2006

Aristotle’s Worst Idea

John Thorp

The University of Western Ontario, jthorp@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/philosophypres

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Citation of this paper:
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/philosophypres/5
Aristotle’s Worst Idea
John Thorp
Department of Philosophy

Aristotle’s commitment to monotelism shows up rather comically in his
disdain for the ‘Dolphin knife’—clearly an ancient equivalent of the Swiss
Army knife. He also casts aspersions on a tool
known as an ἀκινδυών, which seems to
have been a combination
of a toast-fork and
lantern, used by
soldiers in the field.

The problem with
these tools is that they
are made for
cheapness’ sake.

He also thinks that,
contrary to the ideal,
nature is sometimes
forced to double up on
the functions of animal
organisms:

...elephants’ trunks serve as
noses, as hands, as legs,
even as snorkels;

...apes’ tails serve both as
limbs in climbing and as
anus-lids;

...human lips serve both for
speech and for the
protection of the teeth.

But in all such cases (and
they are numerous) nature
fails short of the ideal,
which is monotelism.

Monotelism is Aristotle’s worst idea.

Gender
The unique function of
women is domestic.

We know how deeply
rooted this idea has
been, and how hard we
have had to work to
dislodge it.

Part of the answer lies in his metaphysics: purpose
or function is involved in the ‘essence’ of a thing,
and a thing cannot have more than one essence.

Part, too, lies in the aristocratic culture of his time.
There was a broad preference for tidiness and
order; everything has its proper place, its proper
function. People who resort to polylectic devices do
so ‘out of stringiness’: they must be poor.

Finally, he advances an argument, not very
convincingly, that when an organ has several
functions it must suffer some compromise of
design. If an insect’s tongue doubles as a stinger
it cannot be very good at both jobs.

Money
Although there are biblical
prohibitions of usury, there was
also a philosophical argument,
stemming from Aristotle himself,
according to which the sole
purpose of money was to represent
goods; hence charging interest is a
perversion of the purpose of
money. Dante placed usurers lower
in hell even than sodomites.

Genetics
The human genome project set out to map the
correspondence between genotypes and phenotypes,
loosely, between genes and the traits to which they
give rise. This project was governed by what has
come to be called the ‘central dogma’, namely that
there is a one-to-one correspondence between
genes and traits. On the basis of this dogma, it was
projected that there would be 120,000 genotypes
(since that is the number of trait-registrations).
However, the number of genes has had to be revised
downward to about 25% of the original estimate:
30,000.

This error is the result of a presupposition of
monotelism. The truth is
that one gene may
have more than one
function, may be
matched with more
than one trait.

In the polyleism of
genetics lies the whole
danger of genetic
engineering: you may
alter a gene to alter a
trait, but you don’t
know what other traits
you may be altering at
the same time!

Monotelism has done
a lot of damage, and it
may yet do a lot more.

Labour
The principle of the division of labour is inspired by
monotelism: if the workforce can mirror the
functional organization of a living body, then
maximum efficiency will be attained — but at what
cost in alienation?

Labour
The principle of the division of labour is inspired by
monotelism: if the workforce can mirror the
functional organization of a living body, then
maximum efficiency will be attained — but at what
cost in alienation?

Sex
The unique function of
sex is procreation.

This idea was adopted in
one branch of Stoicism,
and from there it passed
into Christian theology. It
has permeated our
culture.

Although there are biblical
prohibitions of usury, there was
also a philosophical argument,
stemming from Aristotle himself,
according to which the sole
purpose of money was to represent
goods; hence charging interest is a
perversion of the purpose of
money. Dante placed usurers lower
in hell even than sodomites.