

Responding to Aristotle's "Essences" Argument

Post by "Cassius" of April 9, 2026 at 9:23 AM

We don't crawl in a hold and die and give way to AI because AI isn't alive, doesn't care, and will never fight for what it values as a human being. But if AI can help provide weapons of immediate value faster than we could find answers ourselves, I'm ready to pick up that weapon.

This answer is based on what living people have produced, but do I know any living person who can answer Aristotle better than this? If I do know such a person, please point out where the following might be wrong! Because it sure sounds consistent with all my past reading on Epicurus.

The case of Aristotelian case is actually a *harder* problem for Epicurus than Plato's Ideal Forms, because Aristotle had already made the key concession Epicurus would demand of Plato.

Why It's a Different Problem

Against Plato, Epicurus's objection is relatively straightforward: Forms existing in a separate realm are simply unreachable by the Canon and do violence to the evident facts of reality consisting of bodies and void. Plato puts ideal forms or "essences" *above* the physical world.

Aristotle pre-empts that objection. He agrees there is no separate realm of Forms. Essences are *immanent* — they exist in particular things, not above them. The essence of color is not floating in a Platonic heaven; it is *in* colored things, and the intellect abstracts it from sensory experience. This is much closer to Epicurean territory, and Epicurus cannot simply dismiss it as empty transcendentalism.

The Epicurean Counter: Prolēpsis vs. Essence

The key Epicurean move is to deploy the doctrine of *prolēpsis* (preconception) as an alternative account of exactly what Aristotle thinks essences explain.

When we encounter red things repeatedly, we form a general mental concept — a *prolēpsis* — of color. This concept is real, it is useful, and it is derived from sensation. But for Epicurus it is a *cognitive construction* built from accumulated sensory encounters, not a perception of an immanent universal structure residing in things. The distinction matters enormously: Aristotle thinks the intellect is *discovering* something that is really there in the world; Epicurus thinks the

intellect is *constructing* a useful generalization from what sensation provides.

So the Canon gives us particular colored things. Full stop. Aristotle's "essence of color" is what happens when a mind operates on that sensory data and mistakes its own generalization for a feature of external reality.

The Atomic Account Does Additional Work

On something like color specifically, Epicurus has a second line of attack: color is not a primary property of atoms at all. Atoms have shape, size, and weight — that is all. Color (and taste, sound, smell) are emergent properties arising from atomic arrangements *in relation to a perceiver*. They are real as experienced — Epicurus is not a skeptic about color experience — but they have no essence to be abstracted because they are relational and contextual, not intrinsic structural features of things.

This directly undercuts Aristotle's example. You cannot abstract the essence of color because color doesn't inhere in things as a stable immanent form waiting to be intellectually grasped. It is produced at the intersection of atomic structure and percipient organism.

The Teleology Connection

There is a deeper reason Epicurus must reject Aristotelian essence, and it goes beyond epistemology. Aristotle's essences are not merely descriptive — they are bound up with his teleology. The essence of a thing includes its *telos*, what it is *for*, what counts as its flourishing or completion. *To ti ēn einai* — "the what it was to be" for a thing — carries this purposive dimension throughout Aristotle's natural philosophy.

Epicurus rejects natural teleology root and branch. There is no "what things are for" in a world of atoms and void moving by weight, impact, and swerve. If there is no *telos* in nature, then Aristotelian essence — which is form-as-*telos* immanent in matter — simply has nothing to latch onto. The entire framework requires a purposive nature Epicurus denies.
