

General / Opening - Comments on Existentialism / Nihilism

Post by "Cassius" of January 3, 2020 at 8:01 AM

This Richard Dawkins article is what comes to mind lately when I hear the word "essence" used in a philosophic sense:

<https://www.edge.org/response-detail/25366>

Opening paragraph:

Essentialism

Essentialism—what I've called "the tyranny of the discontinuous mind"—stems from Plato, with his characteristically Greek geometer's view of things. For Plato, a circle, or a right triangle, were ideal forms, definable mathematically but never realised in practice. A circle drawn in the sand was an imperfect approximation to the ideal Platonic circle hanging in some abstract space. That works for geometric shapes like circles, but essentialism has been applied to living things and Ernst Mayr blamed this for humanity's late discovery of evolution—as late as the nineteenth century. If, like Aristotle, you treat all flesh-and-blood rabbits as imperfect approximations to an ideal Platonic rabbit, it won't occur to you that rabbits might have evolved from a non-rabbit ancestor, and might evolve into a non-rabbit descendant. If you think, following the dictionary definition of essentialism, that the *essence* of rabbitness is "prior to" the *existence* of rabbits (whatever "prior to" might mean, and that's a nonsense in itself) evolution is not an idea that will spring readily to your mind, and you may resist when somebody else suggests it.