

Aristotle's Powers and Responsibility for Nature

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Stephan Millett

Aristotle's Powers and Responsibility for Nature

This book explores in detail the question of what 'nature' is. This is a primarily metaphysical exploration, but one that also examines key aspects of modern biology—and establishes a clear relation between Aristotle's conception of 'nature' and other conceptions relevant to contemporary environmental philosophy. Aristotle to date has not figured as prominently in the environmental literature as he perhaps should, although he has been given a significant status in work on animal rights, through the work of Rollin, and more particularly through the work of Stephen R. L. Clark, and has had something of a revival in various forms of environmental virtue theory. However, outside of Rollin and Clark, and narrow uses of Aristotelian virtues, when Aristotle has appeared in an environmental context, it has generally been to receive what is colloquially known as 'bad press'. One of the aims of this book is to attempt an environmental rehabilitation of Aristotle—to show that an Aristotelian biological metaphysics can be coupled with an Aristotle inspired moral philosophy to produce a biocentric environmental ethic. The initial focus, however, is not on ethics, but rather on biology and considerations of a biological metaphysics.

The book began life in a desire to examine claims that Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's concept of autopoiesis—a fringe player in the philosophy of biology, but one with an expanding sphere of influence—had dispensed with the need for any 'peculiar directing force' in explaining what it means to be a living thing. The term 'autopoiesis' was created in 1972 by Maturana and Varela and applied to single cells and multi-cellular organisms as part of an attempt to describe the necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of life. One of the interesting claims made of autopoiesis is that its use can be extended beyond its origins in molecular biology and can be applied to such things as social systems and ecosystems. But, perhaps more important is the claim that the presence of autopoiesis is a defining characteristic of morally considerable entities: that an autopoietic unity is the paradigm case of moral considerability. This combination would make it useful not only for a biocentric ethic, but also for an ecocentric ethic. It turns out, however, that Maturana and Varela's theory is not fully coherent, that its claim to dispense with teleology in nature is deeply flawed and that use of autopoiesis should at the very least be restricted to the cellular level where it originated. It certainly should not be extended to cover social systems or ecosystems, but that is not to say that the ideas expressed in autopoiesis and the

questions the concept tries to address are not important for environmental philosophy: they are. It is just that although ecosystems are an undoubtedly important element of environmental ethics they should not (and certainly not on the basis of any autopoietic character they might have) be considered individuals in their own right, as is claimed of them by some proponents of autopoiesis. It is better to see ecosystems as standing in a relationship of non-causal dependence to the biological individuals that comprise them—a relationship in which ecosystems have the character they do in large part because of the particular character of their component parts. The component parts of most interest here are living individuals, but working out just what makes something an individual is not an easy task. In examining the question of what an individual is—and how an individual maintains itself as an individual despite external influences and internal changes—two key concepts emerge: Aristotle's concept of *dūnamis* and Spinoza's concept of *conatus*. There are several things of interest in these concepts. On closer examination, for example, it becomes clear that autopoiesis can be expressed in terms of *dūnamis* and that Spinoza's *conatus* both has a strong historical connection to *dūnamis* and also can be expressed in terms of it. Spinoza's concept of *conatus* (an internal impetus to maintain oneself in one's own being) is used extensively in deep ecology approaches to environmental ethics, notably Arne Naess's, and is a crucial component of Mathews' ecological metaphysics. For Stephen Clark there is a certain irony in this because Spinoza himself was adamantly anti-animal, holding not only that it was unnecessary to consider the interests and feelings of 'animals', but that it was actually wrong. A reassessment of *conatus* must, of necessity imply a reassessment of analyses that rely on the concept. So, although Naess's work is dealt with only in passing, if the interpretation of Spinoza's *conatus* outlined here holds then Naess also needs to be reconsidered. However, the connection made here between Aristotle and Spinoza is not entirely new: for example, Stephen Clark has referred to it in his work on animal rights. One of the results, however, of using it in the context of environmental metaphysics is that contemporary use of the concept of *conatus*, when examined closely, becomes, in fact, a concept much closer to Aristotle's *dūnamis* than to Spinoza's *conatus*. The close relationship between *dūnamis* and *conatus* by itself puts Aristotle firmly into the heart of environmental ethics, but the rehabilitation of Aristotle's reputation in environmental terms does not stop there. It turns out that other key contemporary theories in environmental ethics may also be read in Aristotelian terms and that the immanent purposiveness in all living things that Aristotle identified is a suitable foundation on which to build an ethic.