

Locke on Essence

- *Essences*: individuate kinds, and explain why members of the kind have the features that they do.
 - Real Essence :: Internal constitution of a substance that (i) objectively determines its other “discoverable qualities” (e.g. its perceptible properties); (ii) determines what kind of thing a thing is
 - Nominal Essence :: The property or properties specified by some kind term, by which we sort an individual into a particular kind.
1. We sort things in terms of their nominal, rather than real, essences.
 2. We cannot sort things in terms of their real essences.

Skepticism about knowledge of real essences

Argument 1

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 of the same real Essence of a circle, should have different Properties. But were there no other reason against it, yet 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 ourselves with such Essences of the Sorts or Species of Things, as come within the reach of our Knowledge: which, when seriously considered, will be found, as I have said, to be nothing else, but those abstract complex Ideas, to which we have annexed distinct general Names. (III.iii.17)

1. if the real essence of an individual determined its sensible properties, then two individuals with the same real essence should not differ (so much) in their sensible properties
2. “monsters” (offspring that are thought to be of the same real essence as their parents) are occasionally produced in nature
3. \therefore the real essence does not determine sensible properties OR \therefore there are only particular real essences (i.e. no particulars “share” the same real essence) and no kinds which contain more than one particular

Argument 2

The only imaginable help in this case would be, that, having framed perfect complex ideas of the properties of things flowing from their different real essences, we should thereby distinguish them into species. But neither can this be done. For, being ignorant of the real essence itself, it is impossible to know all those properties that flow from it, and are so annexed to it, that any one of them being away, we may certainly conclude that that essence is not there, and so the thing is not of that species. We can never know what is the precise number of properties depending on the real essence of gold, any one of which failing, the real essence of gold, and consequently gold, would not be there, unless we knew the real essence of gold itself, and by that determined that species. (III.vi.19)

1. For any object, a proper subset of its monadic properties (the essential properties) explain the instantiation of its other monadic properties (its **propria**).
2. We cannot have any epistemic basis for determining which properties are essential without a conception of which **kind** of thing we're concerned with.
3. We cannot determine which kind a particular belongs to without a grasp of its essence.
4. \therefore We have no basis for determining the essential properties of any object.

Scientific Knowledge of nature

- Corpuscularianism is the best model of what scientific knowledge of nature would look like BUT:
 - We can't know for sure that corpuscularianism is true
 - Even if we did know it was true we couldn't have genuinely scientific knowledge of nature
- Obscurity** we cannot know the real essences of material bodies because we cannot know the properties of their smallest parts (their material constitution)
- Inscrutability** even if we did know the real essences of material bodies via their primary qualities, the connections between primary and secondary qualities are inscrutable to us (though maybe not to God, angels, etc.)

Knowledge

Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can con-

template, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them...Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas. In this alone it consists. (IV.i.1-2)

1. Knowledge is of *ideas* and their relations (of agreement or “repugnancy”) not of things in the world
(a) does this commit Locke to a kind of “veil of perception” skepticism?
2. Knowledge requires the subject’s *perception* of ideas and their relationships
3. When you have knowledge you have certainty