript{th} January 1693, quoted by Peter Anstey)
§2. Real essences and nominal essences
What is a nominal essence…?

‘…the *Essences of the sorts*, or… *Species* of Things, are nothing else but these abstract *Ideas*…’ (3.3.12, N 414)

‘…the *Essence* of each *Genus*, or Sort, comes to be nothing but that abstract *Idea*, which the General, or *Sortal*… Name stands for.’ (3.3.15, N 417)
Some examples…

‘…the nominal Essence of Gold, is that complex Idea the word Gold stands for, let it be, for instance, a Body yellow, of a certain weight, malleable, fusible, and fixed.’ (3.6.2, N 439)
Some examples…

‘…though, perhaps, voluntary Motion, with Sense and Reason, join’d to a Body of a certain shape, be… the nominal Essence of [human being].’ (3.6.3, N 439)
…what it is to be a gold thing is to be yellow, heavy, malleable, etc.

…what it is to be a human being is to be capable of voluntary motion, to have sense and reason, to have a body with a shape roughly like mine, etc.

…what it is to be water is to be (at room temperature) clear, wet, drinkable stuff, etc.
What is a real essence…?

‘…the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is…’

‘…the real internal, but generally in Substances, unknown Constitution of Things, whereon their discoverable Qualities depend…’ (3.3.15, N 417)
Locke tells us that there are two theories of the *real essences of bodies*…

The first ‘suppose[s] a certain number of those Essences, according to which, all natural things are made, and wherein they do exactly everyone of them partake, and *so become of this or that species*…

‘…[it] supposes these *Essences*, as a certain number of Forms or Molds, wherein all natural Things, that exist, are cast.’ (3.3.17, N 418)
The second theory, which Locke thinks is more rational…

‘…is of those who look on all natural Things to have a real, but unknown Constitution of their insensible Parts, from which flow those sensible Qualities, which serve us to distinguish them one from another, according as we have occasion to rank them into sorts, under common Denominations.’ (3.3.17, N 418)
What is Locke rejecting…?

He is rejecting the claim that what makes a particular thing belong to a *general sort* of thing…

…is the fact that its ‘insensible Parts’ are constituted in a particular way…

…as opposed to the fact that it corresponds to a particular ‘abstract *Idea*’.
Suppose that on Twin-Earth…

…the things that correspond to our abstract idea of a gold thing…

…i.e. the things that are yellow, heavy, malleable, etc.

…and have a completely different ‘unknown Constitution of their insensible Parts’ to the one they have on Earth.
Are these things on *Twin-Earth* gold things…?

Are they things of the same sort as the things we call gold things on *Earth*…?

Locke thinks the answer is Yes.

On *Twin-Earth*, gold things have a different *real essence*. 
Suppose that on *Twin-Earth 2*…

…the things that have the same ‘unknown Constitution of their insensible Parts’ as the things we call gold things…

…do not agree with our abstract idea of a gold thing…

…i.e. they are not yellow, heavy, malleable, etc.
Are these things on *Twin-Earth* 2 gold things…?

Are they things of the same sort as the things we call gold things on *Earth*…?

Locke thinks the answer is No.

Precisely because they have a different *nominal essence*.
§3. The Kripke-Putnam theory
According to the Kripke-Putnam theory…

…we use the sensible qualities of things to fix the reference of natural kind terms…

…but the meaning of natural kind terms is not given by a list of sensible qualities…
Consider the things that correspond to our abstract idea of a gold thing…

Now consider the constitution of the insensible parts of those things in the actual world…

‘Gold’ refers to things whose insensible parts are constituted in that way…

…whether or not they are in the actual world.
Suppose again that on Twin-Earth…

…the things that correspond to our abstract idea of a gold thing…

…i.e. the things that are yellow, heavy, malleable, etc.

…have a completely different ‘unknown Constitution of their insensible Parts’ to the one they have on Earth.
Are these things on *Twin-Earth* gold things…?

Are they things of the same sort as the things we call gold things on *Earth*…?

Not according to the Kripke-Putnam theory…

Precisely because they have a different *real essence* to the things we call gold things on Earth.
Suppose again that on Twin-Earth 2…

…the things that have the same ‘unknown Constitution of their insensible Parts’ as the things we call gold things...

…do not agree with our abstract idea of a gold thing...

…i.e. they are not yellow, heavy, malleable, etc.
Are these things on *Twin-Earth 2* gold things…?

Are they things of the same sort as the things we call gold things on *Earth*…?

According to the Kripke-Putnam theory, the answer is Yes.

Precisely because they have the same *real essence* as the things we call gold things on *Earth*. 
§4. Locke’s arguments
‘...the supposition of Essences, that cannot be known; and the making of them nevertheless to be that, which distinguishes the Species of Things...

...is so wholly useless, and unserviceable to any part of our Knowledge, that that alone were sufficient, to make us lay it by...

...and content our selves with such Essences of the Sorts or Species of Things, as come within the reach of our Knowledge.’ (3.3.17, N 418)
P1  We have no knowledge of the real essences of things.

P2  We can sort things on the basis of their real essences only if we have some knowledge of the real essences of things.

C   We cannot sort things on the basis of their real essences.

Why accept P1?
‘…Languages, in all Countries, have been established long before Sciences…

…So that they have not been Philosophers… that have made the general Names, that are in use amongst the several Nations of Men…

…But those… have, for the most part, in all Languages, received their Birth and Signification, from ignorant and illiterate People.’ (3.6.25, N 452)
P1  The way we sort things is accessible to ignorant and illiterate people.

P2  Ignorant and illiterate people have no knowledge of the real essences of things.

P3  We can sort things on the basis of their real essences only if we have some knowledge of the real essences of things.

C   The way we sort things cannot be on the basis of their real essences.
‘…The frequent Productions of Monsters, in all the Species of Animals, and of Changelings, and other strange Issues of humane Birth, carry with them difficulties, not possible to consist with this Hypothesis…

…Since it is as impossible, that two Things, partaking exactly of the same real Essence, should have different Properties, as that two Figures partaking in the same real Essence of a Circle, should have different properties.’ (3.3.17, N 418)
P1: Things of the same sort can have wildly different sensible qualities.

P2: If things of the same sort are things with the same real essence, they cannot have wildly different sensible qualities.

C: Things of the same sort are not things with the same real essence.

Why accept P2?
‘...If I should ask any one, whether *Ice* and *Water* were two distinct *Species* of Things, I doubt not but I should be answered in the affirmative: And it cannot be denied, but he that says that they are two distinct *Species*, is in the right...

...But if an *English-man*, bred in *Jamaica*, who, perhaps, had never seen nor heard of *Ice*, coming into *England* in the Winter, find, the water he put in his *Bason* at night, in a great part frozen in the morning; and not knowing any peculiar name it had, should call it harden’d *Water*...
... I ask, Whether this would be a new *Species* to him, different from Water? And, I think, it would be answered here, It would not to him be a new *Species*...

...And if this be so, ’tis plain, that *our distinct Species, are nothing but distinct complex Ideas, with distinct Names annexed to them.*’ (3.6.13, N 447-448)
The ice and water argument…

P1 We are not wrong to say that ice and water are different sorts of thing.

P2 The Jamaican-born Englishman is not wrong to say that ice is the same sort of thing as water (i.e. that it’s just hardened water).

C Things are not sorted on the basis of their real essences.
P3  If we are not wrong to say that ice and water are different sorts of thing, and things are sorted on the basis of their real essences, the constitution of the insensible parts of ice and water must be different.

P4  If the Jamaican-born Englishman is not wrong to say that ice is the same sort of thing as water, and things are sorted on the basis of their real essences, the constitution of the insensible parts of ice and water must be the same.
The constitution of the insensible parts of ice and water cannot be both the same and different.

If things are sorted on the basis of their real essences, there is no problem...

Ice agrees with the abstract idea that the Jamaican-born Englishman associates with water...

...but it doesn’t agree with the abstract idea that we associate with water.
Next week…

…onto Berkeley