

Real Essentialism (Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Vol. 11)

By David S. Oderberg

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Real Essentialism presents a comprehensive defence of neo-Aristotelian essentialism. Do objects have essences? Must they be the kinds of things they are in spite of the changes they undergo? Can we know what things are really like – can we define and classify reality? Many, if not most, philosophers doubt this, influenced by centuries of empiricism, and by the anti-essentialism of Wittgenstein, Quine, Popper, and other thinkers. *Real Essentialism* reinvigorates the tradition of realist, essentialist metaphysics, defending the reality and knowability of essence, the possibility of objective, immutable definition, and its relevance to contemporary scientific and metaphysical issues such as whether essence transcends physics and chemistry, the essence of life, the nature of biological species, and the nature of the person.

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Editorial Review

Review

'[*Real Essentialism*] presents vigorous and wide-ranging arguments in defense of an Aristotelian metaphysical scheme … This book puts forward many unfashionable views. But it argues for them with vigor and erudition.' *– Crawford L. Elder, Analysis Reviews*

'Oderberg … exemplifies the unfortunately rare combination in analytical philosophy of rigorous and historically informed argumentation …This book places hylomorphism squarely on the table for discussion.' *– Sebastian Rehnman, Review of Metaphysics*

'a major intellectual achievement....I can particularly recommend, for those interested in such matters--as many metaphysicians presently are--his very well informed discussion of powers and laws of nature, which raises important objections to many current accounts of these.' *-E.J. Lowe, The Philosophical Quarterly*

"...there can be no doubt that this learned and rigorous work deserves a wide readership."*--Edward Feser, Faith and Philosophy*

From the Author
Real Essentialism sets out a system of realist metaphysics in the Aristotelian tradition, applying it to fundamental metaphysical and scientific problems. First, the theory is contrasted with the contemporary essentialism of Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, and their followers, which is shown to be inadequate to the task of justifying real, objective, knowable essences. Next, the book criticizes the anti-essentialism of Locke, Quine, Wittgenstein, and Popper. After a further defence of the reality and knowability of essence, the system of real essentialism is laid out, beginning with a defence of hylemorphism - prime matter and substantial form as the foundation of essence. There follows an account of substance, classification, individuation, and identity. Essence and existence, powers, and laws of nature are then analyzed, followed by properties, artefacts, and origins. The book concludes by applying real essentialism in great depth to three central problems at the interface of science and metaphysics: the nature of life, the reality of biological species, and the essence of the person.

Real Essentialism has as its underlying idea the view that traditional metaphysics is relevant to contemporary philosophy and science. It is not an outmoded relic of pre-Enlightenment thinking, but a vital and reasonable way of solving perennial philosophical problems as well as many of the foundational and methodological questions thrown up by contemporary science. Hylemorphism, long discarded as an Aristotelian relic, is again brought to the forefront of metaphysical thinking. In particular, the doctrine of substantial forms, for centuries rejected outright by the overwhelming majority of philosophers, is rehabilitated. Hylemorphism may have been tossed aside, but for no good reason other than historical prejudice. Its critics can be answered, as can anti-essentialists in general. The system of Aristotelian taxonomy, never fully abandoned by scientists but long suspected of inadequacy, especially in biology, is defended in a way that has not been done for a long time. Real Essentialism puts traditional metaphysics back in its rightful place at the centre of philosophical and scientific thinking. It will be of interest to professional philosophers and scientists alike,

especially those working in metaphysics and biology.

About the Author

David S. Oderberg is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading. He has published many books and articles in metaphysics, philosophical logic, ethics, philosophy of religion, and other subjects.

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