

Body, Soul and Social Practice: A Contemporary Version of Aristotelian Hylomorphism

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In this paper, I will sketch a version of the Aristotelian, “hylomorphic” conception of human nature without using any of the usual technical vocabulary of historic Aristotelians -- in particular, I’m going to try to avoid using the words ‘form’ and ‘matter’, both of which have highly misleading connotations in contemporary metaphysics and modern physics.

1. A neo-Aristotelian is a kind of property dualist, or more properly property pluralist. There are paradigmatically physical properties, like mass and charge, paradigmatically biological properties like being alive, perceiving, desiring, and various motor behaviors, and paradigmatically intellectual properties like understanding, thinking, willing, and reasoning.

2, I am assuming what David Armstrong¹ has called a sparse or austere theory of properties. In some cases, an open sentence or a concept corresponds to no property at all, and a single property may be designated by any of an infinite class of open sentences or concepts.

When a particular has a property, there is a particular instantiation of that property (called a ‘trope’, ‘individual accident’ or ‘moment’), which is either the individual nature of that thing (like Socrates’ humanity) or a superadded particular property that somehow inheres in the thing (like Socrates’ paleness). Tropes of the second sort (the ‘accidents’) are ontologically dependent on the former. You never find accidental tropes that aren’t inhering in something with a distinct nature. The nature determines what sorts of accidental tropes may or must inhere in the thing itself.

3. The world consists of both simple and composite things. Among the simple things are God and the elementary particles or homogeneous masses of stuff or fields of force. Some of the actually simple things may be potentially divisible. Whether or not that is true is a matter for scientific discovery.

Among the composite things in the world are living organisms, and among the organisms are people. A human being is just an animal organism of a certain kind. Whether there are any composite things separate from organisms is an open question, I would guess that there are relatively few: stars or planets might qualify. I will assume that many organisms have composite parts (which we can call ‘organs’).

4. Organisms and organs have two kinds of properties: compositional and non-compositional. A compositional property is a property of the form: y has parts x_1, \dots, x_n of

kinds F_1, \dots, F_n , and standing in relations $R_1\vec{x}, \dots, R_m\vec{x}$. A property is physical-compositional if the F 's and R 's are all physical properties.

A non-compositional property of an organic thing (organ or organism) is *emergent* in the following sense: the instantiation of the emergent property does not in any sense consist in the instantiation of any class of mereological properties. There is always an emergent trope, over and above the tropes and mereological relations that ground the organic thing's mereological properties.

5. Emergence in this sense is compatible with 'supervenience'. One set of properties (such as the mental or biological properties) supervene on another set (such as the physical) just in case it is impossible for there to be a difference with respect to the first set without a corresponding difference in the second set. "No mental difference without a physical difference" is the slogan corresponding to mind/body supervenience. For my purposes, here is a more precise definition of supervenience (following Jaegwon Kim's definition of 'strong supervenience'):

Class A of descriptions *supervenes on* class B of descriptions over kind K of organic things if and only if:

- necessarily, if k is of kind K and k satisfies the descriptions in set A' , a subset of A, and no other descriptions in A, then
- there is a set B' , a subset of B, such that k satisfies the descriptions in B' and no other description in B, and,
- necessarily, any member of kind K satisfying the descriptions in B' also satisfies the descriptions in A' .

The entire class of biological or intellectual properties of an organism may supervene on the class of physical descriptions true of the fundamental parts of that organism.

6. Ontic Priority.

However, the neo-Aristotelian differs from the physicalist on the question of ontic priority. In many (perhaps not all cases) the supervening property is ontically and explanatorily prior to the satisfaction of the subvening description. There are ontically primitive emergent or supervening tropes.

The individual nature of an organism is ontically prior to the natures of its organs, which in turn are ontically prior to the natures of their atomic parts.

What do I mean by ontic priority?

Entity A is *ontically prior* to entity B just in case B's persistence through time (i.e., the persistence of a thing with B's nature) is to be explained in terms of A's persistence, and not vice versa.

To say that the atomic parts of an organism ‘satisfy’ descriptions in the language of physics is to stretch somewhat the usual meaning of ‘satisfaction’. Strictly speaking, the atomic particles of an organism do not have the same physical natures as do the corresponding particles in the inorganic world. Instead, they have natures qua functional parts of the organism: natures that may perfectly mimic the behavior of the natures of the corresponding ‘free’ particles, given the parameters of the organic body in which they occur. The use of ‘satisfaction’ in the above definition of supervenience (section 5) must be read in this looser way.

7. Is this a kind of substance dualism? Not exactly, but it isn’t a form of materialism, either. For the neo-Aristotelian, there is no mind/body problem, since the body is every bit as dependent on the organism as is the mind. In the case of human beings, in fact, the body is more dependent on the living organism than is the mind. As Aristotle argues in *De Anima* 3, the intellectual activities of the human mind (conceptualization and ratiocination) are not dependent, in principle, on any corporeal organ, in contrast to such nutritive and animate activities as growth and digestion, behavior, sense perception, sensory memory and imagination.

Consequently, for all we know, human being could continue to exist with no parts whatsoever, as a simple entity (like God or an angel). There is no reason why a simple entity, with no spatial location, could not perform basic intellectual activities. If the tropes that constitute certain intellectual activities and habits persist after biological death, the dissolution of the organic body, then we would have good reason to identify the simple, non-spatial substance as the deceased human being.

Wouldn’t such survival of death violate supervenience? Two ‘bodiless’ human beings would have exactly the same physical properties (namely, none), but different intellectual properties. However, there is some reason to think that supervenience would hold for an embodied human being, reason that simply wouldn’t apply to a bodiless human being. (I don’t say that this reason is conclusive: I am not really committed to supervenience or to its denial.) If supervenience failed for embodied human persons, and if intellectual activities have effects on physical activities (like bodily movements), then we would either have the violation of conservation laws for fundamental particles, or else we would have to posit new, heretofore undiscovered fundamental forces and energies (intellectual forces and energies). No such postulation is required for the kind of failure of supervenience for disembodied persons.

8. Neo-Aristotelianism and Functionalism

For Aristotelians, the causal and functional profile of each property-type is essential to it. Consequently, analytic functional “definitions” of mental states do succeed in picking out the corresponding mental types by means of essential features of those properties.

What we tend, in contemporary philosophy of mind, to call “qualia” are simply the mental properties as they appear to one bearing that property. Each mental property-type has both a qualitative aspect and a functional profile, and both are essential to it. Thus,

two humans in pain are, necessarily, appeared to in the same way, and in a state with pain's characteristic causal profile: caused (normally) by tissue damage, and leading (normally) to aversion.

Can non-humans suffer pain? Presumably yes. A property's functional profile needn't express itself in every instance. Each instance of pain has the power to produce an awareness of pain in an organism with the appropriate mental capacities. That power is still present, even when the pain occurs in an organism without such mental capacities.

10. Causal exclusion.

Since Aristotelians are non-reductive realists about causal connection, and since causal-connections hold between trope-like instantiations of natures or accidents, the threat of causal exclusion, as described by Jaegwon Kim,² is a real one.

However, for the Aristotelian, the exclusion is always top-down, not bottom-up. Where an intellectual description (like *forming a volition*) is in competition with a biological description (like *appetite-driven behavior*), or a biological description with a physical one, it is always the higher-level descriptions that wins, since the instantiations of the properties verifying the lower-level descriptions depend upon (are perhaps even parts) the powers of the properties corresponding to the higher-level descriptions.

In some cases, the parts of an organism have autonomous physical accidents (physical properties whose presence is not determined by the higher-level natures or accidents of the organism). In such cases, purely physical causation is possible: as for example, one might trigger a Geiger counter, having ingested a radioactive isotope.

11. Mental representations?

If I'm right about the possibility of disembodied survival, then human thinking cannot consist in the manipulation of physically instantiated symbols or representations. Instead, thought involves emergent properties of organism: emergent accidents, to be precise.

When a person is embodied, these emergent accidents will typically lack any proper part of the organism; instead, they will correspond to some total state of the organism's parts (like the storage of a hologram on film). In contrast, sense perception and motor volitions can always be located within discrete organs (components of the nervous system).

Since the intellectual accidents are not realized by physical, chemical or biological properties, we can take seriously Aristotle's theory that mental reference to properties is simply a matter of identity. For example, if I am thinking of species S, my thought includes an intellectual accident that is itself conspecific with the members of S, although in a different mode from that of the normal, worldly members of S. Real horses and concepts of horses differ only their categorical and ontic status: horses are substances, and concepts of horses are emergent accidents of persons. The two are otherwise indistinguishable. This means that one cannot truly have the concept of a horse until

one's intellectual accident possesses all of the essential powers of real horses, in the mode appropriate for such accidents.

12. Social Practices.

Aristotle famously taught that man is a *zoon politikon*: a 'city-dwelling animal'. Although the social aspect of human nature is acknowledged in the natural law accounts of law and politics, too often its relevance to ethical casuistry is overlooked. Attending to man's social nature is crucial not only for legal and political philosophy, but also for solving difficult moral problems about the actions of individual people.

What somebody does when he acts—what he does *intentionally*, as philosophers say—partially depends upon the nature of the social practices in which he is a participant. Many moral dilemmas about whether or not individual actions are good or bad cannot be solved without understanding those discrete actions as *parts* of ongoing practices, that is, as aspects of soldiering in warfare, healing in medicine, protecting in policing, and so on. Social practices provide principled grounds for drawing moral distinctions between tactical bombing and terror bombing, surgery and mutilation, self-defense and murder and other distinctions that in hard cases can otherwise be made to appear sophistical.

13. The Ontology of Social Practices.

In attending to social nature the metaphysician must avoid both the Scylla of atomistic individualism and the Charybdis of organic collectivism. The attempt to navigate successfully the narrow strait between them has been a recurring theme in Western metaphysics, from the time of Plato to the present. The organic collectivist holds that the most fundamentally real things (the "substances") are complete and sovereign human societies: on this view, typified by Jean Jacques Rousseau for example, individual human beings are merely cells of the social organism, with a nature, an identity and an existence wholly dependent on that of the whole. In contrast, the atomistic individualist, such as Ayn Rand, holds that individual human beings are the substances, with societies as mere aggregations or "heaps" (to use Aristotle's expression).

These metaphysical propositions carry heavy ethical weight, since it is substances that have natural ends or *tele*, and it is these natural ends that define real and intrinsic value. Take fish, for instance. What it is for a fish to be a good and flourishing fish is a function of the natural ends of the fish form of life; what's good for fish isn't good for foxes because the fish and the fox have different forms of life with different natural ends. What counts as a good and flourishing fox is a function of *its* specific form of life. As with fish and foxes, so with human beings.

For organic collectivist pictures of human life, the good of individual human beings carries no weight, since, strictly speaking, there is no such thing: the good of the society as a whole is everything. For atomic individualists, the 'common good' consists of nothing but the sum of measures of the individual welfare of participants. The organicist can make no room for individual rights or respect for individual autonomy, and in

summing all individual goods into one general good the organicist fails to acknowledge what John Rawls called ‘the separateness of persons’. The atomist cannot acknowledge any distinctively common or public good, is forced to treat all social institutions instrumentally, and is saddled with an insoluble ‘free-rider problem’ if he attempts to explain why individuals should care about society when it inconveniences them. The correct view must involve some kind of synthesizing of the two opposites, but this is not a trivial matter, since it is almost axiomatic that no single substance can be composed of other, equally self-subsistent substances: either the whole is dependent on the parts, or the parts on the whole.

The puzzle’s solution lies in the conception of a ‘social practice’, a conception that has played a central role in much of twentieth-century philosophy. Philosophers as diverse as Tyler Burge, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Searle and others have shown how social practices are a significant part of philosophical anthropology. In order to understand what social practices are and to see their relevance to our problem, we need to shift the focus from human individuals to the *acts* performed by human individuals. We will also need to draw a technical distinction between what I’ll call *social institutions* versus *social practices*.

In brief, the solution to the problem is this: social institutions like the state or the university are aggregates of the human individuals who compose them, and so the goods of human individuals are prior to the goods of the social institutions of which they are parts. Social institutions ‘host’ social practices like politics and education. Social practices, however, are comprised not of human individuals themselves, but by the *acts* of human individuals. Human acts are at once the parts that compose social practices and are determined by the social practices they compose. In other words, social practices are not mere aggregates and the relation between individual acts and social practices is *analogous* to the relation between cells and the whole organism.

To put the point in philosophical jargon, we can say that social practices are quasi-substantial accident of human substances: it is a whole that is ontologically prior to its parts (the individual acts) but not to the human participants who perform the acts and who are substances in the strictest sense. Thus both organic collectivism and atomic individualism have their kernels of truth, which the natural law account of social practices and social institutions preserves. The collectivist goes wrong in supposing that all social forms are, like social practices, organic wholes. The individualist goes wrong in supposing that all social forms, like social institutions, are aggregative. But the social world is populated by both aggregative social institutions (the NFL, American Bar Association, the Cleveland Orchestra) and by the holistic social practices (football, law, classical symphonic music) which social institutions promote and sustain.

On this account, then, each individual human act has a dual dependency: both on its individual subject (the human agent) and on the particular practice (or practices) to which it belongs. The individual act draws its nature and its individuality from *both* sources: it wouldn’t be the very act it is if it had *either* a different subject or belonged to a different practice. For instance, consider your pulling of the lever on November 4, 2008. That

action was what it was because of the social practices in which you were a participant: it was an act of voting, an exercise in justice of civic duty, a parent's teaching his child by example, and so on. You intended to pull the lever and pulling the lever was part of the aforementioned social practices.

The human nature of each individual human being is the ground both for the capacity of the human being to enter into social practices and the need to do so. It is in this sense that we are social or political animals. When an individual human being participates in a social practice, he allows himself to become an agent of the practice, by taking into his intention the intrinsic end (*telos*) of the practice itself. For instance, in order to participate in a baseball game, I must act as a baseball player, which involves making the intrinsic end of the game (victory of my team in accordance with the rules) the end of my baseball-related acts. The nature or essence of the act does not depend solely on the agent's internal psychology: it depends also on the essence of the social practice to which the act belongs.

Social practices can be conventional, at least in part. There is, however, a very significant non-conventional aspect to many, if not all, practices. Social practices are not always mere arbitrary constructions of societies—witness, for example, languages, marriages or legal systems, each of which are natural conventions. It is natural for human beings to speak, marry and to order their common concerns by law, even if the particular form which language, marriage and law takes varies by time and place. This variance may be benign, as in the way that French differs from English, or vicious, as in the way that polygamy differs from monogamy. Whether a variance amounts to a *deviance* depends upon that convention's contribution to or frustration of the natural ends of the specifically human form of life.

¹ D. M. Armstrong, *What is a Law of Nature?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

² Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005.