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What is Innateness?

Griffiths, Paul E. (2001) *What is Innateness?* [Preprint]



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Abstract

In behavioral ecology some authors regard the innateness concept as irretrievably confused whilst others take it to refer to adaptations. In cognitive psychology, however, whether traits are 'innate' is regarded as a significant question and is often the subject of heated debate. Several philosophers have tried to define innateness with the intention of making sense of its use in cognitive psychology. In contrast, I argue that the concept is irretrievably confused. The vernacular innateness concept represents a key aspect of 'folkbiology', namely, the explanatory strategy that psychologists and cognitive anthropologists have labeled 'folk essentialism'. Folk essentialism is inimical to Darwinism, and both Darwin and the founders of the modern synthesis struggled to overcome this way of thinking about living systems. Because the vernacular concept of innateness is part of folkbiology, attempts to define it more adequately are unlikely to succeed, making it preferable to introduce new, neutral terms for the various, related notions that are needed to understand cognitive development.

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