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On Natural and Unnatural Arts

Part 1

For Aristotle the study of nature is the study of a certain kind of productive action. Physics, he says, has as its subject natural motion -- that is, motion (kinesis) that arises by nature (kata physin). Inexact but fair illustrations of what arises by nature are our own productive enterprises. There is, he insists, a far reaching similarity between our makings and those of nature. The motions of procreation, for example, are like those of industrial manufacture (Parts of Animals 641a 14-18; 641b 10-15). The causal principles that are present in the making of a couch are also present in the actions that result in a fetus. Both couch and fetus have a material cause: wood or flesh. Each requires an agent -- an inefficient cause -- to impart motion: a carpenter or a male parent. Each, too, serves some need or fulfills some aim -- a final cause. Likewise, both exemplify a previously existing specific pattern or essence -- a formal cause. These four principles are present in all change, whether the change be natural, artificial, or spontaneous (Physics II ch. 3; Metaphysics 1032a 12-30). Thus nature, kinesis kata physin, is basically akin to art, kinesis apo technes. Indeed, it is a kind of art.

Part 2

This analogy between art and nature is basic, of course, to the whole of Aristotle's work. All his treatises prominently display or implicitly assume it. It is an analogy that he obviously prizes. Yet it is also one that he takes pains to keep from degenerating into an identity. He points out that there are differences between artificial and natural processes. Two are of definitive importance. In the making of a couch the formal and efficient causes differ. The efficient cause is the carpenter or, more precisely, the form that functions "as his soul" (Physics II ch. 3; Metaphysics 1013a 29-32; 1033b 22-23). The couch's formal cause is an idea abstracted from experience and fixed as a form in the soul" of the carpenter (Metaphysics 1032a 33-1032b 1). In the making of a fetus, however, the formal and efficient causes are the same. The efficient cause -- the primary source of motion -- is "the same in species" as the formal cause (Physics 198a 25-28; Metaphysics 1032a 22-25). To mark this distinction one may use medieval terminology and say that art represents eminent causation whereas nature is a realm of formal causation.

The second way in which artificial and natural processes differ is that the final and efficient causes of an artifact operate externally to the matter they manipulate, whereas in natural gestation they work from within the growing organism they control (Physics 192b 12-19). To mark this distinction one may again use medieval terminology and say that art represents transient causation whereas nature is a realm of immanent causation.

These are the two respects in which kinesis apo technes and kinesis kata physin differ (Physics 198a 23-29). Art is eminent and transient in its operations; nature's actions are formal and immanent. The formal quality of a natural process makes it conservative. The primary source of motion is there the same in species as the formal cause it imparts to the effects that it produces. Thus there is a similarity between source and issue in natural gestation; both belong to the same

species; and Aristotle has his explanation for why parent and child are alike. The primary source of motion in nature is also immanent in the matter it controls, and so Aristotle has his explanation for why growing plants and animals need no external source of guidance. The eminent quality of an artificial process makes it productive of novelty. The primary source of motion there differs in species from the formal cause it imparts to the effect that it produces; thus there is dissimilarity between source and issue in industrial art; and Aristotle has his explanation for why carpenters and couches are not alike. The primary source of motion in industrial design is also external to the matter moved. It operates as a transient force. Thus Aristotle has his explanation for why couches do not grow but have to be assembled.

Part 3

Just why Aristotle chose to define nature as a realm of formal and immanent art is a matter of easy conjecture: it allowed him to retain the teleological interpretation of organic processes that Plato had developed but without having to subscribe to Plato's psychological and ontological dualisms. Plato had defined nature as divine art. It follows immediately from that definition that nothing human can give birth, for birth is a natural -- that is, a divine -- and so not a human process. To account for our apparent ability to have children Plato was obliged to analyze us as a duality of agencies; one human (the reason), one divine (the appetites). For him the agent that produces a couch is not the agent that produces a son. We all change identities, so to speak, when moving from the design of furniture to the siring of children. Aristotle avoids that awkward doctrine by simply saying that it is, not agency, but differences in causal relations that distinguish art from nature. A carpenter for him is the primary source of motion for both his couches and his children. He simply resembles his children and not his couches, and the reason is that in the first but not the second case it is the form that is his soul, not a differing form in his soul, that is the formal, species-determining source of what he effects. The distinction between "form as" and "form in" the soul goes substitute, in short, for a psychological dualism that Aristotle clearly wishes to avoid. Nature is not divine art for him; it is formal art. Thus we need not surrender our humanity when doing anything natural.

Nature is, of course, also immanent art, and that definition allows Aristotle to avoid the Platonic implication that the world represents, or participates in, a transcendent realm of Ideas. Formal causes akin to Plato's Ideas exist, but they are resident in the living matter of the world from whence we, in so far as we are capable of genuine knowledge, may abstract them through sensation and memory and implant them in our souls, where we may then make use of them in our sciences and our productive arts (Posterior Analytics 100a 8). Neither duality would be so effectively undermined had the analogy between art and nature been allowed to become an identity. The distinctive, separate causal components of industrial design lend themselves to a Platonic, dualistic interpretation of life. Aristotle's aim in insisting upon his definition of nature as formal and immanent art was, then, probably that of evading his teacher's dichotomies. Kinesis kata physin is like kinesis apo technes. It is not, however, the same.

Part 4

Aristotle is so committed to the point that nature merely resembles without being the same as industrial art that he defends it -- almost fiercely -- in the face of obvious challenges. He recognizes, for example, that reproduction is not an entirely formal process. Offspring usually fail to resemble their parents

exactly. In the case of monstrous births it may not even be clear that specific continuity has been preserved. Yet mules and two headed calves surely arise by nature, not by art alone. Aristotle meets this challenge by arguing that nature aspires to the status of a purely formal realm and that all monstrosities, therefore, represent a failure of purposive effort (Physics 199b 4-5). The principle of formal causation is simply thwarted by a failure of the efficient cause to carry out nature's intent or by the irrational principle of matter that seems to resist the imposition of form upon it (Generation of Animals 778a 16-778b 7). A formal effect is more less achieved, nonetheless, and nature will, in any event, always try to correct itself. Nature resembles, indeed, nothing so much as a doctor doctoring himself (Physics 199b 29-31). Male mules, after all, are sterile, and their race would therefore die out if left to run its natural course. Thus one might say that for Aristotle nature remains in intent, though not in strictest fact, a realm of formal art. To a certain extent it is botched and in need of aid by virtue of its resemblance to the eminent, novel, "monstrous" effects of industrial design.

Aristotle is obliged to acknowledge as well that nature is not entirely a realm of immanent art. A male parent, he believes, must be the formal and efficient cause of a fetus. In that case reproduction is a transient process, for the source of motion is external to what is produced. Aristotle is unwilling to say on this account that reproduction is unnatural. He is equally unwilling to surrender his definition of nature. Thus he has a problem that he wrestles with in The Generation of Animals (729b 5-730b 23). None of his maneuvers there effectively resolve his problem, however, and he is obliged to rest in evident discontent with the point that it is only the initiation of reproduction that is transient. Once semen is emitted to the female, Nature -- not the male parent -- uses it as a tool to work on the fetus, thereby producing a child through the immanent process of growth. Whereas a carpenter is responsible for all the changes induced in the wood he works with to make a couch, a father is responsible for only an initial change that then continues without his agency. Thus, the efficient cause of natural generation may originally be external to the matter it effects, but it becomes, as the efficient cause of industrial design never does, internal to what it moves.

The point of these observations is that in the face of pervasive tendencies of kinesis kata physin to assume the characteristics of kinesis apo technes Aristotle moves to shore up as best he can his definition of nature as a realm of both formal and immanent art.

Part 5

The contrast between art and nature permeates Aristotle's discussions of biological and industrial subjects. He treats, or at least tries to treat, everything he regards as natural as formal and immanent art. He also writes of architecture, carpentry, fencing and shipbuilding as examples of eminent and transient art. A striking feature of his work, however, is that he does not apply his account of the artificial to the whole of what we normally take to be art. A couch, he agrees, comes into existence artificially, but poems and plays have a different origin. Thus only the industrial arts exemplify the properties of origin. Thus only the industrial arts exemplify the properties of eminent and transient causation. The fine arts, in high contrast, do not. They are the products of formal and immanent design.

In the Politics and Poetics Aristotle emphasizes what would seem to be the doctrinal point that the sole subjects of artistic imitation are "men in action" (Poetics 1448a 1). Music imitates our passions (Politics 1340a 17-22). Painting imitates our features (Poetics 1454b 10-12). Drama imitates our actions (Poetics 1449b 20-30). We ourselves, in short, are the subjects of our imitative arts. It follows from this doctrine that the fine arts are formal, not eminent, creations, for the form in the soul of the artist is the same as the form that is his soul. The poet, Aristotle, stresses, has scientific knowledge of some aspect of human life. That knowledge consists of a form in his soul, but since it is garnered from the observations made of men it is no different from the principle of form that governs their actions, gives them specific identity, and which is, in fact, what each man calls his soul. Thus the artist, as a member of the species whose general possibilities and traits he depicts, necessarily has as his own formal cause -- his soul -- the very form that is fixed in his soul and that serves as the formal cause of the drama he creates. In his case the efficient cause of the play, his soul, is the same as the formal cause of the play, the knowledge resident in his soul. Poetry is therefore for Aristotle a product of formal, not eminent, causation and becomes, to that extent, a product of nature, not of art.

Indeed, one has to draw the paradoxical conclusion that the fine arts for Aristotle are more natural than nature. The competent painter and poet, he writes, will improve upon the human subject matter they treat (Poetics, 1454b 8-18; 1461b 10-13). They thus often attain a more formal effect than exists in real life. Nature, after all, is partially botched and in need of aid, its formal intent having been thwarted to a certain extent by a failure of its efficient cause to act as directed. What poets and painters do is fulfill nature's intent in regard to ourselves. Thus their work is actually a better example of a natural action than one can generally find in life itself!

This odd conclusion, which would seem to be mandated by Aristotle's text, is reinforced by a second feature of his analysis in the Poetics. There he treats dramatic productions as immanent, not transient, processes. He acknowledges, of course, that the playwright is a cause of his play and that he remains external to the incidents and characters of his story. It is not, however, so much the playwright as it is the playwright's knowledge that concerns Aristotle. In a play that knowledge appears as dramatic structure, or plot, for knowledge is of formal, universal causes, and it is through its plot that a play exemplifies scientific truths about the conceptual possibilities of human life and action. In this sense a plot is the formal cause of a play, but appearing as something internal to the play itself. There it assumes the status of a final cause. Characters exist for the sake of the action, Aristotle insists, and since the plot is the action, the end and purpose of a tragedy is its plot. (Poetics 1450a 20-23). The action is also an efficient cause. It is the first essential, the life and soul of a tragedy. (Poetics 1450a 39). A complete action has a beginning that initiates change, a middle that is both caused and produces effects, and an end that is caused but produces nothing further. Since a plot is the complete action of a tragedy it expresses a causal force; it is the continuously active, efficient cause that links the various incidents together into an etiological chain. This force is internal to the tragic spectacle, being related to it as a soul is related to an animal's body. Thus, not only do the final, formal and efficient causes coincide in the tragedy, as they do in any organism, they also reside within it. The tragic spectacle is therefore an example of immanent causation. That it is to be traced ultimately to a playwright compromises this truth, but no more than the tracing of a child to a father compromises the truth that it, the child, is nonetheless a growing organism that belongs to the order of kinesis kata physin. Aristotle describes tragedy -- and with it other forms of imitation -- as a genre of both formal and immanent art. It is not, then, properly art at all -- kinesis apo technes -- but an example of what arises by nature.

Part 6

Anyone who is bothered by this paradoxical conclusion may protest that it relies on too literal a reading of Aristotle and that he did not wish to classify the imitative arts as parts of nature. "Nature, after all, is formed from living matter in Aristotle's view," one might say, "and he surely realized that poems, pictures, musical compositions, and even dramatic spectacles, for all their use of actors and actresses, are not themselves living things. The fine arts imitate nature, certainly, but surely their differing materials and structures belong -- as Randall claims they do¹ -- to art." Aristotle, however, does not distinguish art from nature in terms of either structure or material. Art is simply eminent and transient causation. Nature is simply formal and immanent causation. By the terms of that distinction the "arts" that imitate the actions of nature are themselves natural. The action of a tragedy is not merely analogous to the actions of human life such as is shipbuilding. It is an improved version of them. It is, so to speak, life remade. Its only causally distinctive feature is that it illustrates kinesis kata physin better than most anything else in our lives. It is, then, a part of nature. Imitations for Aristotle belong to the order imitated.

That principle is one that any reader of Aristotle should be loath to challenge, for he apparently accepted it consciously and with a contentious point in mind. It is, in fact, an extension of his stance in the Politics where he argues that many of our legal and political creations arise by nature. The state itself owes, he insists, its existence to a natural impulse. The family is a natural social unit. Slavery is natural. Even a certain kind of finance is natural. Laws that correspond to the intentions of nature are themselves natural. No one, for example, who observes the laws governing slavery acts contrary to nature -- at least in those cases where slavery is made both expedient and right by nature's intent. (Politics I, chs. 3,4,5). The just law enjoins natural behavior. The whole of a fully just society would therefore belong to the order of nature. The practice of imitation would be a feature of such a society, for it stems from a natural impulse we share with other animals. (Poetics 1448b 4-21). The Poetics in its argument is an addendum to the Politics. Its esthetic theory reflects Aristotle's political and social doctrine, and it is not to be dismissed as a bizarre, argumentative accident. When Aristotle writes, as he does repeatedly, that a well made play is like an organism in proportion and unity (Poetics 1450b 35-1451a 5; 1459a 20-25), he is not indulging in a thoughtless cliché of art criticism. Anything that belongs to the order of nature will, his point is, have the organic traits of something natural. The imitative arts really do produce, not artifacts, but natural things.

It is because they do that the plot of a drama has priority over its characters. Nature is a realm of natural action. The plot is the action of the play. For the play to belong to the order of nature its plot must of necessity be a natural action. If the plot is neglected or given even a secondary priority so that it fails to bear the marks of what is natural, the aim of imitation will be frustrated. It is, in short, the naturalness of the plot-action that gives to the play its standing as a product of nature. That standing is of first importance. Thus the first essential, the very soul, of a play is its plot.

The natural standing of a tragedy also explains why Aristotle credits to it a therapeutic effect. Nature resembles nothing so much as a doctor doctoring himself, Aristotle says. If a tragedy really does arise by nature, then one should be able to see in it an example of nature's most distinctive behavior. Some kind of medicinal practice should be evident, and indeed it is. A tragedy is an improved, more formal version of life than actual history affords and so shows in

its own spectacle the effect of nature's self ministrations. As an object of contemplation, however, it will also arouse "in us" -- natural beings all -- the presumably pathological emotions of pity and fear in order to bring about their purgation. Just how it achieves this effect Aristotle, of course, does not say, thereby inviting the speculations of commentators. There can be little doubt, however, that he does have a medicinal sense in mind for the word "purgation," or "catharsis." The argument of the Poetics is like the argument of virtually the whole of Aristotle's work. It rests on the metaphysics of his philosophy of nature. It is there that one should go to understand his intent. Other sources are not likely to be of help. Else, for example, appeals to the model of a trial to explain the doctrine of catharsis, but the result is unconvincing.² He argues that a tragedy for Aristotle is like, not nature, but a pre-trial hearing in which, typically, the hero's criminal but naive acts are purged, or purified, by the poet-lawyer of the suspicion of having been contaminated with heinous desires, and that he is to be pitied but not condemned by the judgment of the chorus to the purifying rites of an ecclesiastical execution. This effort to fix "catharsis" with a legal sense is not a creditable reading of Aristotle. The purifying rite of an execution comes after a judgment of moral pollution has been rendered. If the verdict of the chorus is that the hero is innocent, and so free of moral pollution, then no ritual purification -- no catharsis -- is needed. Aristotle could have thought of the process of proving the tragic hero's purity of motive as cathartic only by equating proof of innocence with punishment, and he is unlikely to have done anything as confused as that. The more viable view of the Poetics is that it gives to tragedy all the traits of nature, including that of acting as a doctor to itself.

Part 7

Aristotle does not extend his paradoxical analyses of the fine arts to industrial genres. Fences, ships, and couches remain for him the products of art -- that is, of kinesis apo technes. Randall claims that any distinction between the fine and industrial arts would have been unintelligible to Aristotle,³ but that is most certainly not so. The major distinction of his metaphysics divides them. Only the fine arts are examples of kinesis kata physin. That Aristotle draws a distinction between the unnatural art of carpentry and the natural art of poetry cannot be ignored without doing violence to his stance. The question to be asked about his esthetic theory is not that of why he failed to see a difference between these arts, but why he distinguished between them in so radical and paradoxical a manner.

A straightforward answer to that question would seem to be available. Aristotle's theory of art is, first of all -- an example of remnant Platonism in his work. The fine arts that imitate nature were for Plato also arts that belong to the order of nature. All living things, he stressed, strive to achieve a vicarious immortality for themselves by way of reproduction. That striving is obviously present in poets and politicians, imitators both, who merely use the more enduring vehicles of song and law to keep their memories green. The teleology of the works that imitate nature thus is the same as the teleology of any plant or animal. Since the difference between true art and nature is a teleological difference, most of the work of the politician and the poet is actually a product of nature, not of art. One only has to ask a poet such as Ion to see that this conclusion is true. He will readily admit that something divine is the inspired source of his verses. Since nature is really divine art, those verses obviously

arise by nature -- not by a true art whose principles could be taught. They are, so the Republic Book Ten argues, clearly different from such genuine, human arts as couch making and bridle design. Thus if we are ever to live in a fully human society we will have to banish the whole of that mob of political and poetic imitators who take the divine, organic art of nature as their guide. Plato's distinction between the human arts of industry and the divine arts of imitation is, obviously, the source of Aristotle's parallel distinction. The paradoxical ring of that distinction is really nothing more than an echo reverberating from its Platonic source.

Still, Aristotle's attitude toward the imitative arts is different from that of Plato. The naturalness of a well made tragedy is for him a high point in its favor, the natural being the hallmark of intelligence and virtue. He argues that we ought to do precisely what Plato condemned. We should make our laws, institutions, and arts as natural as possible, for the unnatural condition is an evil. (Politics 1254a 1-2). Plato's first loyalties were to what he regarded as human in us. Aristotle's first loyalties are to what he regards as natural in us. Given that attitude, the more he can analyze as natural about our actions the more he can justify our lives. Thus he seizes upon the example afforded by Plato's peculiar analysis of the fine arts to link them to the sanctifying order of nature. His failure to treat the industrial and fine arts in the same way is therefore a symptom both of his dependence upon Plato and of a quarrel with him.

That quarrel, of course, is also an inherited motif in Aristotle's work. It links him to the party of sophists that Plato had attacked. Plato's work had grown in response to the sophistic dispute between the so-called friends of nomos, or convention, or art -- as represented by Gorgias and Protagoras -- and the so-called friends of physis, or nature -- as represented by Diogenes and Antiphon. Plato's ploy was to undermine the distinction between nomos and physis by developing a teleological cosmology in which physis was itself a kind of nomos. We cannot live, his point was, in accord with nature as the friends of physis wish us to because there is no worldly nature to live in accord with. What we call nature is divine art. Although he undermined the sophists' debate in this manner, Plato's sympathies were obviously with the party upholding the claims of nomos over physis, for it is, he stressed, our own, human arts and conventions -- not those of nature -- that we should cultivate and make the basis of our culture. Aristotle's sympathies are with the friends of physis. His quarrel with Plato thus represents a reemergence of the major debate of the sophistic age within the context of a teleological cosmology that draws intimate parallels between artificial and natural processes. His work is a counter attack from the ranks of those who upheld the claims of physis over nomos.

It is sometimes said the whole of Western philosophy can be divided into Platonic and Aristotlian schools, and that may be true enough to pass as a weighty remark. It would be truer and weightier yet, however, were it altered to read that Western philosophy shows the divisions of Greece's sophistic age. Plato's and Aristotle's equally odd but nonetheless rival treatments of the distinction between the natural and unnatural arts shows them to have been sparring in a new arena but for an old cause.

Notes:

1. John Herman Randall, Jr. Aristotle (Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 277.
2. G. F. Else, Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument (Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 438.
3. Randall, Aristotle, p. 278.