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Essentialist Anti-Essentialism, with considerations from other sides of modernity

Résumé

Cet article est une critique du postulat selon lequel de l'essence découlerait nécessairement l'essentialisme, conformément à une conception de la métaphysique où les choses n'entrent pas en relation avec la réalité. Fort d'une métaphysique relationnelle et d'une phénoménologie libérée de l'ontologie, l'auteur démontre que les sciences humaines peuvent s'enrichir d'une essence sans essentialisme. Entre autres choses, cette forme d'essence permettrait de comprendre ce qui les conduit à considérer certaines communautés humaines comme des problèmes intrinsèques.

Mots-clés

Essentialisme – anti-essentialisme – discipline – modernité – poststructuralisme

Abstract

This article offers a critique of the notion that essence must entail essentialism. The author argues that this presumption depends on an appeal to a metaphysics in which things stand outside of relations with the rest of reality. Offering a relational metaphysics and a phenomenological model of ontological suspension, the author argues that a form of essence without essentialism could be deployed in the human sciences to analyze, among other things, tendencies to treat certain human communities as problems in themselves.

Keywords

Essentialism – anti-essentialism – disciplines – modernity – poststructuralism

Référence électronique

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Essentialist Anti-Essentialism, with Considerations from Other Sides of Modernity

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The impact of poststructuralism¹ in recent work in the human sciences has been such that the term *essentialism* has the status of an elliptical *reductio ad absurdum*: its identification entails the assertion of a position incompatible with the enterprise at hand. As leading to the classic law of non-contradiction, the formulation of “not both *p* and *not-p*,” the presupposition of anti-essentialism means essentialism, without context or clarification, must be rejected. As an *ism*, it also falls prey to the accusations of reductionism. In effect, to essentialize in ways that manifest the fall into an *ism* means that something is excluded by the limitation of one thing to another. In some cases, however, the claim is not so much that one thing could only be understood in terms of another but that some thing could only be what it is in spite of efforts to relate it to another. This kind of essentialism, where a thing could only be what it is, raises a plethora of metaphysical and epistemological questions. Metaphysically, there is a problem raised by trying to *understand* it, for as the epistemological consideration is produced, there is the matter of how such an effort could be possible without either differentiation of a thing from itself or, worse, an imposition onto the thing itself. The search for this reflexive being, the thing *in itself*, is full of paradox, for even the assertion of it in such a movement begins with its displacement, of something other than the thing with which to determine it.

¹ I will be using this term in a broad sense throughout this article. Although emerging as a counter-hegemonic position, poststructuralism has become ironically hegemonic, at least in the discourse on essence, to the point of its being difficult to imagine postcolonial thought, recent critical theory, and even varieties of contemporary North American social and political theory without generally poststructural approaches to its treatment. For a critique of the presumption of postcolonial theory as a form of poststructuralism, see, e.g., Pal Ahluwalia, *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001). Although postcolonialism is not identical with poststructuralism, since, e.g., some forms are Marxist in orientation, the language of their critique, at least with regard to essence, even with the Marxist-oriented practitioners, is peculiarly poststructural, as Peter Hallward shows in *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002); cf. also Lewis R. Gordon, “Esquisse d’une critique monstrueuse de la raison postcoloniale,” *Tumultes*, numéro 37 (October 2011), p. 165–183. For critical discussions across these terrains, see, e.g., Joseph M. Schwartz, *The Future Of Democratic Equality: Rebuilding Social Solidarity in a Fragmented America* (New York: Routledge, 2008). As I am more concerned here with the human sciences as broadly conceived, see also, e.g., Pauline Roseneau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, Intrusions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Subsequent notes in this article will reveal a body of literature engaging these themes across much of the human sciences.

These problems emerge, however, through an ambiguity in the notion of a thing-in-itself. Is it an effort to establish what a thing is outside of the relation established by our efforts to grasp it? If so, the problem becomes the contradictory relational effort to be non-relational.

This brings us to the problem of substance-based metaphysics versus *relational* metaphysics. The former, emerging from the thought of Plato and Aristotle, involves the search for the “really real,” that which, supposedly, is what it is independent of everything else. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argued this was substance, whose form was its essence, the necessary inner reality of a thing. This view has dominated much of the history of western views of reality. To study a thing involved unveiling that which lurks within and makes it what it is. A dualism between inside and outside emerged, wherein the outside suffered demoted status with respect to reality. In addition to the question of what emerges when the outside becomes an object of investigation—What, in other words, is *its* essence?—Wouldn’t that which in its essence be the absence of essence be a contradiction of terms?—there is the added complication of the scope or kinds of reality to which the inner-essence model applied. For example, what would be the inner essence of social reality? Would not any human being asking such a question already be doing so from the *inside*? If so, there is the additional problem of an ever-changing essence where, as W.E.B. Du Bois has shown in “Sociology Hesitant,” meaning, purpose, and choice affect the expectations of permanence or timelessness from the line of ancient thought to which Plato and Aristotle belonged.² As classicists would attest, this line emerges from the effort to overcome the ancient problem of permanence and flux as bases of reality. The two classic stands of Parmenides (permanence) and Heraclitus (flux) are given new challenges as epistemology emerged as the fundamental starting point. Overcoming human subjectivity in the search for objectivity brought the flux inward with the presupposition of permanence, or at least a greater capacity for permanence, belonging to the purview of the external world.

The problems of substance-based metaphysics received powerful criticisms in Ernst Cassirer’s prescient *Substance and Function*, a work which brought to the fore metaphysical implications of Kant’s famous Copernican turn of shifting questions of what there is to the conditions for the possibility of knowing anything at all.³ This shift brought the *relation* of the inner to the outer to the fore through the question of their meaning and conceptualization. As meaning always involves something pointing beyond itself either to rules of meaning or a thing to which it refers, the notion of an inner essence independent of everything becomes, ironically, unsustainable. Essence had to be sought elsewhere, in functions, in rules, in what is *added* to things to make them meaningful and coherent. Cassirer eventually took the path of form, sign, and

² W.E.B. Du Bois, “Sociology Hesitant.” *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000), p. 37–44

³ Cassirer’s critique, see *Substance and Function and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity*, trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1923).

symbol to articulate these relations, which he later realized were structures revealing his affinity to structuralism.⁴

The appeal to essence, and, indeed, related conceptual tools such as *eidos*, totality, type, or quotient, needn't collapse into the foreclosed ascription of *essentialism*. As essentialism is an ontological claim, a claim about the being of a thing, a different conclusion would emerge where such a claim has been put to the side, parenthesized, or suspended. The phenomenological tradition, an approach that has been accused of essentialist thinking, is such an approach. Its initiating step is to put to the side assertions of being, what practitioners call "the natural attitude," and reflect, sometimes meditate, inward on the phenomenal features of what remains, in an ever-critical and multilayered process of evaluation. "Essence," from this perspective, offers no appeal to an isolated substance; it appeals, instead, to a relationship in which meaning is made manifest. This relational consideration, often not taken into account by critics of phenomenology, is crucial also to another aspect of its practice, namely, the appeal to consciousness, a notion rejected by some critics as subjectivist and by others as essentialism through the backdoor of psychologism. In terms of the latter, a philosophy of consciousness is entrapped in the mire of anthropology or, worse, anthropocentrism.⁵

A difficult consideration to explain, however, is the distinction between psychological consciousness and its phenomenological counterpart, which, at the end of the day, is not properly such at all. In *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and *Cartesian Meditations*, Edmund Husserl offered a transcendental phenomenological critique of all imaginable processes of justification and self-evaluation, including phenomenology.⁶ The thought experiment he asked us all to consider is what would we be left with if we made all forms of reasoning, including conditions for such, subject to critique, which, here, means non-presumed legitimacy? We are left with, he concluded, simply our relationship to any subject matter or object of thought. *That relationship*, he argued, reveals a *form*, and that is of directionality or intentionality, which he calls transcendental consciousness or the transcendental ego. If we don't find his argument convincing, Husserl simply asks us to try to *demonstrate* otherwise? The radicality of his proposal places him in the company of many other radical thinkers (with many of whom he lacked political affinity), such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon.⁷

⁴ See Peter Caws, *Structuralism: Art of the Intelligible* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1988).

⁵ See, of course, Martin Heidegger's critique of thought in this regard in "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial Classics, 2008), p. 213-266.

⁶ Husserl, *Cartesian Mediations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960); and Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

⁷ For discussion and elaboration, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Du Bois articulated the problem of studying “problem people” and the challenges that posed to social thought at the end of the 19th century.⁸ People become problems in the eyes of a researcher where the latter fails to make the distinction between a theory that addresses the problems a people face and the challenges that pose for her or his method (and methodology).⁹ The tendency of many social researchers is to seek presumed methodological integrity by blaming the people for their failure to fit neatly into its dictates. Why not, Du Bois asked, interrogate the method and the discipline? Instead of asking what’s wrong with the people, explore what’s wrong with one’s method. A half-century later, Fanon radicalized this question by identifying epistemic colonization at methodological levels. If colonization was both a means and an end, why should we presume that its methods were immune from its practice?¹⁰ Fanon’s approach, similar to Husserl’s, was not to assume or presume his method but press on with the paradox of the method of no presumed method. The radicality of this approach led to a rejection of disciplinary boundaries of self-contained methods over the human subject. For Fanon, as for Du Bois, the human being exceeds methodological subjugation but could nevertheless be studied through processes of methodological *illumination*. The task, in other words, is to enable more of the human beings in question to appear.

This approach required what Paget Henry, in his reading of Du Bois, calls *potentiated double consciousness*.¹¹ Unpotentiated double consciousness simply involves seeing groups from a colonized perspective. From such a project, people of African descent are only *black, negroes, niggers, savages*. Realization of the conditions that make such views possible, that there are contradictions in a system that produces people under such categories, leads to a critique of its conditions in which the system’s legitimacy is called into question. The result is a subversion of universality and particularity. That the avowed universal is only part of a story—that the people designated under such categories actually transcend them with their humanity—makes it particular and relativizes it. The argument, however, goes further. That dominant category had presumed universality leads to the false thesis of its intrinsically legitimate status, which eliminates other perspectives from which it

⁸ See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Study of Negro Problems,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (January 1898), p. 1–23, reprinted in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 56 (March 2000): 13–27, and *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903). See also Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4: “What Does It Mean to be a Problem?”

⁹ See Jane Anna Gordon, “Challenges Posed to Social-Scientific Method by the Study of Race.” In Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (eds.), *A Companion to African-American Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), p. 279–304. Cf. Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰ See Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), and for discussion, Lewis R. Gordon, “Fanon on Decolonizing Knowledge.” In *Fanon and the Decolonization of Philosophy*, edited by Elizabeth A. Hope and Tracey Nicholls, with a foreword by Mireille Fanon-Mendès-France (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 3–18.

¹¹ Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications,” *The C. L. R. James Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005), p. 79–112.

could be judged, interpreted, and understood—in short, it is treated as a substance without need of relation. The presumed particular, however, draws its meaning from its relations. To study *black, negro, niggers, and savages* requires interrogating the conditions of their emergence. That they are linked to constructions of people of African descent means asking about the conditions through and by which Africa could have been interpreted in those ways. And as this process continues, one encounters the fundamental *relational* way by which these avowed particulars are studied, to the point of realizing their greater scope of incorporation by virtue of their always having to be understood with other terms. In effect, this makes the avowed particular *broader* than the claimed universal. An error, however, would be the presumption that this fecundity of scope entails being the real universal. As an interrogation of the practices by which universality and particularity were constituted, the proper response is that one is a false appeal to substance and the other is an encomium for universalizing practice. Such an activity is not identical with universality but it *is an expanding commitment*. This effort of increased interrelationships is, in effect, what is called for in a decolonizing epistemic practice.¹²

Now, while poststructuralism has affinities with structuralism, which is a *relational* approach to the study of meaning and human phenomena, it parts company through a series of disavowals, most key of which are its rejections of essence, universality, and totalities. Peter Caws has shown, however, that many structuralists share these views, which calls the *post* in poststructuralism into question.¹³ A critique of these points of difference also emerges at the epistemic level on the extent to which such disavowal could avoid the significance of a *priori* disavowal. In other words, for certain modes of reasoning to be ruled out *in toto* requires there being no condition of its permissibility, which, paradoxically, would be a total assertion against total assertions. This problem of metadiscursive rejection, of falling apart at radical levels of self-evaluation, requires a different approach, if but for minimal expectations of consistency. (I say “minimal” since maximal would face the same problem of collapsing into a law of thought.) The conundrum of “essentialist anti-essentialism” raises considerations on how to assess such modes of metacritique.

¹² Others and I have developed this line of argument in a variety of contexts. See Lewis R. Gordon, “Theory in Black: Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010), p. 193–214; *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); *Disciplinary Decadence*; and *Existencia Africana*; Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and, relatedly, Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA : University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: Social Science and the Global Dynamics of Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007); and Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011).

¹³ See Peter Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ : Humanities International Press, 1988).

What, in other words, are we *doing* when we engage in such practices of asserted non-relationality?¹⁴

To some extent, we commit the error of seeking forms of purity in a commitment that is patently impure. We are here on biblical terrain: the search for godlike attributes for the world in which we theorize, one that is, in the end, irremediably human.

Efforts to expurgate the human being from human phenomena, from human relations, have what I call a *theodicean grammar*.¹⁵ Theodicy is the form of justificatory practice in which a god or deity's integrity is maintained through articulating the externality of infelicities over which such a being is presumed to have control. The classic response is either to erase the contradictions—evil only *appears* as such but is *in fact* absent—or place them on another source; free will, e.g., requires human responsibility. Problem people, however, return in this formulation. In making the contradictions external, the god, internally, becomes complete, becomes substance, and is offered as nonrelational.

Another name for this phenomenon is *mauvaise-foi*, bad faith.¹⁶ It is such because it in effect is an effort to perform a variety of contradictions the consequence of which requires lying to ourselves, making ourselves believe what we don't believe, using our freedom to deny it, asserting the very human effort at human evasion. Here, the insights against essentialism come to the fore, in which investments against freedom and humanity require advancing closed (and foreclosed) schema. *Mauvaise-foi*, however, goes not only in the direction of rejecting essentialism but also against denying the varieties of identifiable ways in which phenomena, including human ones, are manifested in the world. Thus, to deny the many ways in which we are seen, those in which we are engaged, many of which are evidenced by communication and speech, is also a form of *mauvaise-foi*. At the heart of this critique is the identification

¹⁴ "Essentialist anti-essentialism" is a term used by Nikolas Kompridis along similar concerns to those in this article, although his main concern is with problems of cultural relativism. See his, "Normativizing Hybridity/Neutralizing Culture," *Political Theory* 33, no. 3 (2005), p. 318–343 and "The Unsettled and Unsettling Claims of Culture: A Reply to Seyla Benhabib," *Political Theory* 34, no. 3, p. 389–396; and for discussion, Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, chap. 5. Concerns of this kind are also discussed in Africana philosophies of culture. See especially Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), Michelle Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, & Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), and Drucilla Cornell and Kenneth Panfilio *Symbolic Forms for a New Humanity: Cultural and Racial Reconfigurations of Critical Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). Cf. also Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) and *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*.

¹⁵ See Lewis R. Gordon, "Theory in Black" and "L'existence noire dans la philosophie de la culture," *Diogenes* n° 235-236 (juillet 2011), p. 133–147.

¹⁶ I am thinking here, of course, of Jean-Paul Sartre's classic usage in *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943). For elaboration of my interpretation of this concept, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1995), *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, and *Existential Africana*.

of both essentialism and certain forms of anti-essentialism as instances of the same phenomenon. There is, as we have already seen, a form of anti-essentialist essentialism.

Mauvaise-foi also takes the form of an attack on evidence and sociality. An aspect of evidence is what could be called *evidentiality*. This involves the fundamental relationality of evidence; as with the problem of substance-based metaphysics, anti-evidence involves ignoring conditions by which a phenomenon could appear or “be” in the first place. Evidence is the appearance not only of phenomena but also the inferential or, in phenomenological language, the *appresentation* of missing phenomena. Evidence, in other words, brings to consciousness what *must be*, which requires connecting a series of missing phenomena, in effect, an ordering, or, in old-style philosophical language, *logging*, *logos*, which also points, inevitably, to a point of reference beyond the self. Evidence, thus, requires intersubjectivity, a world of others, even with regard to the self—that is, the self taking on the perspective of another and also acknowledging its capacity to be another—and is therefore symbiotically linked to concerns of social reality. Sacrifice of evidence holds within it, then, an attack on the social world.¹⁷

The relationship between *mauvaise-foi* and the rejection of social reality could be understood thus. Suppose I were to reject a world of others. To do so would require making me the only one in the world. But if that were so, I would not be able to posit myself as singular since that concept requires being able to distinguish myself from others, the second category of which has already been ruled out of the equation. The performative contradiction emerges on what I would require to inaugurate the intellectual exercise. Now suppose the opposite, that there are only others. To rule myself out of the equation, I must make myself into a thing, a non-subject. The problem is that for me to assert there only being others, I must be there in the first place. In either direction, I must make myself believe what I do not believe. As forms of *mauvaise-foi*, the opposite of each must hold, and in both instances, they point to the social world of the condition of their possibility.

Concerns of *mauvaise-foi* and evidence bring to the fore a vexing problem of reality, a notion toward which anti-essentialists are often ambivalent. On one hand, the concept smacks of sufficient rigidity to be an instance of essentialism. On the other hand, a good reason to be anti-essentialist is that essentialism goes against the grain of reality. This is because, as Jaspers correctly argued, in the end, reality is that which always exceeds us. There are paradoxes in this relationship, for although reality emerges as that which is outside of us, it is also that which is produced through and by us and is also a manifestation of us.

In the modern world, struggles with and against reality often lead to crises of knowledge, many of which emerge from false dilemmas of scope. These crises of knowledge, which lead also to the same for disciplines, often take three routes—appeals to scientific naturalism, then to historicism, and a retreat to the resources of

¹⁷ For elaboration, see “What Does It Mean to be a Problem?” in my *Existentialia Africana*.

language. The story of essence, including its anti-essentialist portraits, unfolds through each of these modes of negotiating reality.

Scientific naturalism, for instance, often asserts the primacy of science. This often leads, however, to problems emerging from a failure to distinguish between reason and rationality. The latter is guided by the logic of consistency and instrumentality. To be consistent, there cannot be, as we have seen, a subsequent point of contradiction. Consistency thus leads, when referring to itself, to the demand for *maximal consistency*. Adopting this model, science, then, at least with regard to its aims over nature, seeks maximal consistency or completeness. Where science moves to the level of meta-science, it then demands the same for its own evaluation and also for that which at first may not be part of nature. To bring such concepts and phenomena under the yoke of nature—a condition for science—requires *naturalizing* them. Here, we encounter, however, the problem of science exceeding its scope. Consider reason. The task of reason includes evaluating rationality and science—indeed, evaluating everything. Because of this, reason faces the question of the reasonability of a rational claim. Here we encounter what, for rationality, would be a paradox: *maximal consistency is at times unreasonable*. In the human world, for instance, a maximally consistent person could not only be an unreasonable person but perhaps also an irrational, maybe even insane, one.

The naturalizing impulse, however, refers to an aspiration of science that in effect puts it in conflict with reason. The latter's capacity for contradiction and paradox—its incompleteness, which, for dialecticians would simply mean its capacity to move through its negations—makes it seemingly unstable for science, what Jaspers calls “mystification of the understanding” and Lévi-Strauss “mythopoetic.”¹⁸ To make reason behave, so to speak, scientific rationality, at least as it has played itself out in much of modern thought, has attempted (and to some extent still attempts) the colonization of reason. One could imagine how these concerns are exacerbated in a human science such as sociology, as we saw with Du Bois's critique. As he argued in “Sociology Hesitant,” sociology is “...the Science that seeks the limits of Chance in human conduct.”¹⁹ The scientific demands of sociology is always in tension with the reality of the basis of its subject, the human being, whose aggregates, institutions, intersubjective meanings lead to challenges of articulating an order or form over that which is incomplete: the human world, in formal terms, is simply not a well-formed formula. Its structure, which is paradoxical because it is an informal structure, could be written thus:

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¹⁸ For more, see Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, with a new foreword by Wendy Doniger (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

¹⁹ Du Bois, “Sociology Hesitant,” *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Husserl voiced some of these concerns more than a century ago, although he considered them more in terms of relativism.²⁰ Naturalism refers to the domain of nature as complete, which is the imposition onto nature of what is neither empirical nor naturalistic. It thus faces (1) legitimacy through being relative to one domain of nature and then to another or (2) forcing other possibilities to be under its reign through ignoring the contradiction of their emergence in the first place. In his *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre observed a similar problem in his critique of materialism. As an *idea* about matter, the effort to eliminate that which transcends matter is already contradicted in the offering.²¹

Such an insight is also offered on problems of historicist and linguistic efforts against idealism. They fail, in the end, at the level of their own practice.

The tendency to collapse essence talk into essentialism, which I have talked about in terms of poststructuralism but I should like to stress I do not mean as a phenomenon exclusive to it—nor do I, as well, aim here to make this point a rallying cry against *poststructuralists*—works across these hegemonic considerations in terms of biology and cognitive psychology, often in the form of psychophysiology, in the first, history and culture (often through considerations of anthropology and sociology) in the second, and textuality and semiology in terms of the third. There isn't room for elaboration here.²² Essence in each poses little difficulty where its scope and meaning are without appeal to the teleology of an "inner cause." Where there is, however, admission of the relationship established by engaging them, and where there is understanding of their being part of a larger human nexus of negotiating the human relationship to a reality that always exceeds us (namely, the human relationship to and realization of the non-human), there is room for the kind of humility on which, ultimately the insight and impetus of anti-essentialism is ultimately based. There is, then, an ironically productive way in which essence without essentialism could make its contribution to the perilous task of human study.

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²⁰ See Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, trans. and intro. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 71–147; cf. my discussions in *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* and *Disciplinary Decadence*.

²¹ See Sartre's introduction, *Critique de la raison dialectique, tome1, Théorie des ensembles pratiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

²² See *Disciplinary Decadence* for more discussion.

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