
How feasible is intrinsic taxon essentialism?

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Abstract

Session title: New light on species essentialisms in biology (Francesca Merlin, Françoise Longy, Anouk Barberousse, Elena Casetta & Thomas Reydon)

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The debate on the feasibility of essentialism with respect to species and higher taxa has resurfaced due to the development in the past 10-15 years or so of what has come to be known as the New Biological Essentialism (NBE). NBE, however, is not a homogeneous position. Rather, it is a heterogeneous cluster of views that address different philosophical issues, use different conceptions of essence, differ on the question in which contexts of biological reasoning essences should play a role, and differ on what sort of position essentialism exactly is. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the virtues and vices of NBE as such and to come up with an overall argument for or against NBE. What can be achieved is at most local arguments for or against particular forms of essentialism in particular contexts of application. The present paper aims to contribute to achieving more clarity about the feasibility and scope of essentialist positions in the philosophy of biology by examining the most recent arguments that have been put forward by, among others, Michael Devitt and Travis Dumsday in support of so-called "intrinsic taxon essentialism", i.e., the view that biological taxa have intrinsic (as opposed to relational) essences. My questions will be whether it is possible to endorse intrinsic taxon essentialism and if so, in which forms intrinsic taxon essentialism is a possible position, and what work these various forms can do for philosophers of biology. My general outlook will be skeptical.

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