

KINDS OF THINGS: A Study of Natural and Conventional Kind Classifications

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SUMMARY

How do we classify and refer to the various kinds of things encountered in the world? Since traditional, or Descriptivist, theories of reference fail to explain our use of natural kind terms (NKTs), I defend the Causal Theory of Reference (CTR) associated with Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke. However, contradictions arise within that theory. On the one hand, the problem of indeterminacy of the same-kind relation suggests that members of natural kinds possess no mind-independent Real Essences. On the other hand, Kripke makes a convincing case for regarding such statements as 'Water is H₂O' as necessary *a posteriori* truths. The notion of regrounding, much used by defenders of the CTR, does not account for 'Water is H₂O' being a truth both necessary and discoverable empirically. The contradiction is plausibly resolved by Alan Sidelle, who provides a Conventionalist interpretation of Real Essence and of necessity *a posteriori*. My defence of the CTR entails a clear distinction between natural and conventional kind terms (CKTs), since applications of that theory to CKTs cannot be justified. I argue that no one theory explains our use of CKTs. Strict definitions may be given in some cases, and both Wittgensteinian family resemblances and Bede Rundle's notion of the 'leading idea' help to give the meaning of artefact terms. I also critically discuss and compare T.E. Wilkerson's and John Dupré's accounts of natural kinds, and argue for an emphatic distinction between natural and conventional *kinds*.

Most of the ideas discussed here are borrowed, but the connections made between them are largely my own. In particular no other philosopher has (as far as I am aware) shown how we might defend both a Conventionalist interpretation of the CTR (which is the only defensible interpretation of the only defensible theory of reference, given problems with the Descriptivist approach, the plausibility of Kripke's advocacy of necessity *a posteriori* and the problem of Indeterminate Reference) *and* the notion that causally effective essences determine conformity to laws of nature. Uncritical supporters of the CTR assume a connection between these ideas which involves the false notions of Real Necessity and of (metaphysically) Real Essence. I propose a different type of connection, one suggested by Colin McGinn's argument that some apparently dispositional properties (such as malleability) are identical to the microstructural essence (atomic number) which is held to determine such properties.

I also offer a solution to the *qua*- problem by distinguishing between the grounding of natural kind terms and the process of referring to natural kinds (Chapter 3). I suggest how regrounding and a Conventionalist interpretation of the CTR may be harmonised (Chapter 5). I propose that there exist not only natural and conventional kinds, but also an intermediate category, *scientific kinds* (Chapter 1). Terms denoting such kinds behave like CKTs, but the kinds themselves are amenable to scientific investigation. Against Dupré, I argue that dispositional properties could not form the basis of laws (Chapter 1). I also suggest that the difference between those dispositional properties which are and those which are not reducible to invariant microstructures is scientifically testable (Chapter 5).

In summary, the chief purpose of this thesis is to show how our classifications of natural

kinds can be both conventional (in that they derive from human decisions) *and* nonetheless objective (in that they are based on real features of natural kinds which make them subject to laws of nature.) A subsidiary, and largely implicit, objective is to defend the Realist claim that the world is as it is independently of our perspective upon it.

CONTENTS

Introduction

A Defence of (Weak) Realism and of Externalism
The Analytic-Synthetic Distinction
Thought Experiments
The Contribution of Psychology

Chapter 1: Kinds of Things

T.E. Wilkerson's Categorisation of Kinds
Scientific Kinds
Characteristics of Natural Kinds
Conventional Kinds
De Sousa on Laws of Nature
Implications of a Conventionalist Account of Natural Kinds
Dupré on Natural Kinds

Chapter 2: Theories of Reference

The Description Theory of Reference
The Causal Theory of Reference
Putnam's Account of Meaning
Kripke on Necessity *a posteriori*

Chapter 3: The Grounding of Natural Kind Terms

Grounding and the *qua*- Problem
Referring to Natural Kinds
Regrounding
Theoretical Kind Terms

Chapter 4: The Problem of Indeterminate Reference

Competing Essences
The Stipulation of Essence
When Scientific and Vernacular Kind Terms Fail to Coextend

Chapter 5: A Conventionalist Defence of the Causal Theory

Sidelle and Conventionalism
McGinn on Essence

Chapter 6: Conventional Kind Terms

The Causal Theory: Artefact Terms
The Causal Theory: Attributive Terms
Hybrid Terms
Wittgenstein on Family Resemblances
Strict Definitions
Rundle on the Leading Idea

Conclusion

Appendix I: The Notion of Similarity

Appendix II: Universals

Appendix III: Species

Neo-Aristotelianism
Wilkerson and Narrow Kinds
The Species-as-Individuals Thesis
Pluralism: Ruse and Kitcher

Appendix IV: Classification and Cultural Relativism

Bibliography