In Kind: Species of Exchange in Early Modern Science and Philosophy

Outline of a workshop at CRASSH, University of Cambridge

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Description and Rationale

The etymology of the term ‘species’ relates to the identification of kinds, types and varieties; appearances, forms and likenesses; specimens and portions, either exemplary or rough and incomplete; and spices and drugs. All these definitions imply skills and systems of assembling, inspecting and judging. The phrase ‘in kind’ (also ‘in specie’) describes exchanges in which equivalence or agreement is established between parties to mutual satisfaction, while ‘specie’ has more specifically denoted the basis of economic exchange in terms of intrinsic rather than symbolic worth. ‘Species’ thus connects a number of domains through the identification of kinds; an ideal of self-evident credibility; and the forging of relations and exchanges out of potentially incommensurable varieties.

This workshop proposes to interrogate the relations among philosophies and practices of species designation in the decades around the turn of the eighteenth century. Well-known controversies over the character of such designations achieved prominence at this time. John Locke’s scepticism about the possibility of discerning essential natural kinds, and John Ray’s debate with Augustus Rivinus and Joseph Pitton de Tournefort over whether the process of determining botanical species could be philosophical rather than pragmatic, are merely two of the period’s best-known interventions. Locke’s profile is nonetheless ideally suggestive for the re-assessment we propose: the species sceptic who also argued against the existence of an essential human nature kept his own herbarium of exotic plants, and enjoyed important links to the Royal Africa Company, the Council of Trade and Plantations and the colonization of Carolina. In other words, long-distance exchange relations furnished compelling new objects for philosophical contemplation,
confronting philosophers and naturalists alike with puzzling varieties of vegetables, minerals, animals, objects and humans.

Our aim is to examine the question of species designation both in philosophical systems and quotidian practices. What methods, resources and exchanges did designation projects involve? How did practical techniques – especially manual and visual – intersect with the articulation of philosophical accounts of the designation of kinds? To what extent were reckonings of plant, animal and human variation (understood either physically or culturally) related concerns in larger programmes of natural history and natural philosophy? Our hypothesis is that before more celebrated episodes in global histories of Enlightenment classification, ethnographic encounter and racial reckoning (in particular, Linnaean systematics and the Pacific voyages and comparative anatomy projects of the later eighteenth century), travel, commerce and colonization raised pressing questions about the very possibility of contriving reasoned mechanisms of equivalence, discrimination and taxonomy. These questions invite a sustained interdisciplinary assessment they have hitherto lacked, to shed light on the early modern functioning of global information systems, resource networks, and philosophies of natural order.

The workshop will involve the discussion of pre-circulated papers by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, whose work is situated in the intersection of the history of science, philosophy, and studies in ethnography and colonial history. The primary speakers have already published extensively on issues pertinent to our topic, and are uniquely well placed to develop new questions in conversation.

**Selected bibliography**


