

Essence as a Fundamental Concept of Explaining and Understanding Reality

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Submitted: 13 Jan 2020; Accepted: 22 Jan 2020; Published: 24 Jan 2020

Abstract

According to Aristotle, the “essence” or “substance” of a thing, concept, change or natural phenomenon, of an entity in general, expresses the identity, the fundamental quality of the entity, “the what”, that makes the entity what it fundamentally is. Thus, intrinsically embodied in Aristotle’s onto-theological “Metaphysics”, and connected with the Platonic world of ideas, and ideal forms, the “essence” or “substance” of a thing was, thus, considered unalterable and eternal. The concept of essence was not particularly popular in progressive times due to its controversial nature, as it carried different meanings in the history of modern and post-modern philosophy and was loaded with this metaphysical legacy. Although not entirely rejected in the Early Modernity, the total rejection of “essence” mainly occurs with the philosophical currents of the Enlightenment, Positivism and Logical Positivism, as well the philosophy of Pragmatism, in the modern and post-modern era. Indeed, modern and post-modern empiristic, positivistic, utilitarian, relativistic and pragmatic world-views, seem to totally reject metaphysics and essentialism, in studying reality and all issues interwoven with reality, in all fields. Essence, historically and epistemologically closely connected with Aristotle’s causality theory should be interpreted and understood, along with its unalterable characteristic, in a modified, alterable way, so that it can also be used, by empiricists, positivists and progressive spirits, to explain and understand reality, while searching the first causes and fundamental features of things, concepts and any kind of phenomena. Based on literature, and giving some characteristic examples from the field of socioeconomic, environmental and natural science, this paper proves the necessity of the concept of essence in explaining and understanding reality.

Keywords: Essence, Essentialism, Philosophy, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Reality, Modernity, Emigration Fluxes, Ecology, Natural Sciences

Introduction

According to Aristotle’s “Metaphysics”, the basic presupposition for the study of reality, of the “being qua being” as a whole, is the possession of theoretical wisdom, as the knowledge of the first principles and causes of a thing (a being, ein Seiendes), perceptible or imperceptible, concept, change or natural phenomenon, of an entity in general [1, 2]. So, in order to study and explain reality, Aristotle proceeds to a causal investigation, considering that the concept of cause has “both a metaphysical and an epistemological component” [3].

His famous four causes are: the “formal cause” (“causa formalis”), that connotes its “essence”, the “what it was to be” of the entity; the “material cause” (“causa materialis”), connoting the matter which the entity is made from; the “efficient or moving cause” (“causa efficiens” or “causa movens”), that expresses the source, or agent of the entity; and the “final cause” (“causa finalis”), that teleologically connotes the final purpose, the goal of the entity, which, for Aristotle is “the good” [4].

Aristotle’s “essence” refers the basic nature, the identity, the intrinsic quality of a thing, concept, change or phenomenon, of an entity in general, that makes it what it fundamentally is; it is the common quality, the identity, of a category of entities, without which they are not what they are, and thus they cannot fall into that category; it is, as already mentioned above, “the what it was to be”, or “the what it is” of an entity, as it is elaborated in the Book Z of his “Metaphysics” [5].

So, according to Aristotle’s onto-theological “Metaphysics” – and the Platonic world of ideas and ideal forms – when we speak for the “essence” or the “substance” of a thing we understand the knowledge of the first principles and causes of that entity, and its fundamentally recognized features, which are considered unalterable and eternal. Within this context, the statement that the awareness of their mortality is the essence of man, since no other creature has this awareness, is, until now, an unchangeably valid example. Accepting the primacy of essence, in studying reality, we are within the realm of “essentialism”.

Yet, there are also essential features, first causes and principles defining reality, that are not unchangeable or eternal, but rather spatiotemporally depended, like, for example, socio-political, economic or environmental fundamental characteristics, valuable in

explaining and understanding reality. So, there is no epistemological reason to exclude the concepts of “eessence” “essential” or “essentialism” from studying reality. Consequently, it is clarified, at this point, that “essence” is not used, in this paper, to prove a social conservatism, accepting unalterable, consolidated social characteristics, or to defend, for example, anti-feminism as based on an unalterable underlying human nature and “essential” female characteristics. It is rather used to prove the necessity and importance of the rational and honest pursuit of the deeply grounded first causes and substantial features, that characterize an essentialist way of exploring and understanding reality in all its current manifestations, as, for example, are the socio-political, economic, environmental or scientific phenomena. Rationalism, in this case, should not be degraded, as very often happens in our modern and post-modern era, “to instrumental rationalism and pragmatism, which – aiming to or based on empirical mostly calculating utilitarian concepts and results – also seems to reject essentially grounded approaches of socio-political, financial, ethical, educational and environmental issues” [6].

In my opinion, Aristotle's metaphysically loaded “essence”, with its unalterable and eternal characteristics, is one of the main reasons that empirical, positivist and progressive modernity has disdained the concepts of essence and essentialism, fanatically excluding them from the study of reality. That doesn't mean that there are no manifestations of reality, particularly when speaking, for example, for gender issues, social or racial equality, where a wrongly based and interpreted essential approach could, under certain circumstances, lead to misunderstandings and socio-political misdeeds.

The rejection of essentialism

The concept of essence was not particularly popular in modern and post-modern times – mainly in the philosophical currents of the Enlightenment, Positivism and Logical Positivism, as well Pragmatism – due to its controversial nature, as it carried different meanings in the history of ideas and was loaded with its Aristotelian metaphysical legacy. The scientific revolution of the 17th century, the two phases of industrial revolution that followed after the mid of the 18th and the 19th century, and particularly the anti-metaphysical and anti-essential Enlightenment and the positivistic 19th century, ideologically and epistemologically led to the neo-positivistic current of the “Vienna Circle” – which was famously hostile to metaphysics and essentialism – as well to modern and post-modern Pragmatism, on the basis of its concepts of utility and its relativistic view of truth.

Regarding, for example, the “Vienna Circle's” attack on metaphysics and essentialism, a sentence that didn't express “something that was formally true or false” or couldn't “be empirically tested... might have emotive meaning but it was literally nonsensical”; and utterances “about the absolute, or transcendent entities, or substance, or the destiny of man...were said to be metaphysical; and the conclusion drawn was that if philosophy was to constitute a genuine branch of knowledge, it must emancipate itself from metaphysics” [7]. Moreover, according to William James (1842-1910) and his “Pragmatism”, “it falls in with ... positivism in disdaining verbal figures, superfluous questions and metaphysical abstractions” [8].

So, although Early Modernity's empiricism didn't entirely reject essentialism, its rejection occurs in the Enlightenment era, and much more efficiently in the 19th century's Positivism, in the 20th century's Logical Positivism and in the relativistic current of Pragmatism,

during the modern and post-modern era. Indeed, modern and post-modern empirical, positivistic, relativistic and pragmatic world-views, seem to totally reject – in full contrast, particularly to modern physics (quantum mechanics) and cosmology – metaphysics and essentialism in studying reality and all issues interwoven with reality, in all fields.

It must be emphasized, that this anti-metaphysical, anti-essential ideology is also strongly related to today's insensible scientism, bureaucracy and vulgar technocracy, particularly regarding government and socio-political issues, globalized economy, exclusively rationalized management, education programs and assessment, and environmental issues. It is also related, based on arrogant scientism and cruel technocracy, to the very catastrophic, for man and the environment, view that technoscience and ethics are two different disciplines, entirely unlinked, and that there was no necessity for science teaching and engineering education, along with the epistemic values, to be essentially enriched with moral values, namely humanistic and ecocentric [9].

But is this hostile attitude epistemologically productive? Is it even possible to have a critical discussion, a study of reality without including the fundamental features, the first causes or principles of things, concepts, changes and any kind of phenomena, all of which constitute a study within an essential context?

In my opinion, the metaphysically loaded concept of Aristotle's essence, and its unalterable characteristic, as it is philosophically established in the history of ideas in the so-called West-European civilization and culture, should be interpreted and understood in a modified alterable way, so that it can also be used by empiricists, positivists and progressive spirits for explaining and understanding reality, while searching for the fundamental qualities of any kind of phenomena, and entities in general. Some briefly given characteristic examples from the field of socio-economic, environmental and natural science, that follow, will prove the necessity of this statement.

Characteristic Examples for an Essential Research

Consider we participate in a political and socio-economic discussion on the emigration and refugees fluxes to Europe, that is already happening and could enormously escalate any time in the near future. How productive, and close to reality is to discuss this issue exclusively focusing on technocratic, so to say, considerations and solutions, like distribution algorithms for each country that can accommodate emigrants or refugees, finding funds, or properly organizing Non-Governmental Organizations, without seriously focusing on the essence of the problem, its fundamental features and causes? The essence of this phenomenon should be searched and found in its first causes and basic features, i.e. wars, poverty and famine, or even climate change and global warming (in the case of future climate emigration), and all the ensuing socioeconomic problems and distresses. It is towards these essential issues that all our efforts should be directed.

Let's, furthermore, see the current environmental crisis the whole planet is facing. Which are the essential, the very first causes of this disastrous phenomenon? The problematic and dangerous situation that mankind faces today, regarding environmental issues like greenhouse gases, temperature rise of the planet, climate change and crude environmental destruction didn't appear suddenly. All these are the result of the global prevalence of economy and economism over

politics, of the most superficial, anti-essential, positivistic, pragmatic, bureaucratic, technocratic, laissez-faire, competitive, exclusively profit-based (at any cost) and finally anti-democratic attitudes and practices, at the expense of a prudential and essential approach of social progress, technoscientific development and flourishing of human and non-human beings on this planet [10].

With regard to this issue, a crucial question is whether superficial, transitory measures, like pollutants stock market, raising of gas taxes, or waste-treatment technologies – like the design and use of filters, pollution control engineering, etc., alone, can drastically help to face the environmental crisis before it is too late. Another question of vital importance is whether a society, that excludes essentialism and the inquiry of the basic principles and substantial causes of all its acts and consequent events and results, is capable of understanding the situation in order to proceed to essential, permanent measures that could radically face the problem.

A third question, perhaps the most significant of all three, is whether the present global sociopolitical and economic system of neoliberal capitalism can do otherwise, unless radical socio-political and economic changes, in theory and practice, occur; changes that – according to the liberal political and economic philosophy of Adam Smith (1723-1790) and his virtue ethics – should be focused on essential and socio-economically just democracy, on “moral sentiments”, embodied in economics, socio-political theory and practice, as well as in common good [11]. After all, Adam Smith, the famous founder of free market economy and economic liberalism, was a professor of ethics who considered capitalism much more democratic, socially sensitive and just than it is today, and professed that economy should be interwoven with ethics, something that contemporary capitalism seems to catastrophically forget or ignore. So, the answers to our three previous questions respectively are: No, they cannot; it cannot and it will not, unless we achieve a drastic change in our world-view that would essentially help us face the environmental crisis and cure the disease and its causes rather than its symptoms.

An additional example, showing the significance of the concept of essence in explaining and understanding reality, is from the field of natural sciences. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, a vivid and very significant scientific and epistemological debate was still going on, between distinguished academics and researchers, about the notion of atoms, molecules and the kinetic theory of gases. A movement, mainly expressed by the physical chemist and philosopher Wilhelm Ostwald (1853-1932) and the physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1838-1916), was strongly opposed to their existence, which, on the other hand, was mainly supported by the physicist and philosopher Ludwig Boltzmann (1844-1906) and his atomic theory [12]. Denying the existence of atoms and molecules, we cannot explain and understand the phenomenon of heat, unless we accept the nature that is the essence of heat as an energy form caused by the random atomic and molecular motion. This knowledge of the essence of heat, its real nature, was crucial, at that time, for the development of Thermodynamics.

Conclusion

The necessity of the concept of essence, for explaining and understanding reality – based on original literature texts and a reference to its disdained presence in the history of modern and post-modern western philosophy – is proven in this paper.

For This Purpose Three Cases Are Briefly Discussed, As Characteristic Examples:

- a) The political and socio-economic problem concerning the current emigration and refugees fluxes to Europe, that is already taking place, and could enormously escalate any time in the future.
- b) The planet's environmental crisis, and
- c) The scientific and epistemological problem, based on the history of science, the debate on the existence of atoms and molecules, and the nature of heat.

All three cases, arising from different disciplines – that is politics, sociology and global economy, ecology and physical chemistry – characteristically and undoubtedly prove the epistemological necessity of the concept of essence, for explain and understanding reality.

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