

Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds

Edited by Stephen P. Schwartz

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Some essential literature of the recent revival of essentialism is conveniently reproduced within this collection of articles with an introduction by the editor. Whether one likes it or not, discussion of essences has again become *de rigueur*, and this polemical handbook will certainly assist it. It does not pretend to be a balanced collection, but modern essentialism likes to think of itself as a revolutionary movement and one would not expect the *Bedside Morning Star* to reprint *Times* leaders in the interests of fairness. However, it cannot really be said that the philosophical media have overlooked or suppressed the views of Kripke, Putnam, Plantinga *et al.*, and even as essentialist propaganda this volume would be better for the inclusion of at least a token representative of the opposition. What is in is good, though, and those of us with more of a taste for the accidental are given a formidable literature to deal with.

The basis of the new essentialism is a referential theory of meaning. The first article reprinted is Donnellan's 'Reference and Definite Descriptions', which distinguishes a referential use in which a description need not be true of what it refers to. There follows Kripke's 'Identity and Necessity', in which the claim that true identity statements made with names (or theoretical identifications) are necessary is supported by the notion of a rigid designator and used to bolster essences both individual and mental, at the price of admitting necessary *a posteriori* truths. Putnam, in 'Is Semantics Possible?' and 'Meaning and Reference' attacks the idea that the senses of common nouns fix their extensions and develops instead a referential theory on which their extensions are fixed by essential properties that samples share with ostensibly picked out stereotypes. Goosens, in 'Underlying Trait Terms', plays some variations on the same theme. Then we have Quine's 'Natural Kinds', in which scientific theory replaces (and so justifies) disreputable judgements of unspecific similarity between members of a kind with specific statements of its real underlying structure or mechanism. Copi's 'Essence and Accident' relates Aristotle's essences to Locke's real and nominal essences, and concludes that it is the business of science to find out the real essences of things. Evans' 'The Causal Theory of Names' tries to set out and overcome problems of using causation to explain how names can refer if not by their bearers satisfying associated descriptions. Donnellan's 'Speaking of Nothing' tackles in particular the problems posed for such an account by statements like 'Santa Claus does not exist'. Finally, Plantinga in 'Transworld Identity or Worldbound Individuals' provides support for Kripke's thesis, as against David Lewis and others, that the same individual (thing or kind) can figure in many possible worlds and that the necessity of such properties as being self-identical can thus be explained and established.

Here we have the main ingredients of a systematic essentialist metaphysics, linked to theories of meaning in general and naming in particular, of necessity, of scientific classification and theorising, and of causation. Its various proponents of course differ over details, and there are *lacunae* and anomalies at various points in the essentialist account of these matters. But that is only to be expected in any progressive research programme; and it is not sufficient objection to be able to

jibe and quibble at such details. The real objections to the programme must be to its basic conceptions of reference, of metaphysical as opposed to epistemic necessity, and of the nature of scientific theory and method.

What chiefly sells the programme in fact is the standing of the theoretical sciences, especially microphysics, whose primitive predicates ostensibly provide such convincing candidates for naming the essential intrinsic natures both of particular things and of natural kinds. This standing is neatly secured against Feyerabendian scepticism by separating the necessary from the well established (or the *a priori* or the analytic) and hence essentialism itself from the problems of scientific epistemology. By the same tokens, reference, whether to particular things or to kinds, is separated from the epistemologically vulnerable beliefs of the referrer.

So far so good; it is a relief to see philosophy of science emerging from its neurotic obsession with methodology. But admitting that microphysics can tell us general truths about the very small is one thing; showing that its subject matter or methods entitle it to deliver the essences of things is quite another. What I miss in the essentialist case is any argument to show why theoretical primitiveness in general, or microscopicness in particular, should be taken to signify necessity, essence or intrinsicity of attributes rather than aptness of such predicates for the concise formulation of humanly intelligible and explanatory theories. If a molecular theory of water is first supplemented by and then derived from theories of atomic structure, 'is H₂O' can cease to be a primitive predicate without the truth and explanatory value of 'water is H₂O' (*i.e.* 'Everything that is water is H₂O', which is *not* an identity statement) being at all impugned. Essence cannot both be identified with primitiveness in explanatory theories and credibly claimed to be a feature of the world rather than of our theorising. Nor is the case for the inwardness of essences at all made out. 'Is H₂O' has more small scale implications than 'is water' has, but how does that help? I see no more reason to suppose that essences are revealed by microscopes than to suppose that possible worlds are revealed by telescopes. Why should the nature of a thing or kind reside more in what's inside it than—for example—in the inertial/gravitational measure of its quantity of matter as determined by its relations to everything outside it?

The fact is that there is little argument, either here or elsewhere in the relevant literature, for the claim that the world, as opposed to our theorising and other linguistic activities, has essential features. Rather, the assumption is simply made, on the strength of such familiar but unargued and specious examples, and then seized on to pad out otherwise manifestly inadequate causal accounts of how words generally get applied to things. That there is a causal element in knowledge no one would deny, nor that ostension must supplement, and may occasionally supplant, description in determining what in the world we are talking about. And certainly we do not yet have a satisfactory general account of our abilities to refer to things and kinds of thing. But even if there are essences in the world, it has not been shown, to my mind, that they could help to make good such an account. Essences are a myth; which is not to deny that myths can stimulate notable discoveries and worthwhile contributions to serious understanding. I believe that to have happened in this case; and the book is worth buying on that basis alone.

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