

Opinion of the opponent on Wai Fung Leung's Master's thesis *Analyzing Aristotle's Concept of Human Nature*

The author has tried to defend Aristotle's conception of human nature against the background of objections to this concept made from post-essentialist and liberal positions by the contemporary Austrian philosopher M. Kronfeldner. The first 26 pages of the thesis are devoted to a fairly detailed analysis of her work *What's Left of Human Nature?* (2018), then proceeds to an interpretation of Aristotle's concept of human nature, and finally attempts to reinterpret the Aristotelian approach in a way that would stand up to Kronfeldner's main objections (the Darwinian, Developmentalist, and Dehumanization challenge). The main strategy of the author's argument is the so-called Teleological Essentialism used by philosophers of biology such as Walsh and Devitt.

Before I start to evaluate the thesis in terms of form and content, I would like to express some embarrassment about its motivation. The attempt to defend Aristotle's conception of human nature usually takes place in two contexts: (1) a conservative, often theologically based assessment of human society, (2) Aristotle as the first scientist-biologist. It does not seem to me that the first motivation is important to the author; the second motivation shines through in the attempt to reconcile Aristotle's biology with evolutionism (read Darwinism). The main goal, however, seems to be to reinterpret Aristotle's approach to human nature so that it can stand up in the light of both scientific and social developments in the West, including those of the last two centuries. I am afraid that such an endeavour is doomed to a conceptual acrobatics typical of medieval scholasticism. The shadows of self-serving argumentation could only be avoided if the author had more accurately defined the context and stated the specific issues in which Aristotelian concepts are stronger/more appropriate (or ethically more advanced) than their post-essentialist and liberal alternatives.

The formal aspect of the thesis is sufficient for the requirements set for the Master's degree. The author sticks to and continuously explains the logical structure of the thesis, pinpoints the important interpretative moments, and properly distinguishes between his own thoughts and those of other authors. The style of footnote references is transparent (even if idiosyncratic), with the exception of p. 61 (reference directly in the text). However, the form of the bibliography is very inappropriate, as the author unnecessarily divides references by subject area and put sources that can be used for further study in the section called "Secondary/Supplementary Literature".

I consider the biggest problem of the thesis to be its language. The style is generally very difficult to read: it consists of grammatically incoherent long sentences (examples among many: p. 34, 1st par., p. 35, 2nd par.). The work literally cries out for linguistic correction, but one wonders how proofreading would cope with places that are unclear even in terms of content (p. 60, last sentence - what do Selective Breeding and Artificial Intelligence have to say about Human Nature?).

As for the content, given the above, I see it mainly as a neo-scholastic exercise in argumentation. In my opinion, the author mostly succeeds in grasping Aristotle's concepts and reinterpreting them in accordance with his own aims, using techniques in the relevant secondary literature. The main conceptual tool is Teleological Essentialism:

"I think Aristotle's Teleological Essentialism does not fall into Krofeldner's concern about traditional Essentialism, as I will show that it resembles some of the evolutionary and genealogical concepts that Kronfeldner agreed on. In my opinion, Aristotle's concept of Essence remains plausible in addressing the challenges." (p. 51)

Here I cannot agree, for Kronfeldner explicitly rejects Teleological Essentialism, as well as any other view of humans that relies solely on intrinsic factors. If the author really wanted to come to terms with her critique, he would have to explain what he means by Teleological Essentialism, or how his approach differs from Walsh or Devitt (cf. Kronfeldner 2018, pp. 174-8).

I agree with the author that Kronfeldner's Dehumanization challenge against Aristotle is lacking historical context. Even though, I think his argument in Sec. 3.6 could be much more straightforward: the Aristotelian conceptual approach to human nature is something different from Aristotle's exclusion of slaves and women from politics.

Defence questions:

1) Why do you think that Aristotle disposed of evolutionary terminologies? Are not phrases like "he does not present a Macro-Micro distinction to explain Change and further about Evolution, though it would be possible if given the possibility, that Aristotle would have agreed on the Evolutionary account" (p. 53) an example of anachronistic thinking (cf. incommensurability)?

2) How should one understand Kronfeldner's "The Double-Entry Solution to the Problem of Moral Standing" based on the following passage? Does this mean that persons refuting humanism are on the verge of not being human?

"The Double Entry solution proposes that we should accept Human Nature in both biological and cultural sense but specifically for one to be a human in the cultural sense, not only that one needs to be biologically connected to their ancestors, but also necessarily connected to humanism and thus social and moral standing, that one can share similarity and interact with other individuals from the same species socially and morally." (p. 25 )

Rating:

The submitted text is sufficient for the requirements of a Master's thesis, I recommend it for defence and grade D.

In Emporio, Santorini, 15.1.2024

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