

Секция «Биология, медицина, философия: совместная проблематика дисциплин»

## Biological essentialism in contemporary analytic metaphysics

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In this work I would like to defend a broadly Aristotelian essentialist view regarding the metaphysics of biological species that most philosophers of biology regard not only as false but as archaic. According to this view, the identity conditions, or the persistence conditions, of an individual organism are tied to its species membership, i.e. as long as an individual organism remains a member of the species it belongs to, it remains itself.

I want to focus on is the distinction between a living thing, and a dead thing. So, an organism is by definition a individual lifeform. And when that organism dies, it ceases to exist as an organism.

Some essentialists maintain that everything belongs to a species, a kind that has an essence which is different from the essence of every other species, and every species belongs to a genus that includes other species that share some defining property that members of no other genus has, and every genus belongs to a more general genus, until, in the case of living things, you reach the highest genus, which is animate thing, or living thing.

The mainstream approach in philosophy of biology is to treat biological species as individual entities, like we would treat, for example, nations in the study of history.

Specifically, the classification of organisms into groups in this approach depends on determining the most recent common ancestor. So this is what is known as cladistics, of course.

From a metaphysical point of view, once you have the distinction between living and non-living, there is a good reason to consider biological essentialism. Because presumably organisms are individuals, and they are clearly alive at some point and clearly cease to be alive when they die.

When exactly that happens, it doesn't matter for my purposes here. We can allow for at least epistemic vagueness regarding the beginning and end of an organism's life. It doesn't affect my point that at some moment, the organism is alive, and later, eventually it is not. And at that moment it has also ceased to exist as an organism, or we can say, it has ceased to exist altogether, and what remains of it, that's something different. A collection of cells or other matter.

We can also accept epistemic vagueness when we have cases where we're not sure what the organism is. For example, is it this individual tree, or this group of trees. Or when a single celled organism divides, we're not sure whether the organism survives, or in some cases like viruses we might wonder whether there even is an organism to talk about. We can admit that we can't perhaps judge where to draw the metaphysical boundaries in some cases. What is enough that there are cases where we eventually can draw the boundaries.

And so here is the strength of biological essentialism: there is, at least, the genus living thing, and so any living thing has the identity condition, that it must remain a living thing to remain what it is. And this looks like a particularly good result for essentialism, because essentialism is usually difficult to defend, because it's difficult to defend the notion that anything has essence,

or a real definition, because that might be a result of us projecting our human way of classifying things onto a reality that where those distinctions may not be in any way privileged, or more real than other ways of classifying things.

But alive and dead are as good candidates as any for a mind-independent classification, and being alive is essential to organisms, which is why perhaps surprisingly, biological essentialism may be the most defensible kind of essentialism.

### **References**

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