



Analyzing Aristotle's concept of Human Nature through Maria Kronfeldner's Framework of Human Nature [Master Diploma Thesis]

Advisor Review

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Structure and Content

Since the thesis title is self-explanatory, it is unnecessary to debate its content at length. The author aims to compare the modern, post-essentials views on “human nature,” represented in the thesis by the analytic and conceptual framework worked out by Maria Kronfeldner, with Aristotle’s theoretical views on human beings, which is often described in literature as essentialist.

More specifically, the author aims to demonstrate that Aristotle’s theoretical framework is in fundamental respects compatible with selected post-essentialists views. In his own words: “If the explanation and comparison come out to be plausible it would imply that (1) Aristotle and his thoughts towards Human, Nature and Human Nature should be understood in a way that is not an Essentialist or is a Post-Essentialist according to Kronfeldner's terms and (2) We can understand the concept of Human Nature from a historical perspective that focuses on the progression of thoughts open-mindedly and extract some insights from it,” (p. 2). Or, more sharply, the author wants to defend the claim that: “[...] Aristotle’s concept of Human Nature is still viable in addressing the contemporary challenges and thus offering a more optimistic view about the use of the concept,” (p. 49).

The structure of the thesis logically follows these aims. First, the author introduces Kronfeldner’s framework, with particular emphasis on the three challenges she identifies with respect to any essentialist understanding of human nature: Darwinian, Developmentalist, and Dehumanization challenge (hereafter 3D).



Second, the author then focuses on Aristotle knowing very well that to conduct a just comparison of Aristotele's views and Kronfeldner's requires not only analyzing Aristotele's views on "biology" but also, for instance, on metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Already, this move manifests substantive philosophical awareness of the author inasmuch as he realizes that he cannot properly juxtapose two historically distant conceptual frameworks without making explicit at least some of their theoretical and historical background assumptions. To give just one example, the author realizes that it is instructive for his general purposes to parse the fact that Aristotle does not work with the Darwinian theory of evolution; with the Darwinian "theory of change" in nature (cf., Section 3.2 "Comparison on the concept of Change [and Evolution]," and also Section 5.1 "About Incommensurability").

Finally, the author proceeds with the very comparison which he, in fact, broadly frames as "an Aristotelian Response" to 3D. However, in the end, the author reaches a rather synthetic conclusion:

In the end, I think it is good to make a balance between both views from Aristotle and Kronfeldner, that the concept of Human Nature should remain as what it is, for the existence of such a concept serves as a practical tool to reminds us of both the co-evolution that is happening in our times and the details and core principles of what makes a being, a being, without losing a purpose and that constitutes our Essence: *A human will be a human, having their purpose and flourishing according to the purpose they constructed, both biological inheritance and cultural inheritance will be a determining factor.* (p. 69, emphasis mine)

I address, among other things, the justification of such a conclusion indirectly through my questions for the author's master's diploma thesis defence.

Formal Requirements

The thesis safely meets the minimum requirements for academic writing and formatting. Naturally, the text is imperfect, full of run-on sentences, and the author should have had it proofread before the submission (as I suggested several times). But what matters here the most is the content. In my book, the author systematically uses *philosophically* transparent language and always tries to carefully define all the key terms and theses he works with.



Questions for the Defence

(1) The Swampman example

The author chooses (rightly, in my view) to discuss in greater detail the (in)famous Davidson's thought experiment of "The Swampman" (p. 14, 16, 56–58, and 72). Among other things, because Kronfeldner also uses it as an example to illustrate some of her points. Put simply, she uses it to show that although such a "human" is not in a genealogical relationship with us (thus, one might say that The Swampman is not a human in the biological/evolutionary/species sense), *it is feasible to imagine that The Swampman would interact smoothly and "successfully" within our social worlds*. Thus, The Swampman might be granted the status of a human after all. This shows that humans are unique entities for which origin really matters. Gold would be gold, "even if it had no genealogical relationship to any instance of gold on Earth," (Kronfeldner 2018: 44). So, it consequently shows that there is a philosophically interesting relation between the concepts of "human" and "person", as well as "humankind" and "humanity" (cf. *ibid.*: 44, 5ff).

The author could elaborate a little more on the following conclusion:

To briefly conclude, the main point of going into the Swampman example is to note that Kronfeldner's argument is not as consistent as one might have thought upon reading her explanation. On the other hand, Aristotle's concept of Change and further on moral virtue and culture seem to be compatible in dealing with the Darwinian Challenge and providing a more open concept of the term "Human" (Humankind and Humanity in Kronfeldner's terms) and thus "Human Nature". I do think at some point Aristotle, unlike Kronfeldner, put more emphasis on Humanity than Humankind, how a human is recognised as a human is more of a concept derived from cultural interaction than mere biological history. (p. 58)

What exactly is the inconsistency of Kronfeldner's argument? (cf., also p. 57). What do you mean by saying that Aristotle has a more open concept of "human?" How does The Swampman example relate to "The Double Entry" solution Kronfeldner offers? (see Kronfeldner 2018: 218ff; and the author's thesis p. 25ff).



(2) The usefulness of the concept of “human nature”

The author summarises Kronfeldner’s position towards the concept of human *nature* this way:

Kronfeldner thinks that as long as the language about/of "Nature" still exists, dehumanization exists since there will always be misuse of the word, nor can it be eliminated entirely in both scientific and social contexts. Interestingly, Kronfeldner's final thought on the concept of human nature in general, despite solving the Darwinian Challenge and the Developmentalist Challenge, is halted by the Dehumanization Challenge, which she thinks that it is not possible to solve thus one should prevent using the term "Human Nature", specifically in the descriptive sense. (p. 26)

And Aristotle is interpreted in the following manner:

To summarize Aristotle's concept of Human Nature, one can discover that the Aristotelian concept of Nature is something to be/being, while essence is the being of a being. As for the Nature of a "human", he thinks that for one to be considered as a human being, one should have both the body and soul of a human, in other words, the biological structure (Matter as Potentiality) and functioning of a human (Soul as Actuality), which can be further extended into the (1) parental relationship which represents the transmission of human body and soul from parent to child, (2) the biological body structured in a way that allows it to function as what it is and (3) that the function of the body also includes the function of thoughts and interaction with other beings and surroundings.

How does Kronfeldner’s insistence on the potential misuse of the concept of human *nature* relate to the synthetic conclusion the author offers in the thesis? (See also page two of this review). Put another way, why should we stick to the phrase human nature? Could we not say that a better term is, e.g., the human *condition*? Or to simply refer to human *history*? Especially since Aristotle also emphasises the “cultural” dimensions of human *being*. How about speaking of “second nature” as some Aristotelian scholars do (e.g., John McDowell).

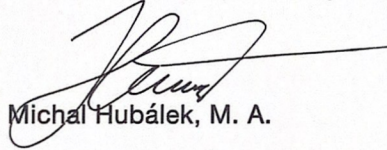


Final Considerations

The thesis clearly displays author's attempts to understand *and creatively work* with two distinct and detailed theoretical and conceptual frameworks. And although I certainly have reservations about some conclusions offered in the thesis, I cannot but appreciate the author's proactive attitude to the writing process itself and his admirable philosophical ardor in the topics discussed. So, depending on the author's defence, i.e., in case he plausibly defends his arguments and answers my and the opponent's questions,

*I recommend that the grade **A**, or **B** is awarded to the author on the basis of this master's diploma thesis submission.*

In Santa Cruz (CA), January 16, 2024



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Cited Literature

Kronfeldner, M. 2018. *What's Left of Human Nature?: A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist, and Interactive Account of a Contested Concept*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.