

WHAT IS A "SPECIES"?

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There is perhaps no word in the English language of which the true meaning, as applied to living organisms, has been discussed at greater length than the word "species." Strictly speaking, of course, the word is a latin one, which has become anglicized under what we believe to be its original form, or at any rate as the Romans used it in the time of Julius Caesar, and we shall find the same meaning given whether we look it up in an English or a Latin Dictionary, viz., "a sort", or "kind", "an aggregate of individuals". As a matter of fact the wholly unscientific man, "the man in the street" rarely uses the word at all. He doesn't understand its meaning. "A kind", or "sort" is expressive enough for him, and anyone can understand what that means. But for the naturalist the third meaning here given, "an aggregate of individuals" is the one which better expresses his meaning when he talks of a "species".

So long as we do not think too much about it that meaning is good enough, that is to say we use it to mean an individual kind, an aggregate of individuals, as entirely distinct from another individual kind or aggregate of individuals. He would be an argumentative man indeed who would dispute the fact that an oak was quite a distinct kind of tree from a fir, or that a pheasant was quite a distinct bird from a duck, or, amongst animals, a fox distinct from a bear. And most people will be quite willing to admit that there are different kinds, or more technically, "species", of oaks, firs, pheasants, ducks, foxes, and bears. That is to say that there are certain aggregates of individuals or "species" of each of the above named things that are more or less easily to be distinguished from other aggregates of individuals of the same class. That these kinds are to be distinguished each by certain characters of colour, form, habit, etc., not possessed by the other kinds is implied by the use of the word "species". Naturalists may tell us, for instance, that the grizzly bear is quite distinct from the brown bear by the colour of its fur, the shape of its head, the comparative size or shape of certain bones in the body or limbs, habits of feeding, etc. Or botanists, that a certain species of oak is distinguished from another by the shape of its leaves or acorns, or the exact way in which they grow from the twigs, by the form of growth, or shape of the tree itself, by the colour or texture of its wood, and in each case that these characters are not possessed by any other species. But why these kinds should be considered separate because they differ in these parts, or what degree of difference is necessary before