

The Moral Animal

by Anthony Bonnemaison

Aristotle's ethics is, indeed, a form of naturalism. Yet, according to Pierre-Marie Morel, this is a problematic naturalism in which nature retains a degree of opacity and proves irreducible to any biological determinism.

About: Pierre-Marie Morel, *La nature et le bien. L'éthique d'Aristote et la question naturaliste*, Louvain-La-Neuve, Peeters, 2021, collection « Aristote. Traductions et études », 288 p., 79 €.

What place does Aristotle assign to nature in his practical philosophy? As a corollary, to what extent do ethics and politics fall under naturalistic considerations in the eyes of the Stagirite? To begin, there is here a tension, an “anomaly” (p. 1) that puzzles readers of Aristotle. On the one hand, the reference to nature (*phusis* / φύσις) is recurrent in the practical corpus, including in such celebrated passages as the first book of the *Politics*, where man is said to be “by nature” a political animal. Yet, on the other hand, it is well known that the practical sphere constitutes for Aristotle a specific, properly human domain, one that seemingly escapes, at least in part, natural determinations.

In *La nature et le bien* (Nature and the good), Pierre-Marie Morel attempts to better frame the question of naturalism by bringing these two poles together, and by carefully and patiently exploring this tension in the texts themselves rather than seeking to reduce it from the outset. Indeed, many commentators have chosen to resolve the difficulty in one direction or the other, either by making ethics dependent on foundational norms that are external to it—whether these norms be metaphysical or physical—or, on the contrary, by rejecting the very idea that Aristotle embraced

ethical naturalism. For Morel, it is rather the very meaning of Aristotle's ethical naturalism that must be questioned. Such an interrogation reveals a form of naturalism that is not essentialist or narrowly scientific, but properly practical and problematic, a naturalism that permeates all aspects of practical philosophy yet without reducing the exceptionality of human action.

Throughout the twelve chapters that make up the book, Morel, one of the world's leading specialists in Aristotelian philosophy and ancient atomism,¹ provides a subtle analysis of the "multiple ways" in which nature "penetrates the ethical and political sphere" (p. 253). The question was already partially addressed in some of his earlier works, in particular in a 2007 book² that presented a general theory of action applicable to both the simplest activities and the most complex processes like human action. In this new book, Morel highlights the limits of this integrative process, while also showing that the sphere of human action remains irreducible even as it is traversed by the question of nature.

How to Read Aristotle?

The question of how to read Aristotle may seem trivial at best, specious at worst. The book nevertheless invites us to take this question seriously, which is not the least of its virtues. Indeed, on several occasions, Morel highlights the tendency on the part of certain commentators to resolve theoretical difficulties by distancing themselves from the texts and what they are willing to tell us, with the consequent risk of reading Aristotle as if he stood, so to speak, outside the text. This pitfall is obvious when concepts such as "second nature" (the product of habit) or "human nature" are presented as having been formulated or clearly defined by Aristotle himself—despite being at most reconstructions from often difficult texts—but also when certain statements evoking nature are detached from their context and taken to be Aristotle's own position.

In order to avoid these pitfalls, Morel develops a method for reading Aristotle, which is based on two principles: first, a systematic survey and examination of the

¹ In this regard, it should be noted that Morel also published a book on ancient atomism in 2021: *Le plaisir et la nécessité. Philosophie naturelle et anthropologie chez Démocrite et Épicure*, Paris, Vrin, 2021.

² P.-M. Morel, *De la matière à l'action. Aristote et le problème du vivant*, Paris, Vrin, 2007.

occurrences, in the practical corpus (*Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *Politics*), of terms belonging to the lexical field of nature; second, a close study of the contexts and argumentative modalities specific to the examined passages. These precepts certainly seem common sense and could be embraced by any commentator on Aristotle. Morel, however, applies them in a way that makes him stand out in the field of Aristotelian studies. Indeed, the emphasis on the “semantic instability” (p. 23) of the concept of nature from one text to the next, as well as on the dialectical character of many references to nature in the treatises on practical philosophy, serves as the foundation for his thesis that these references have a “problematic connotation” far more than they act as “indisputable principles” (p. 6). Thus, the literal and contextual approach most often leads to deflationary or minimalist interpretations of the references to nature, insofar as these are not intended to produce truly scientific demonstrations but are part of composite arguments that partly repeat accepted ideas or else operate as analogies, transversal concepts, or simple facts derived from natural inquiry.

From the Study of Nature to the Study of Human Action: The Embedded Knowledge of Practical Philosophy

With this established, Morel sets out to determine with greater precision the extent to which the knowledge and application of practical philosophy require knowledge from outside. By virtue of the principle of the incommensurability of scientific genres, there should be no possible passage for Aristotle between ethics and physics (understood in a broad sense to include natural philosophy). Yet, on numerous occasions, the “Master of those who know,” as Dante called him, seems to directly contravene this precept in his ethico-political texts, in particular when he emphasizes the physiological basis of certain phenomena with which ethics is concerned (for instance, voluntary actions, intemperance, emotional processes) or the similarities between certain human faculties and traits and those of other animals.

The contradiction is resolved, however, as soon as the precise epistemological role of these references to natural philosophy is elucidated. Indeed, Aristotle’s natural philosophy takes the form of “instrumental and simplified knowledge,” also described by Morel as “embedded” knowledge (p. 62), which corroborates and delimits the ethical theorist’s inquiry yet without founding it. Thus, the sphere of human action remains irreducible, as evidenced by the discontinuity between what is properly

human and the rest of the animal kingdom (despite the analogies established by Aristotle), such that this “embedded” use of physiological knowledge is not equivalent to an application of physical explanations to the practical sphere, which has its own explanatory regime.

The Natural Element of the Good Life

This epistemological solution does not, however, solve all difficulties. The sovereign good, which identifies itself to happiness, is equated by Aristotle both with a certain end pursued by all men and with man’s proper function. These two famous statements from the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* seem to call for a strongly naturalistic and even essentialist interpretation of ethics, insofar as they appear to ground ethics in the essence (nature) of man. Yet, Morel reminds us that despite their undeniable naturalistic dimension, these statements are proposed as preliminary remarks meant to be later clarified—in particular, they do not allow us to choose between Aristotle’s two models for a fulfilling life, the model of political life and that of life dedicated to knowledge. One should therefore not infer too much naturalism from them, especially since the properly human end (the good life) is irreducible to the animal end (living), such that its determination goes far beyond biological investigation. The same applies to virtue, pleasure, and friendship, which are all manifestations of the good life in the virtuous agent: They cannot be equated with strictly natural processes, either because ethical virtues do not arise in us spontaneously but under the effect of habit, or because the pleasures that accompany virtuous acts are appropriate to certain properly human actions, or even because friendship towards others cannot be directly derived from our spontaneous tendency towards self-love and self-preservation.

A natural element thus clearly intervenes in the good life, but it does so in the modality of power, which is to say as a potentiality that remains partly indeterminate and plastic and that requires properly human mediations (education, exercise, deliberation, the ordering of the city) in order to unfold. If Aristotle’s naturalism is “thwarted” or “inchoative” (p. 185), in the sense that it allows to determine the potential and ends of man without being able to prescribe the means to fulfill them, then the whole task of ethics and politics is to elucidate and implement these mediations which simultaneously fulfill and overcome nature. In this respect, the

reference to nature does have a normative dimension, but it is “a problem to be solved” (p. 24) rather than a series of *a priori* defined norms.

As this investigation makes clear, Aristotle’s practical philosophy is resistant to antinomies and clear-cut dualisms. The irreducibility of Aristotelian philosophy to the great philosophical dualisms has been highlighted before. What is novel, however, is the way in which Morel links the overcoming of these dualisms to his analysis of Aristotle’s naturalism. Using the cases of justice and money, he highlights how Aristotle mobilizes the traditional distinction between nature and convention to transform it into a “constitutive duality” (p. 198) characteristic of human existence in society. He also shows that the indeterminate and multifaceted character of the reference to nature makes it possible to transcend the antithesis between freedom and determinism: Individual action is partially determined by various forms of natural processes, yet without it being possible to identify “a specific biological program that would exhaust human possibilities” (p. 240). Finally, he notes that the Aristotelian analysis of prudence, which allows to overcome the opposition between utilitarian and deontological approaches to moral action, also raises the question of nature: As a political man placed at the head of a city-state, the prudent man must possess real practical and objective knowledge, including a minimal understanding of nature, and in particular of human nature.

A Discreet Plea in the Field of Contemporary Ethics

While primarily a fine, meticulous study of Aristotelian philosophy, this book can also be read as a discreet plea for a nuanced, problematic approach to the question of nature, and in particular to its articulation with morality. If nature is “both necessary and insufficient to the good life” (p. 253), situated in the realm of possibilities rather than immutable norms, and conducive to questions rather than solutions, then it can still find its place, along with Aristotle, in contemporary debates.

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