**Kinds, Objects, and Essences**

**David Papineau—King’s College London**

**LAN COG Seminar Series in Analytic Philosophy**

**University of Lisbon—11 June 2021 1600**

1 Kripke

2 Kinds

3 Super-explanatory properties

4 Historical kinds

5 Super-explanatory properties as essences

6 Persisting objects as kinds

7 Issues about persisting objects as kinds

8 End

1. Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* revived the traditional distinction between *essential* and *accidental* properties of things. (You get a priori contingencies when you *fix reference* to something by an *accidental property*: Mitochondrial Eve had many descendants. You get a posteriori necessities when you *don’t* fix reference to something by some *essential* *property*: David Papineau has Owen and Constance as parents.)

Do we still believe in *essences*? I’ll show how this idea can be made perfectly respectable. (I’m not aiming to show that essential properties lie deep in the nature of things, so much as to cast light on the way the idea functions in our everyday thinking.)

2. Consider *kinds*—general categories whose instances share many properties, each of which is not only (more or less) necessary, but also (more or less) sufficient.

For example: chemical substances, biological taxa, astronomical objects, functional kinds . . .

These structures are crucial to humans finding their way around the world. But they are not anthropocentric. Our cognitive capacities are shaped to fit them, rather than vice versa.

3. Kinds raise a puzzle. They consist of multiple correlations. Correlations call for a causal explanation. Either A is causing B or vice versa, or they have a common cause.

For most kinds, there’s a common cause. Molecular make-up for chemical substances, stellar constitution, common selective pressures for functional kinds, . . . (I’ll come back to biological taxa).

(Boyd: homeostatic property clusters. Property clusters is good. Homeostasis not so much. Some meteorological or psychiatric kinds might derive from reciprocal (homeostatic) causation. But super-explanatory common causes are the norm.)

4. Historical kinds are an interesting case. Consider how many properties are shared by all the copies of the Bible. Here the common cause is—copied from the same origin. I (with Marion Godman and Antonella Mallozzi, following Ruth Millikan) argue that phylogenetic biological taxa are historical kinds. Social kinds (cultures, religions, genders, . . .) are also arguably interesting historical kinds.

5. This now gives us a naturalistic account of Kripkean essential properties for general kinds. Super-explanatory properties are what give rise to all the other shared properties. Now, modality goes with counterfactual thinking. Normally when we suppose away one property (suppose gold was common, heavier, . . .) we hold the other properties fixed. But when we suppose away a super-explanatory property, all bets are off. So it’s natural to think of super-explanatory properties as necessary and sufficient for kind membership across modal space.

Thus water and H2O, tigers and their founding ancestors, Bibles and their origin, watches and their design aetiology, . . .

Don’t think of essences are some esoteric hidden core of things. We just identify kind properties with the super-explanatory property that is responsible for all the other shared nominal properties.

Godman, Mallozzi and Papineau “Essential Properties are Super-Explnanatory: Taming Metaphysical Modality” *JAPA* 2020 <https://philpapers.org/archive/MALEPA-3.pdf>

6. Kripke also had essential properties of particular objects. I couldn’t have had different parents. This lectern couldn’t have been made of ice.

I think these can be explained in a similar way. The trick is to think of persisting objects as akin to kinds. (Millikan says objects and kinds are alike “*substances*”.)

Now the instances aren’t individual (persisting) objects, but encounters with/temporal stages of objects. These stages obviously share many properties. (All the temporal stages of the rock by the pond in my garden share the same size, shape, mass, markings, smoothness, hardness, and so on. All the temporal stages of me myself share the same physiognomy, gait, distinguishing marks, vocal timbre and accent, brown eyes, and so on.)

Philosophers make a big fuss about the difference between persisting objects and events. (“Objects are wholly present at any time that exist.”) I’d say the difference is just the quasi-*kind* structure of object but not events.

So perhaps we can think of persisting objects as like *historical* kinds. Their origins are essential to them. You wouldn’t have been the same person with different parents, or if you’d come from a different zygote.

7. Some issues.

7.1 Your parents might be modally necessary to you, but they’re not modally sufficient. Is even your distinctive original state/your genome sufficient? Perhaps not. Identical twins. Bacteria.

One option. Persisting objects have *essential properties* (necessary across possible words) but not *essences* (sufficient across possible words).

But not obvious idea of persisting objects is compatible with splitting from same origin. (Two different things can’t be identical to another.) Our talk of objects presupposes distinct origins (unless we go in for hydras or overlapping objects). Maybe objects can have individual essences after all.

7.2 Note that the essence of a persisting object will be its *particular* origin. Nobody is ruling out two people with qualitatively identical genomes. (Just as nobody is ruling out that there could be tigers in some distant solar system that could have had qualitatively identical ancestors to ours.) You wouldn’t have been you if you didn’t come from that *particular* zygote.

Exactly what features of your particular origin are essential to it and so to you?

It doesn’t seem as if all are. A cosmic ray could have zapped my zygote and given me blue eyes. The carpenter could have made this lectern a bit shorter. (The particular ancestral tigers could have had more stripes.)

There will be cases and cases, depending on the sort of object at issue, and on what sort of salient stable properties it displays over time. (Remember I’m not charting the deep nature of things, just trying to cast light on how we think.)

So sometimes, it is natural to hold that the *type* of material essential to its origin. Lecterns, vases, mass produced plastic objects, . . . But maybe not for objects whose shape, design and use are more salient than their basic physical properties. Not obvious Buckingham Palace would be a different building if it had been made of stone and not brick.

Even when the *type* of material *is* essential to the origin, it’s a further question whether the *specific bit of stuff* used is also essential. (Contra Kripke, imagine that the carpenter’s assistant had fetched a different indistinguishable piece of wood from the store. Would that really have led to a different lectern with a different particular origin?) But sometimes the specific bit of stuff might well be essential. Michelangelo’s David would arguably have come out differently if he’d used a different block.

Should essences depend on which persisting features of objects are salient to us? Didn’t I say that the structure of kinds is non-anthropocentric? Well, I also said I’m not probing the deep nature of things, just casting light on the way ideas of essence feature in our thinking. I don’t find it too worrying that we should tailor our sense of which differences in origin would mean a different object to why we find the object important.

7.3 Many of the distinguishing characteristics I carry reliably from stage to stage were acquired after birth. (My scar, speaking English, . . .) Still, these changes each only account for one feature, not a huge battery of features like my origin, and on this account don’t qualify as essential.

But what if many changes accumulate? After all, an awful lot of my identifying/predictable stable properties were *acquired* after my conception. Shouldn’t I then have an augmented essence?

This is a general issue about historical kinds. Biological taxa and social kinds also accumulate new characteristics that come to be shared by all the instances.

Sometimes in these biological and social cases the kinds split into two non-interacting and increasingly different groups, and then we count them as new species (genuses, . . .) or new cultures (religions, . . .) with new origins at the split. But there’s no analogy to splitting for persisting objects.

Take the case where a biological lineage doesn’t split, but accumulates enough changes that warrant counting it as a new species. Here we’ll have new essential founders for the new species. Note however, that the original founders of the two-species genus stay essential to the latter species. The hierarchical structure of biological lineages means not just that descent from the original tigers is essential to tigers, but so also descent from the original felines.

The analogy would be for us to say someone can become a new person, stemming essentially from the stage when they had accumulated many stable extra characteristics—which needn’t deny that they are also a persisting entity stemming essentially from the original zygote. (“I wouldn’t be the person I am now if I hadn’t spent ten years of my youth in Durban.”) There’d be some vagueness here, but no different from how it is with biological and social kinds.

It’s an interesting question how far this kind of *refining* of people and other persisting objects is part of our existing thinking.

8. Many other questions remain. For now I’ll be happy if I’ve persuaded you there’s a close link between super-explanatoriness and thinking about essential properties.