
Typological thinking and essentializing from a practical point of view

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Abstract

Typological thinking, long-rejected by biologists and philosophers as perniciously essentialist, is receiving renewed attention. Ernst Mayr's seminal dichotomy of typological thinking and population thinking has, by different authors, been variously reconsidered, challenged, updated, interrogated, reconfigured, and even reasserted and extended. One persistent thread running through this recent work has been the concern to disentangle typological thinking from the essentialism that motivated its rejection. All, or nearly all, agree that some typological practices are unproblematic. The difficulty is how to understand such cases without losing track of a legitimate general worry about mistreating variation. In this paper, I resolve this difficulty by developing a practical notion of *essentializing* as asserting the warranted ignorability of ignored variation. By contrast, the absence of such an assertion, i.e., the opposite of essentializing, I call *variational*. I contend that the traditional typological-populational dichotomy conflates two distinct dichotomies, typological-populational and essentializing-variational. Separating the two dichotomies permits drawing a distinction between *essentializing typological thinking* and *variational typological thinking*. This distinction, *within* typological thinking, closes the gap between specific typologies and the generic worry by suggesting *practical* criteria for determining whether particular typological practices mistreat variation. I conclude by considering two examples from evolutionary developmental biology - staging embryos and generalizing from model organisms – that illustrate the significance of *variational* typological thinking.

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