

General / Opening - Comments on Existentialism / Nihilism

Post by "Cassius" of January 2, 2020 at 8:35 AM

[ADMIN NOTE: To open this discussion here are some comments by "M.A." at another location, which I will paste here for reference. I personally don't have time right now to pursue this topic in detail, but it is definitely of interest, especially as to the intersection with Nietzsche, so this is placeholder to one day come back to it. In his opening post MA is referring to Elayne's article on [An Approach to Reading Philosophy](#):]

M.A.: It's nice to learn you put Epicurus as the context of your deep investigation of science and philosophy. Your framework is best-suited for curious learners of Epicurianism. In my case, I've been to a very strange path. I was a radical Marxist-Leninist communist, became a Socratic skeptic, then a post-modern existentialist. It was at this point of being an anti absolutist I've come to appreciate and embraced the philosophy of Epicurus since he is also an ant-absolutist and as radical as Socrates. In fact, I personally regard Epicurus as the REAL father of existentialism and not so much of Utilitarianism as Utilitarians believe him to be.

Cassius:

I just saw M.A.'s post. I can see why Mike's comment makes sense, and I definitely agree with his last point that Epicurus was not the father of Utilitarianism. But I think Epicurus would recoil in horror, and vigorously denounce many / most of the conclusions that are associated with existentialism, such as this clip on angst. Unfortunately I doubt we can treat the subject of existentialism fairly in a subthread.

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M.A. Response to Cassius:

Yes I agree with your observation. Actually, I do not see existentialism to be identical with Epicureanism as the former lacks the answer to the most of life's ultimate questions which the latter offers. But being the father of something doesn't mean they are the same thing. I just want to say that existentialists are "standing on the shoulder of a giant" who had already answered their questions even before they ever existed. Yes it is true of existentialism that life is meaningless and death is nothing. However, the point of human existence is not to ponder on the meaninglessness of life but to find the meaning through the pursuit of pleasure. Epicureanism being the father of existentialism doesn't mean the former takes care of that

prodigal son. Rather, what I mean is that Epicureanism (not existentialism) was the first to have recognized that there is nothing to fear of death since there is no absolute and eternal damnation. My point is that existentialism is not the original discoverer of existential question of freedom from absolute God by saying that "God is dead". Rather, it is Epicureanism that originally discovered it by saying that God simply doesn't care about human affairs and is already happy elsewhere so we are on our own.

...

Perhaps, I should rephrase the term "father of existentialism" into the "original author of principles which existentialists are using to justify their random thoughts." Of course Epicureanism and existentialism are two different things because I wouldn't get to Epicureanism if not. I just see the connection that connects me from existentialism to Epicureanism. However, I totally disagree about the claim of Utilitarians that they consider Epicurus as their distant ancestor. What I see is that they are more connected with Aristippus. In fact, Utilitarianism promotes meritocracy which is counter to Epicurean prudence..

Cassius:

M.A. thanks for those posts. You seem to really be into this and I think your perspective makes sense. Seeing as you do from both sides of the issue, if you have the inclination to suggest anything in more detail, please consider suggesting a standalone post here, or posting at [Epicureanfriends.com](https://www.epicureanfriends.com). I think many of us here would be interested in your thoughts on how at least some of these (Nietzsche especially) related to Epicurus. I've read myself most of Nietzsche's references to Epicurus, but I presume these others also referenced Epicurus. If you have observations as to how some of these flirted with Epicurus but then rejected him, and why, that could be very interesting. We don't want to sidetrack too far into Existentialism / Nihilism details that aren't relevant, but given your stated views I bet you have more good summary comments like those in this thread. At least from my point of view a major part of our target audience is people who are definitely not professional philosophers, but who are probably acquainted enough with terms like existentialism and nihilism to be aware that these are directions that they don't want to go - but they might not be exactly sure why.

Post by "Hiram" of January 2, 2020 at 10:48 AM

Sartre in particular elaborated some of the complicated issues raised by the Epicurean view on freedom, and the creativity and responsibility that comes from those views which are terrifying for some people (which is why they invent mythical narratives to excuse themselves from owning these powers).

Sartre said: "you are what you make of what life gives you"--which is basically a summary of Epicurus' sermon "On Moral Development". And like Epicurus in that sermon, Sartre and De Beauvoir worried about evaluating the extent to which we are free, and the extent to which we are bound by societal and natural conditions (freedom versus facticity / gravity).

Epicurus evaluated freedom in On Moral Development in terms of our anticipation of agency and responsibility. But Sartre evaluated freedom in terms of POWER over others, and its inevitability in social relations. He evaluated our freedom in terms of how we objectify others, and the difficulties of having true inter-subjectivity. He explained this by saying that as soon as we LOOK at someone, that person becomes an object, and he argued that this is almost always uncomfortable for the person being objectified.

And, obviously, his philosophical discussions and relationship with De Beauvoir and his other associates in Parisian cafés are examples of friendships based on philosophical interests, which is an important part of Epicurean practice also.

Post by “Cassius” of January 2, 2020 at 2:31 PM

Hiram what are you talking about here?

[Quote from Hiram](#)

which is basically a summary of Epicurus' sermon "On Moral Development".

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 3, 2020 at 4:05 AM

I guess there are some considerations we should take when comparing Epicureanism and existentialism in order to avoid confusion as existentialism is not a philosophical system but a movement - movement not in the "organizational sense" but "in the sense that there is a revolution of thought against something". The latter is what I refer to being in comparison with Epicureanism.

Existentialism does not necessarily mean nihilism. However, there are nihilists that are existentialists. There are also nihilists that are not existentialists.. Example of them is Michel Foucault. He is not an existentialist as he doesn't believe that we have a freedom of choice. However, he is a nihilist as he rejects not only the value of history but also the role of science

along with morality and knowledge. The known existentialist-nihilist is Albert Camus whose presentation of the Myth of Sisyphus tells us that everything is nothing and we can't do anything about it.

Contrary to what many believe, Nietzsche is not a nihilist. He only rejects slave morality and the superstition of Christianity, yet he clearly expresses the importance of will.

Nihilism is the rejection of will. Existentialism emphasizes it.

Among the existentialists, Nietzsche, Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir are the ones that give emphasis on free will. De Beauvoir said that we are condemned to make choices.

In the case of Epicureanism, free will is expressed in the theory of the Swerve and in the rejection of the fear of God and worries about death. Hadn't Epicurus believed in free will, he wouldn't have probably introduced the importance of prudence.

The core philosophy of existentialism is that "existence precedes essence". I don't think Epicurus would reject such statement. In fact (whether we like it or not) Epicurus was the first to have told the world about that idea.

Post by “Cassius” of January 3, 2020 at 6:20 AM

In that last paragraph, "existence" is an easier word to grasp than "essence," with "essence" carrying a lot more controversial implication, I would expect, as in some contexts I gather "essence" is comparable to a platonic form, which Epicurus would/did reject. I gather that there is an Aristotelian sense of "essence" that Epicurus also rejected.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 3, 2020 at 7:34 AM

[Cassius](#) Knowing how existentialism condemns abstraction and objectification, I am pretty sure it doesn't have any Aristotelian nor Platonic value. It simply means knowledge or idea. The point is that there is no absolute and abstract knowledge before and after we exist.

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.

Post by "Cassius" of January 3, 2020 at 8:19 AM

Interesting comment from Wikipedia that Socrates was himself not impressed with "essentialism." My understanding of Aristotle echo's Dawkins comments - that Aristotle merely transferred the location of the ideal "essence" from the Plato's otherworldly realm of ideas into *this* world - postulating, for example, that there is an "essence" of yellow in all yellow things. And that this view is a major target of the portions of the Epicurean texts which attack the idea that qualities of objects arise from anything permanent within them. (This is also mentioned in Frances Wright's "A Few Days In Athens" as to color, if I recall.)

Essentialism

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For the 2014 book, see [Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less](#).

Not to be confused with [Existentialism](#).

Essentialism is the view that every [entity](#) has a set of attributes that are necessary to its [identity](#) and function.^[1] In early Western thought, [Plato's idealism](#) held that all things have such an "essence"—an "idea" or "form". In *Categories*, Aristotle similarly proposed that all objects have a [substance](#) that, as [George Lakoff](#) put it, "make the thing what it is, and without which it would be not *that* kind of thing".^[2] The contrary view—[non-essentialism](#)—denies the need to posit such an "essence".

Essentialism has been controversial from its beginning. Plato, in the *Parmenides Dialogue*, depicts Socrates questioning the notion, suggesting that if we accept the idea that every beautiful thing or just action partakes of an essence to be beautiful or just, we must also accept the "existence of separate essences for hair, mud, and dirt".^[3] In biology and other natural sciences, essentialism provided the rationale for [taxonomy](#) at least until the time of [Charles Darwin](#);^[4] the role and importance of essentialism in biology is still a matter of debate.^[5]

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 3, 2020 at 9:06 AM

[Cassius](#) The definition makes sense. The main idea that describes "essence" is that it is prior to existence. Perhaps, the only way for existentialists to reject it is to say that "essence" is posterior, and "existence" prior. It is because redefining it would only mean the posterior is a different concept, not the one they are rejecting and putting behind.

You're right in your observation that Aristotle merely transferred the location. For Plato, there is essence of something before it exists. For Aristotle, you will know that essence when you sense two or more of such things. Voila! It's the same essence. For Plato, it is abstract. For Aristotle, it is objectified.

However, existentialists reject abstraction and objectification. They are highly relativist and subjectivist. Therefore, essence in existentialism is nothing but a metaphorical representation of such rejection.

The statement that "existence precedes essence" was coined by Jean Paul Sartre. If you get used to his style of writing, you will notice he loves turning statement upside down like "I am

what I am not," "I am not what I am."

By rejecting the essentialist position that "essence precedes existence," it's no surprise that Sartre's response is to turn the statement upside down, thus he says "existence precedes essence."

He is not like the conventional philosophers who are taking time abstracting and objectifying the meaning of every word since he doesn't believe in abstraction and objectification.

I think it's enough to say that existence precedes essence to reject the primacy of essence. As I understood it, the primacy of existence only means that every essence is just an illusion.

Post by "Cassius" of January 3, 2020 at 9:28 AM

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

As I understood it, the primacy of existence only means that every essence is just an illusion.

Although "illusion" probably works, would it be also proper to say that "essence" is simply a construct of the human mind, and has no independent existence apart from being a human construction?

I think that is the position I sense Epicurus to be taking, and the position I view as correct -- whether or not the "Existentialists" would agree is another question I suppose.

Post by "Mike Anyayahan" of January 3, 2020 at 9:39 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Although "illusion" probably works, would it be also proper to say that "essence" is simply a construct of the human mind, and has no independent existence apart from being a human construction?

[Cassius](#) That's exactly how existentialists understand it since "essence" has already been demoted in the core statement. And this is also the reason why I mentioned that existentialism is sitting on the shoulder of a giant. That giant is none other than Epicurus who had already

taught such idea long long long before existentialism (as we now know it) ever existed.

Post by “Cassius” of January 3, 2020 at 11:58 AM

Mike: This point (about Epicurus rejecting Platonic ideals) is something that I rarely see raised in most general commentaries, because they are so fixated on making Epicurus out to be a stoic by pounding their version of "absence of pain" as the only thing they maintain is important about Epicurus.

On the other hand, DeWitt hits this anti-Platonism issue early and often in his book, which is why I recommend it to people so strongly. Had I not come across DeWitt's book and his explanation of the real and sweeping significance of Epicurus I would have spent the last ten years very differently, and this forum would not exist.



..and yet people who rely on the popular Catherine Wilson style commentaries will never even hear the name "Norman DeWitt" because he is effectively blacklisted in most all the modern academic articles and popular books.

and that deserves a: 

Post by “Cassius” of January 3, 2020 at 12:03 PM

For example from page 19 of "Epicurus and His Philosophy":

What Comte called the metaphysical stage was for Epicurus represented by Plato and in part by Aristotle. Phenomena were separated from matter and regarded as separate entities. Form was separated from substance and in Plato's theory of ideas was esteemed as the real existence. This meant, as Epicurean ridicule tauntingly insisted, that "horseness" was a real existence but horses were mere apparitions. It seemed less unreasonable, perhaps, to think of justice as existing apart from conduct, public or private. On the physical level the difference between this stage of thought and the next is aptly exemplified in the case of color. Theophrastus believed it to have a separate existence while Epicurus explained it as arising from the arrangement and motions of the atoms comprising the compound, being close to the truth, as so often.

Post by "Hiram" of January 3, 2020 at 1:16 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Hiram what are you talking about here?

Book 25 of "On Nature" (it's in *Les Epicuréens*)

<http://societyofepicurus.com/synopsis-of-ep...al-development/>

Post by "Hiram" of January 3, 2020 at 1:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In that last paragraph, "existence" is an easier word to grasp than "essence," with "essence" carrying a lot more controversial implication, I would expect, as in some contexts I gather "essence" is comparable to a platonic form, which Epicurus would/did reject. I gather that there is an Aristotelian sense of "essence" that Epicurus also rejected.

I don't think essence here is Platonic. It's CREATIVE. In other words, what's being said here is that first we have our material / social conditions (existence), and then we develop our characters and choices over those conditions as we gain responsibility for creating ourselves and our lives (essence, which is our creation to a great extent).

Some of the philosophers who accept a radical form of freedom say that we SCULPT OUR SELVES, and that our lives as our great works of art. Onfray wrote about this in aesthetic terms in his "Sculpture de soi".

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 4, 2020 at 12:32 AM

[Cassius](#) I still can't comment on Norman DeWitt because I have not yet read his book. I'll read it one of these days. So far, I still depend on the original works, and I acknowledge that secondary literature will further help me. I'm curious about his book though.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 4, 2020 at 12:50 AM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

I don't think essence here is Platonic. It's CREATIVE. In other words, what's being said here is that first we have our material / social conditions (existence), and then we develop our characters and choices over those conditions as we gain responsibility for creating ourselves and our lives (essence, which is our creation to a great extent).

[Hiram](#) Yes. Essence here in the core statement (Existence precedes essence) is not Platonic since the word has already been demoted from being the subject to becoming the object in the sentence. It is superfluous to bother ourselves extracting the metaphysical essence of "essence." The statement only asserts the primacy of existence over essence. Therefore, the Platonic concept of essence has been broken here.