

LOCKE'S CRITIQUE OF ESSENTIALISM

Let us return, briefly, to three questions from the previous chapter:

- (Q1) Does the cosmos already come to us divided up into particular objects, or are these divisions something which we *impose* upon the world, in accordance with some sort of a "conceptual scheme"?
- (Q4) For any object O and any of its putatively essential (accidental) properties F, is it an objective, mind-independent fact that O is essentially (accidentally) F, or is O's being essentially (accidentally) F a matter of convention?
- (Q5) Is there an ontologically privileged way of sorting these objects into (lowest) kinds, or is there, instead, a plurality of equally legitimate ways of sorting them into kinds?

As I have already begun to argue, Locke gives a realist answer to the first question, and a conventionalist answer to the second, which forces him, in turn, to give a conventionalist answer to the third. Although he allows that nature comes to us divided up into particular objects, he does not think that these objects are further divided, by nature, into objectively existing kinds or species. Rather, he insists that it is we who sort these objects into kinds or species, and that we do so in a manner which is arbitrarily determined by our particular experiences, interests, and objectives. Since he thinks that there will be many, equally legitimate ways of sorting objects into kinds, and since he also thinks that we cannot intelligibly speak of an object as having essential properties apart from these decisions, he concludes that the properties which are essential to an object on one system of classification will not be essential to it on other, equally legitimate systems. And this, I take it, is essence of his anti-essentialism.

In this chapter I will develop these points in much greater detail. In Part One I develop his contention that naturally occurring objects can have essential properties only relative to a given kind or species. In Part Two I discuss his rejection of the thesis that nature itself sorts these objects into objectively existing kinds or species. And in Part Three I present his positive views about the classification of corporeal substances, and why he takes the results of this process to be largely determined by human interests, activities, and conventions.

I. LOCKE ON THE ACCIDENTAL/ESSENTIAL PROPERTY DISTINCTION

1. The sortal relativity of essential properties

Locke contends that particular objects do not have essential properties *per se*, but only as members of a sort or kind:

That *Essence*, in the ordinary use of the word, relates to *Sorts*, and that it is considered in particular Beings, no farther than as they are ranked into *Sorts*, appears from hence: That take but away the abstract *Ideas*, by which we sort individuals, and rank them into common names, and then the thought of anything *essential* to any of them, instantly vanishes: we have no notion of the one, without the other: which plainly shews their relation. (III.vi.4)

Thus, Locke continues, nothing is essential “to any Individual whatsoever, till the mind refers it to some sort or *Species* of things; and then presently, according to the abstract *Idea* of that sort, something is found *essential*.” He contends, therefore, that an object which is being considered apart from any species does not have *any* essential properties:

If it be asked, whether it be *essential* to me, or any other particular corporeal Being to have Reason? I say no; no more than it is *essential* to this white thing I write on, to have words in it. But if that particular Being, be to be counted of the sort *Man*, and to have the name *Man* given it, then Reason is *essential* to it, supposing Reason to be a part of the complex *Idea* the name *Man* stands for: as it is *essential* to this thing I write on, to contain words, if I will give it the name *Treatise*, and rank it under that *Species*. (III.vi.4)

In this and other passages Locke purports to refer to particular objects independently of their falling under any sortal concepts. Following David Owen (1991), I shall refer to these objects as “unsorted particulars”. In keeping with his realist answer to Q1, he does not endorse the now widely held view that objects can only be identified as objects of a particular kind. In III.vi.4, for example, he refers to himself, in the first person, apart from his being ranked under the sortal *Man*. Later in the same section he refers to another unsorted particular, namely, “the white thing I write on”, apart from its being ranked under the sortal *Treatise*, and in the subsequent section he refers to “the particular parcel of matter I cut my pen with” apart from its being ranked under the sortal *Iron*.

These passages reveal an additional feature of Locke’s treatment of unsorted particulars: he also thinks that we can speak truthfully about their various qualities. He allows, for example, that the thing which he is writing

on is white, apart from its being called a *treatise*, and that he has reason, as well as a particular color and shape, apart from his being called a *man*. He continues to insist, however, that we should not take any of the qualities of an unsorted particular to belong to it essentially. Thus he writes that it would be "very improper and insignificant to ask, Whether it be *essential* to the particular parcel of Matter I cut my Pen with, without considering it under the name *Iron*, or as being of a certain *Species*" (III.vi.5).

In addition to discussing the manifest qualities of an unsorted particular, Locke also discusses the corpuscularian microstructure which gives rise to these qualities. In III.iii.15, when he formally introduces the concept *real essence* as "the real internal, but generally in Substances, unknown Constitutions of Things, whereon their discoverable Qualities depend," he is speaking about particulars which have not been named, i.e., particulars which have not been ranked or sorted under a *general* name such as *Man* or *Gold*. Thus in III.iii.18 he discusses the real essence or corpuscularian microstructure of an unsorted particular, namely, "that particular parcel of Matter, which makes the Ring on my Finger," stating that it is "the real Constitution of its insensible Parts, on which depend all those Properties of Colour, Weight, Fusibility, Fixedness, etc. which are to be found in it". And in III.vi.43 he contends that although discussing the real essences of unsorted particulars is both difficult and potentially misleading, it is also a crucial part of his case against essentialism. Thus Locke:

But I desire, it may be considered, how *difficult* it is, to lead another by Words into the Thoughts of Things, stripp'd of those specifical differences we give them: Which Things, if I name not, I say nothing; and if I do name them, I thereby rank them into some sort, or other, and suggest to the Mind the usual abstract *Idea* of that *Species*; and so cross my purpose. For to talk of a *Man*, and to lay by, at the same time, the ordinary signification of the Name *Man*, which is our complex *Idea*, usually annexed to it; and bid the Reader consider *Man*, as he is in himself, and as he is really distinguished from others, in his internal Constitution, or real Essence, that is, by something he knows not what, looks like trifling: and yet thus must one do, who would speak of the supposed real Essences and *Species* of Things, as thought to be made by Nature, if it be but only to make it understood, that there is no such thing signified by the general Names, which Substances are called by.

Just how Locke's treatment of the real essences of unsorted particulars fits into his case against essentialism will unfold in the subsequent sections of the chapter.



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