

# Thomas Pangle’s Neo-Epicurean Reading of Aristotle’s Biology

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## Abstract

In his 2020 reading of Aristotle’s biology, “A Synoptic Introduction to the Ontological Background of Aristotle’s Political Theory,” Thomas L. Pangle (2020) speaks *de facto* on behalf of contemporary Neo-Epicureanism. For Pangle reads Aristotle by way of advancing the cause of an Epicurean use of Plato. Proposing to liberate Aristotle from a 2,400 year-old Platonic tradition having allegedly unduly minimized the importance of biology in understanding both ontology and politics, Pangle argues for fundamental compatibility between the Stagirite and Darwinian evolutionism. The present article offers strong reasons to reject Pangle’s central contentions.

## Keywords

evolutionism, Aristotle, biology, Plato, epicureanism, materialism, metaphysics, rhetoric

## Introduction

While the dawn of the modern world is marked by systematic intellectual opposition to Aristotle as most authoritative representative of the moral and intellectual virtues of classical antiquity, late modernity has returned to Aristotle — and other Platonists (Gerson, 2006) — as inspiration for validating the most authoritative doctrine of our age: evolutionism.<sup>1</sup>

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1 On the Machiavellian roots of the modern doctrine of evolution, see pp. 296-97 of Leo Strauss (1958), *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. See further Roger D. Masters (2018), *Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power*; Michael Tomasello (2016), *A Natural History of Human Morality*; and D. M. Walsh (2015), *Organisms, Agency, and Evolution*; K. Juechems and C. Summerfield (2019), “Where Does Value Come From?”. The Machiavellian “logic” of mastery or control of nature has trickled down, as it were, to color much of contemporary biology. See for instance, T. Egner (2017), *The Wiley handbook of cognitive control*; MacLean et al. (2014), “The Evolution of Self-Control;” and P. RoCHAT (2021), *Moral Acrobatics*.

A “scientific” Aristotle has emerged at the price of the “pre-scientific” one being abstracted from his Platonic spine and reconstructed piecemeal to confirm the wisdom of modernity over and above the foolishness of antiquity and the evils of its medieval apologists. The scientifically reconstructed Aristotle is no longer a prophet of “thought thinking thought,” but the advocate of an intellectual stance retraceable to Machiavelli and that Shakespeare exposed most remarkably as entailing a synthesis of Epicureanism (teaching that chance rules the world) and Stoicism (teaching that the world is ruled by necessity), whereby hedonism serves as foundation for the strategic use of eternal forms.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past few decades, the cause of a “scientific” instrumentalizing of Aristotle has been aided most incisively by the “Straussian” Thomas L. Pangle (2020), whose 2020 reading of Aristotle’s biology, “A Synoptic Introduction to the Ontological Background of Aristotle’s Political Theory,”<sup>3</sup> speaks *de facto* on behalf of contemporary Neo-Epicureanism.<sup>4</sup> For Pangle reads Aristotle by way of advancing the cause of an Epicurean use of Plato — a use made possible by the Machiavellian synthesis denounced by Shakespeare and later classicists.<sup>5</sup>

## Methods

The present study provides a close “phenomenological” reading of a text in the context of a contemporary academic trend, exposing the text’s guiding ideas to more primordial

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2 On the contemporary phenomenon of “scientific reconstructions” of classical authors, see “The Scientific Reconstruction of Dante” (Andreacchio, 2023). For a recent defense of the synthesis of Epicurus’s chance and Stoicism’s necessity, where the *driving* “force” of chance inheres in “the universal necessities of life,” see Franklin M. Harold (2022), *On Life: Cells, Genes and the Evolution of Complexity*. See further S. Kauffman (2019), *A World Beyond Physics: The Emergence and Evolution of Life*; and J. Monod (1971), *Chance and Necessity*.

3 Recent examples of a scientific reconstruction of Aristotle include, Roger D. Masters (2007), “Historical Change and Evolutionary Theory: From Hunter-Gatherer Bands to States and Empires,” Even Michael Tomasello (2022) will appeal to Aristotle to support his “program” to retrace the evolution of agency understood in terms of “the individual’s control,” where modernity’s individual stands *de facto* to software as biological necessity stand to hardware. On the contemporary “individualistic” or (neo-) Cartesian reading of mind, see further B. Rosslénbroich (2014), *On The Origin of Autonomy: A New Look at the Major Transitions in Evolution*. On the currently dominant academic tendency to read contemporary cybernetics into nature itself, as if man were an imperfect machine to be perfected via or by our technological society, see for instance J. Henrich (2016), *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*; L. R. Santos and A. G. Rosati (2015), *The Evolutionary Roots of Human Decision-Making*; Y. Fregnac (2017), “Big Data and the Industrialization of Neuroscience: A Safe Roadmap for Understanding the Brain?” and N. Wiener (1948), *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*.

4 On modern or neo-Epicureanism, see Leo Strauss (1953), *Natural Right and History*. On Pangle as Epicurean, see Harry Jaffa’s “The Legacy of Leo Strauss: A review of *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, by Leo Strauss” (Jaffa, 1984).

5 Giambattista Vico, Giacomo Leopardi and Leo Strauss stand among the few world-renowned writers who have exposed the core of the Machiavellian revolution as parasitic on Platonism. Epicureanism needed Stoic leverage to overcome Platonism, the offense requiring a distraction from the inherence of the eternal in the human. In effect, what the “neo-Epicurean” does is instrumentalize the eternal forms of ancient Stoicism, forms that are now conceived in strictly mechanistic terms. See further Bruce Alberts (1998), “The cell as a collection of protein machines: preparing the next generation of molecular biologists.”

ones. In this respect, phenomenology invites a genealogical work retracing certain concepts and systems built upon them to more fundamental forms of understanding, or underlying problems. The goal is to see conceptual superstructures in the context of underlying, permanent questions. While helpful in clarifying certain terms and arguments, references to secondary literary sources are limited in the interests of “internal” reading.

Conceptual compatibility between the target text and its own primary source — the latter being Aristotle — is verified with close attention to possible anachronisms, as well as to the possibility of projections of anthropological parameters onto properly ontological ones, whereby a study method can render prejudicial its own findings.

With specific reference to Aristotle, cardinal problems to be explored include the relationship between epistemic and rhetorical concerns, the status of thought vis-à-vis experience and the limits of mechanistic readings of nature.

## Results

The present investigation exposes problems at the heart of Pangle’s reading of Aristotle, as well as a fundamental incongruity between the Stagirite’s own work and Pangle’s project to uproot it from its Platonic roots. As a spokesperson of modern mechanistic readings of nature, Pangle (2020) fails to do justice to Aristotle’s “imitative” or “poetic” conception of natural generation, on account of which the primary mover of all finite being is its archetypical, divine, ontological perfection implying an absolute identity of form and content.

Notwithstanding its defects, Pangle’s appeal to Aristotle can serve us as stepping-stone for renewed reflection on the enduring significance of Aristotle as representing a fundamental alternative to modern evolutionism. The central problem at hand pertains to the intelligibility or “mind” of change itself. Does the “dangerous” passage from chemical necessity to biological freedom an underlying *intelligible* reality, or is it to be explained *away* by more or less tacit appeals to a primordial vertiginous source of energy driving us to survive, if only by achieving “kinetic stability”?<sup>6</sup>

If Romantic voluntarism fails to respond to the challenge of mechanistic biology, that is because both share a visceral rejection of classical — both ancient and medieval — *intellectualism*, as of radical openness to the intelligibility of change itself. Modern “Cartesian” or mechanistic reason fails to address the problem in question insofar as modern rationalism rises to eclipse a mind presupposed by the modern ego’s mind, or a thought that is not a predicate, but a substance — not a function, but a source of consciousness (as of sense-of-self-certainty). For us to return to a pre-modern form of rationalism would be for us to question much more than we are currently willing to question. What would have to be questioned is the mechanistic character of modern rationalism and not merely the equally mechanistic character of the world our scientists “discover.” Is it an accident that the world we believe to be discovering looks very much like the way we set out to discover it? Projecting our “ways” back onto our world might fit the bill of a Baconian knowledge-as-power agenda, where what is true is defined as what works — if only for us, *hic et nunc* — but cognitive/conceptual “black holes” remain, as Harold pointed out, if only optimistically, supported by *faith* in modern rationalism (Harold 2022).

Pangle’s work helps us bring into focus the *anthropological* roots of modern biology (Pangle, 2020). More specifically, *de facto* Pangle’s reading shows that Aristotle can be at least nominally harmonized with modern evolutionism if and only if the Stagirite can

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6 For a recent articulate mechanistic approach to the passage from chemistry to biology, see Addy Pross (2016). *What Is Life? How Chemistry Becomes Biology*.

be harmonized with a Machiavellian conception of *human* nature or, more precisely, of the human being as naturally *compelled* to survive. Compulsion is key, here, given the implied absence of a natural, supreme end entailing a natural hierarchy of ends. In colloquial terms, modern rationalism must ultimately reject any Aristotelian God by way of dismissing its relevance to our everyday life. Otherwise put, the world cannot be turned into a laboratory of total control as long as people fear divine retribution. The reduction of the human to the machine demands the radical elimination of God from our practical (moral-political) life.<sup>7</sup>

The evolutionist’s principle of “survival of the fittest” is shattered by exposure to “meaning in nature,” not in voluntaristic terms, but where life-forms are no longer seen as struggling for power or empowerment, but as spontaneously yearning for a perfection involving the identity (*coincidentia*) of form and content. Falling short of that *transcendent* perfection, survival remains, not a blessing, but a curse — as no being more than man has shown.

## Discussion

Pangle (2020) purports to liberate Aristotle from a 2,400 year-old tradition having unduly minimized the importance of biology (“terrestrial life”) in understanding both metaphysics (Pangle speaks of “ontology” as “inquiry into being as such”) and politics. In the attempt to make up for that Platonic tradition, Pangle argues that all of Aristotle’s appeals to divine transcendence are to be read as mere rhetorical devices aimed at keeping unphilosophical masses at bay. What is Aristotle supposed to have done in spite of the pious veneer of his writings? He is supposed to have vindicated the wisdom of pre-Socratic natural philosophy, if only in a qualified manner. Although pre-Socratic materialists would have been wrong to assume that there is a material imperceptible reality underlying our empirical world, they would have been right to reject any Socratic call to think of nature within the limits of the human, or within the polis.

Now, however, Pangle (2020) presents the Socratic call as a rhetorical façade concealing Socrates’s real, esoteric, or deep concern with natural philosophy. Socrates would have sought to dedicate himself to natural philosophy in private and thus unseen by crowds of non-philosophers who would have judged the philosopher’s pursuit as essentially inimical to traditional morality.

Pangle’s Aristotle takes the relay by arguing that Plato’s “forms” are perceptible, if only unchanging or un-evolving “functions” of things, species to which real philosophers devote “field research and meditative study” in response to material forces retraceable to “a fathomless source.” The picture Pangle (2020) offers us is one of a plurality of collective forms (what things are eminently, but also the “ways” we see them as) in which we may gain awareness of unconscious or subconscious forces responsible for the emergence of organisms out of inorganic compounds, where the supreme organism is man himself, or more precisely the man dedicated to Pangle’s picture of things.

There being no form aside from the perceptible functions of things — even as these functions transcend the outer “shapes” of things — there can be no God of nature for Pangle’s Aristotle and thus no intelligence at work in the interstice separating one species from another: the context of the emergence of man is not characterized by divine intelligence, but by the material forces or mechanical necessity proper of a fathomless abyss.

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7 See Richard Dawkins (2019). *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*.

In appealing to Aristotle's rudimentary biology, Pangle's lesson is strongly reminiscent of Heidegger's radical historicism (Heidegger, 1993). Aristotle's account of the formation of organs out of inorganic compounds is supposed to have fallen short of Pangle's project of accounting for the formation of whole organisms, above all man himself, out of inorganic compounds. To achieve this latter end would be to fulfill Heidegger's own dream of a world that can fully or "scientifically" account for itself without any reference to a transcendent substantive being and so to any intelligible form of change itself. The mystery of a mind embracing all matter yields to the drama of discrete minds ultimately lost in matter.

Pangle's minds respond to their being thrown-in-the-world, to echo Heidegger, by applying the phenomenologically discerned forms/functions of things or pragmata to our ordinary experience, or to the ordering of our world. Not altogether unlike the poets of Plato's cave, as natural philosophers we are supposed to look at the forms of things as standards to administrate human/political life and order. What is the substantive difference between us and Plato's "cave dwellers"? We identify the forms we perceive in the dark with forms we see as enlightened natural philosophers. These forms, which we perceive 1. as stepping-stones to our standing or functioning at the top of a natural hierarchy of beings, and so 2. as building-block for our own authority, are forms that we do not question as forms, insofar as we assume that their ontological context is utterly unfathomable. In eminently practical terms, we are equivalent to Plato's cave dwellers, for they too see "forms" in the dark as stepping-stone to personal supremacy. Pangle's natural philosopher is the best "individual" of the best species (the human) in virtue of his field-research and meditation on forms of "momentously unique" beings (Pangle, 2020).

While Pangle seems to teach that his "forms/species" are essentially-permanent functions, he stresses that those forms have no conceivable being aside from "individual" beings. There is supposed to be no Man aside from "this" or "that" particular man; no "man in God's mind," for there is no God to begin with — no God of nature, to speak with a long Platonic tradition. Yet, what would "ecce homo!" mean where man's manifestation has no otherworldly background? In the absence of a divine dimension of things, or of the inherence of things in an eternal mind, where would things manifest from? Pangle leaves only one door open to us, here, and that door is the machine or mechanism — implying strict compulsion — through which "this man" is constituted within a special "function". For we are supposed to be fundamentally driven by the unfathomable into existence, or into existing within a given form proper to us as a species. As for our "uniquely divergent individuality," this is a momentous ("historically contingent," in historicist terms; "evolutionary," to speak with modern biology) entity that can be decomposed entirely in terms of a species-relative form/function and the material forces of an unfathomable context of general change/evolution (Pangle, 2020).

The words are not Aristotle's own, but Pangle proposes that the Stagirite, on one hand merely pretends that there is a mind or intelligence embracing evolution, while on the other offers us a merely rudimentary biology limited to the formation of the "parts" of animals, while falling short of addressing the question of organisms as wholes, hypothetically because the Stagirite didn't live long enough.

Pangle's argument rests here upon the sense that the organism as a whole mirrors the organ as this one mirrors inorganic matter; as if the Higher mirrored the Lower (as its function), rather than the other way around; under the assumption that nature itself is devoid of intelligence (Pangle, 2020).

If for Aristotle art imitates nature given that nature imitates art, for Pangle the Stagirite could not possibly have taken seriously the latter condition. In presenting nature as a divine art, Aristotle would have been merely feigning piety. Nothing is said, however, of

an alternative traditional reading on account of which Aristotle would have "rediscovered" nature in the mirror of art and so the human in the mirror of the divine — the human, Platonically speaking, "in his proper place," or as a tree whose roots are in Heaven.

Not surprisingly, Pangle's Aristotle is an anthropocentric for whom nature is key to the political, even as there is no divine key to the human. The human/political problem is then a "decisive" one, one pertaining to "decisions" in the face of material necessity. If the human being, or more precisely Pangle's natural philosopher, is the highest of beings, then answers, rather than questions stand at the pinnacle of the Ladder of Being: answers we are to determine progressively, rather than questions we are meant to return to contemplatively; a will to exercise, rather than an intelligence that volition could gather back into (Pangle, 2020).

In the absence of a God of nature, "evolution" must remain a mechanical building upward, where the Low is proof for the High, rather than its mere sign — as it is for traditional Platonism and unaided common sense, alike. Yet, Pangle (2020) sets out to topple this "older" path in the name of a "strict empiricism" that vindicates pre-Socratic materialism ("natural philosophy"), rather than defending the inherence of the metaphysical in the ethical. Indeed nothing is said about the possibility that Aristotle's "biology" about the parts (organs) of animals represented the Stagirite's attempt to show signs that life is presupposed by the lifeless, or that life is permanently hidden within the (overtly) lifeless, even prior to its becoming manifest outside of it. The notion that the inorganic stands as a potentiality for organs, or that all matter is necessarily informed (Pangle readily recognizes this lesson in Aristotle) would have been helpful to Aristotle in countering Epicureanism. Yet, that same notion could have been carried too far, serving the interests of a dogmatism no less inimical to Platonism than Epicurus, namely one represented by the resolution that the inorganic can fully account for organisms.

Aristotle's silence ("indifference to, or neglect of") when it came to a biological account of whole organisms would then point to the ethical-divine limitations of natural teleology, not in the sense that non-philosophers would persecute philosophers for daring to account for the human in strictly "naturalistic" terms, but in the sense that nature must ultimately appear to us as altogether fathomless as long as we do not see it "in its proper place," or as art. Wherever we perceive nature as devoid of mind, our own mind is emptied of nature, while our will imposes itself dogmatically as answer to all questions.

In emptying nature of art, Pangle's Aristotle offers us an art devoid of nature; an art that can justify itself only as mastery of nature. The Stagirite can stand at best as precursor of Pangle's "scientific" plan to devise a full biological account of man, such that would enable us to address political problems more successfully than ever before by channeling our material compulsions in and through our species-relative function as defined by Pangle's evolutionary biology. Our "function" would thereby be validated, if not to solve political problems once and for all, at least to stand as our best guarantor of freedom and order, without need to appeal to a higher God if not as a manner of speech useful to flatter Pangle's enemies into subjugation to Pangle's politics (Pangle, 2020).

What advantage is offered here with respect to the biology we are accustomed to as moderns? In turning to Aristotle, Pangle can expose the limits of a modern biology/rationalism that tends to reduce identity to relations, even though we might object that ultimately modernity appeals to relations only as a means to reconstruct identity on a "scientific" basis. But then, is this not precisely what Pangle is trying to achieve?

While formally objecting to modernity's value/fact dichotomy, Pangle (2020) accepts it in practical terms or hermeneutically, where nature incapsulated in definite arguments is approached in terms of "facts" used to solve problems, where problems stand de facto as fuel to establishing ever-new solutions. Otherwise put, nature outside of Pangle's "functions" is indistinguishable from the Cartesian *res extensa* that, throughout the "historical unfolding" of the Machiavellian blueprint for modernity's Brave New World, has served as stepping stone for the rise of Technocracy.

A cardinal and reasonable objection Pangle faces is the one modernity at large faces, for in the absence of a mind "external" to nature (or more precisely of the providence of a transcendent God), mind cannot be "in" nature without being utterly lost in it even as it justifies itself by "finding"/defining itself in terms of "functions" (forms) we can use to master nature, which is to say to use nature as material fuel for political decisions aimed at supporting natural philosophy (here, as advocated by Pangle). The only freedom that is recognized now is exercised only in overcoming natural necessity; a freedom presupposing, then, compulsion as primordial mover (Pangle, 2020).

Why does man emerge out of inorganic matter? Not because of any pre-human mind. So a single alternative imposes itself: human life evolves out of inorganic compounds as a result of the mechanical stream of an unfathomable vortex whirling through "forms". Now, while noting that for Aristotle these forms "do not come into being," Pangle (2020) rejects the transcendence of forms and so, too, the traditional notion of forms in God's mind. If the forms or species-relative functions are not in God's mind, then where are they? We might say that the forms in question are those of place, standing as the "limit-functions" defining place, so that they are not strictly speaking anywhere. Pangle's forms will then be timeless, much as Heisenberg's physical particles are supposed to be, insofar as they are not "in space and time objectively," constituting rather the parameters within which specialized and temporalized matter/potentiality moves. Yet, the problem of context is not eliminated alongside that of time and space. Are the boundaries of "objective" space and time simply free-floating devices for the emergence of decision-making natural philosophers? Do those forms stand merely in the context of an unfathomable vortex? If forms of generation are by definition not generated, must they not be somehow substantively independent of their generated instantiations? One might argue that the forms are "active" in generation and "latent" outside of it, but latency here does not entail a mere conceptual abstraction, as Pangle seems to argue citing Aristotle's reference to universal forms as entailing "a certain composite whole" made of words and matter considered universally/overall or καθόλου.

On Pangle's reading of Aristotle, biological forms of species must arise in unison with their particular contents, without presupposing any form embracing all of its possible contents. Not being "in space and time objectively," the forms are not *eo ipso* immune to space and time. The fundamental question here pertains to their *raison d'être*: do the forms arise (as "objective" boundaries of space and time) due to mechanical forces and so material necessity, or are they eternally present in a substantive form embracing all matter?

Pangle (2020) renders his Kantian-like answer rather evident as he brushes off Aristotle's references to divine perfection on the way to making space for Darwinian evolutionism, or the notion that animals are fundamentally or primordially moved by a drive for survival, or for preservation of their "individual existence, forever." A reading of Aristotle as seeing animals as reproducing, not because they cannot exist forever "individually," but because they fail to reach up to eternal being (cosmologically, the actual boundaries of the universe), is left altogether out of the picture. Necessarily so, given that the only mind Pangle allows for is a finite one determined by material drives, where biological general

forms or genera are "intellectual matter" (matter ready to be reasoned about) that allows us to think of zoological beings.

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## Author Biography

Marco Andreacchio was awarded a doctorate from the University of Illinois for his interpretation of Sino-Japanese philosophical classics in dialogue with Western counterparts and a doctorate from Cambridge University for his work on Dante's Platonic interpretation of religious authority. Andreacchio has taught at various higher education institutions and published systematically on problems of a political-philosophical nature; his recent monograph on the problem of creation carries the provocative title, "Medieval Teachers of Freedom" (Routledge, 2023).

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