

Why do we have hybrid concepts?

Paul Bloom (2007) argues that there is one sense of "water" that does correspond to H₂O" and another one that corresponds to an artefact kind. That shows, according to him, that the concept of water is hybrid and that "we naturally think about many categories, including water, as *both* natural kinds and artefact kinds". And he claims that the existence of such hybrid concepts is "a natural solution to a difficult learning problem". I argue that Bloom is right about the existence of hybrid concepts which refer at least to two different kinds, one of which is a natural/real kind, but I claim that (a) the analysis he proposes is unsatisfactory as a general account of hybrid concepts; and (b) our possession of such hybrid concepts is not simply the consequence of having to cope with a difficult learning problem, but is epistemologically justified as a means for enhancing our knowledge of the world. I will defend these claims using the concept of biological species as a case study.

In order to justify my claims, I will first show that the concept of "biological species" is a hybrid concept. I will then show how this fact sheds light on a vivid ongoing debate concerning biological species in which various essentialist and non-essentialist positions are involved (see for example Stanford 1995, Sterelny 1999, Devitt 2008, Ereshevsky 2010, etc.). I will then explain why we need a broad notion of natural/real kinds instead of such kinds being limited only to those defined by physical essences such as H₂O. I will make explicit the reasons why, once it is admitted that there exist different sorts of "essences" or causally grounded categories – physical, historical, relational, functional,.. (see Devitt 2008 for a survey) – it may sometimes be helpful, in order to improve our knowledge, to have an undeterminate real kind concept, a concept for which it is not predetermined which sort of essence it is meant to refer to. Such undeterminate concepts can later either give rise to two (or more) independent real kind concepts, or to a hybrid concept whose different related senses are structured in such a way as to reflect significant causal dependences between different sorts of "essences". I conclude by indicating how one can in this perspective account not only for hybrid concepts such as water but also for artefact concepts in general.

References

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