

What An Individual Is

Han Ryner

1919

An individual is a complex, undefinable object. And so only the individual possesses something that can without lying be called existence. As the Cynic philosophers already knew, nothing real, nothing concrete is definable.

The necessities of thought, speech, of science and action force us to act as if the definable exists. Let us consent to this, while all the while smiling at the inevitable.

But we should never forget that no word can give us the essence of a being, not even my own essence, and that no thought, whatever good will and sympathy might animate it, will ever penetrate the essence of another. Our most beautiful, strongest, most penetrating truths glory — modestly — in being but lesser lies.

The more I strive to seize the concrete, the more my formulas become complex and hesitant, then the more I become irritated at not being able to make them flexible and mobile. Whenever I pronounce absolute words I know I am speaking in the abstract and that I am speaking of the void.

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