

The Cognitive Role of Essence: Keeping Track of Things

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Abstract: In the first section of the talk, I go through some by now classic arguments which establish that essence is not reducible to modality, and I note that the same arguments show that essential properties are necessary properties which have a particular epistemic interest; I then suggest that one could take this feature of essential properties as yielding the key to a reductive modal-epistemic account of essence. By looking at the epistemic role of essences, I hope to clarify the view and to help putting it on the table. In the second section I discuss and reject an argument by Lowe which aims to show that knowledge of the essence of something is, at least in standard cases, a pre-condition of thinking about it. In the third section I then turn to a different argument, also suggested by Lowe, which aims to show that knowledge of essences is necessary for knowledge of (a certain sort of) identity judgements, and I defend an improved version of this argument, which takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. The best explanation of our capacity to recognize something will involve at some point, I argue, the claim that we have implicit grasp of its essence.