§1. Natural kinds and general ideas

Are any of our classifications more than merely conventional…?

Do some of them carve nature at the joints…?

Are there natural kinds…?

Locke's story about the generation of abstract, general ideas…

T1 ‘[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)

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…

T2 ‘…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…

T3 ‘…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, 20th January 1693, quoted by Peter Anstey)

§2. Real essences and nominal essences

What is a nominal essence…?

T4 ‘…the Essences of the sorts, or… Species of Things, are nothing else but these abstract Ideas…’ (3.3.12, N 414)
T5  ‘...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…

T6  ‘...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)

T7  ‘...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 is a real essence…?

T8  ‘...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 theory…

T9  ‘...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…

T10  ‘...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'.

Twin-Earth…
§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…

Back to Twin-Earth…

§4. Locke’s arguments

T11 ‘…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?

T12 ‘…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.

T13 ‘…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)

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.
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.
P5 The constitution of the insensible parts of ice and water cannot be both the
same and different.

Why accept P1?

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