A Response to Cassie Finley’s ‘Aristotle’s Functionalism’

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On first pass, it seems that the majority of research programs inquiring about the nature of the mind proceed from a naturalistic base; that is, these research programs seek explanations for mental phenomena that are wholly consistent with an established and accepted core of scientific knowledge, including but not limited to psychology and neuroscience. Surely, there are outliers, but it is difficult for me to imagine a group of cognitive scientists doing science in consultation with Aristotle’s De Anima (On the Soul) in order to improve their working paradigm and hypotheses. Why should scientists today consult an ancient proto-scientist for understanding the nature of the mind?

Cassie Finley's essay, “Aristotle’s Functionalism”, stands out as a commendable work to the relevance of ancient ideas to present day philosophical and scientific inquiry about the mind, calling us to carefully evaluate the theoretical merits of Aristotle’s psychology—specifically, his concept of the psyche (soul). She argues that Aristotle’s concept of the psyche, understood in the vein of functionalism, offers a “middle path” solution to the mind-body problem in way that traditional dualist and physicalist theories of mind do not (pp. 11). Along the way, she discusses the implications of her view with respect to the possibility of strong artificial intelligence (AI) and “E” theories of the mind (see Andy Clark and David Chalmers’ “Extended Mind”). Moreover, she argues that this “Aristotelian form of functionalism” avoids the problem of holism—a prevailing challenge to contemporary varieties of functionalism (pp. 1).

Finley begins with a concise overview of a couple issues facing dualist and physicalist theories of the mind. In discussing Descartes’ interactionist substance dualism, she cites the objection from causation, famously attributed to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia: if the mental
and the physical exist separately as distinct, free-standing substances, how do we explain causal interaction between the two? In discussing reductive physicalist views of the mind, she cites an thesis respectfully defended by Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers: it is a falsehood to think that mental phenomena (namely, consciousness) can be explained away in terms of lower-level physical facts because such explanations fail to explain “raw feels” or qualia, which are typically thought to be fundamental constituents of human subjective experience.

As the title of her essay suggests, Finley’s argument is situated in her discussion of functionalism—the view that mental states just are the functioning of relevant causal input and output mechanisms, regardless of the underlying substrate(s) that might realize mental activity. I take her argument to be (roughly) the following: Aristotle employs his concept of the psyche (soul) in order to classify kinds of living things (plants, nonhuman animals, and humans) with respect to their faculties and functions. Human beings have the same faculties and functions as plants and nonhuman animals but additionally have the distinguishing faculty and corresponding function of nous (‘intellect’ or ‘mind’). If we accept the “mind” (construed in contemporary philosophical terms) can be identified with a collection of faculties and functions that renders the Aristotelian classification of a “human soul”, we are left with an Aristotelian form of functionalism by which we can begin to offer possible solutions to a few puzzles that preoccupy Cartesian dualists and reductive physicalists.

Having argued for this Aristotelian construal of functionalism, Finley then argues that this view allows for a possible solution to the mind-body problem, charting a course between Cartesian dualism and reductive physicalism. Given that the psyche is the form of the body and that the body is the matter of the psyche, Aristotelian functionalism avoids the objection from
causation that seemingly plagues the Cartesian view of the mind. Under this view, we are able to understand the mind in non-reductive terms in relation to the body.

I am particularly interested in her discussion of *nous* (mind or intellect), a part of the human soul, and its relation to her claim that this Aristotelian functionalism allows for the mind and body to be conceptually distinct while being “one and the same” (pp. 6). She refers to *De Anima* Book III 4 in order to support her claim that the mind (*nous*) is realized functionally by the human capacity or disposition to think and reason. She makes a reasonable point here, but I would be interested to hear what she thinks about Book III 5, which has been the subject of hermeneutical controversy (see *SEP* article on “The Active Mind of *De Anima* iii 5”). According to some translations, Aristotle seems to imply that “there is another mind (read *nous*), which is what it is by virtue of the fact that it makes everything; it is a sort of condition like light” (*DA* 430a16–17). He goes on further to say that “this second mind is separable, incapable of being acted upon, mixed with nothing, and in essence an actuality...only when it is separated that it is fully itself” (*DA* 430a23–35). Moreover, without this second mind, “nothing thinks” (*DA* 430a26). This leads me to my first question: If we interpret Aristotle in this way—that is, if we accept that he is positing a second *nous* that is in fact separable—then how do we square this with an Aristotelian functionalism?

I found Finley’s claim—that Aristotelian functionalism offers a possible solution to the problem holism—quite thought provoking. Referencing the problem of holism, she states: “In order to define the mind, there must be a cohesion across all minds, regardless of whether that coherence is based in functionalism or not” (my emphasis; pp. 11). Perhaps this Aristotelian functionalism can plausibly account for some sort of ‘loose’ cohesion across human minds grounded in basic biology, however, I must admit that I am suspicious toward the very
preoccupation with cohesion when it comes to minds that their mental activity (i.e., cognitive, conative, and affective states). My hunch is that if we preoccupy ourselves with seeking out a cohesion across all minds, how can we be certain that this preoccupation is not obstructing the discovery and discussion of possible subtleties in mental activity contingent on cultural and social aspects of human nature? In their article, “The Weirdest People in the World?”, Joseph Hendrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan speak to this very question. Their article shows that a great deal of psychological literature draws conclusions about human nature on the basis of “samples drawn from Western, Education, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies” – a rather unique group of individuals to be drawing conclusions about human nature from (pp. 61). Hence, my second and final question: how might this Aristotelian functionalism make sense of the possible mental subtleties of those humans that do not fall within the WEIRD domain?

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*I’d like to give special thanks to Professor Protasi, Professor Tiehen, and Professor Beardsley for teaching me what I know about ancient philosophy and philosophy mind. I’d also like to thank my long-time friend Zachary Tiner for discussing Cassie’s essay with me and for being kind enough to review and edit my response above.*