

Book Review

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Gillet, Grant. *From Aristotle to Cognitive Neuroscience*. Cham: Springer, 2018, pp. 166.

In the contemporary scenario of the philosophy of mind, there are two divergent streams of explanations regarding the character of the human soul (*psyche*). The Cartesian tradition illustrates the human body and soul as two independent metaphysical substances and the empiricists, on the other hand, deny this extreme division between mind and soul and argue that the human soul has a natural development. Grant Gillet attempts in his book to establish the theory of the *embodied soul* based on the Aristotelian description of the human soul that proposes the theory of the natural development of the soul.

One of the significant aspects of the Cartesian theory of soul, which Gillet tries to disavow, is its extreme solipsistic nature and the illustration of the soul (self) as a metaphysical entity isolated from the rest of the world. Cartesian self is a solitary or even an epistemically self-sufficient phenomenon. The central thesis that Gillet tries to defend is that our cognitive skills do not have an isolated development, depending solely on our thinking and reflections, as Cartesian arguments might assume. Human beings are primarily social beings; their cognitive skills develop through social interactions—thorough shared experiences, knowledge, and moral imperatives. Above all, Gillet takes a different stance from Cartesianism by arguing that the purpose of the cognitive skills is essentially social adaptation and survival, not epistemic.

The Title of the book, *From Aristotle to Cognitive Neuroscience*, fits very well to the structure and the content of the book because Gillett's journey in the book is historically based, a journey which begins with the Aristotelian theory of the soul and is gradually expanded with the help of philosophical schools and arguments that support his specific intention in the book. He describes not only the two different traditions in the philosophy of mind but also tries to integrate different historical developments related to the description of the human mind, namely, Aristotelianism, Wittgenstein's analysis of the language, evolutionary concept of

human consciousness, the phenomenology of Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and the current analytical philosophy of mind and consciousness. The detailed narratives and the specific references to the different philosophical arguments reveal a peculiar nature of Gillet's line of reasoning, which is also the distinct philosophical approach of the author, namely, *Discursive naturalism*.

Discursive naturalism might sound unfamiliar to many readers but it is ultimately the concept applied by Gillet to explain in the present-day scenario the classical Aristotelian concept of *autopoiesis* (self-formation or dynamic self-organisation) in *De Anima*. It is against the Cartesian understanding of the soul which conceives the soul as a distinct substance from the body and has an isolated existence. Through the opening statement of the abstract in the first chapter itself, Gillet gives the outline of Aristotle's theory. (According to Gillet, the Aristotelian concept of the soul denotes that the human being is *not merely a physical thing* and the division into body and soul is *conceptual* and not in terms of different metaphysical substances). The human soul in Aristotelian explanation develops through the training and communication and it has, on the other hand, a gradual development. Human beings have two natures; the first one biological or the attributes they are born with, and the second nature which they develop in themselves. Human beings are social beings and interaction and communication with others play a significant role in the development of the *psyche*. It is through the training and communication, "through perception, action, and reasoning", the second nature is developed that helps the human soul to be a being-in-the-world. In contemporary terms, consciousness can be demonstrated as the interwoven neurocognitive functions that include both sensory-motor functions and the "human integration with our adaptation to discourse and being with others" (p. 39).

Since the second nature (consciousness) develop in a realm of communication, cognitive skills—like language, the application of concepts and predicates with underlying logical structures, and so on—play a crucial role in this process. So to say, cognition is an intersubjective or social activity too, whereby we use mutually shared concepts to perceive things and to communicate with each other what we perceive (*propositionising*). Therefore, *autopoiesis* which demonstrates a triple relationship—to the body, to the

world, and to oneself—takes place in an intersubjective context and since it takes place in the space of reason, it is *discursive* in nature. This is the essential argument that Gillet tries to unfold in the book with further arguments that are indispensable in the current discussions on the human mind and consciousness. These arguments can be summarised in the following points.

a. The phenomenism of Brentano, Husserl, and Sartre confirms the thesis of the embodied theory of the human soul, with its argument of human existence as being-in-the-world with intersubjective interactions and communication.

b. Evolutionary neurology substantiates *discursive naturalism* by arguing that the human interactions with the world and others together with our sensory-motor functions play an important role for a better adaptation beyond animal capacities. Significant here is that, as socio-political beings, we take part in a shared realm of information through communication.

c. Moral thoughts and human values, in general, signify a neurocognitive integration that, on the other hand, points again to a triple relation of the soul – to the world, to others and to the self – in which social interaction, communication, and reasoning are again the core aspects.

In general, Gillet's *discursive naturalism* is the introduction of a creative theory about the human soul, which is an attempt also to re-establish the authority of the Aristotelian thesis of *autopoiesis* from *De Anima*. Further, for the successful explication of his thesis, Gillet adapted *naturalism* and he tries to demonstrate many cognitive functions as neurophysiological. In complex language structures, the author enumerates a large number of arguments from different scenarios of the philosophy of mind, which support his explanation of the soul. All these arguments are woven together with the help of the single central argument that is *discursive naturalism* and they revolve around the concepts of intersubjectivity, communication, reasoning and the use of language. These aspects, on the other hand, refer to active elements in the development of consciousness or soul. Gillet moves along the current discussions about the theory of the embodied soul which to a great extent depend on the new developments in cognitive neuroscience.

Gillet's attempt to challenge the Cartesian theory of the soul and to substantiate the thesis of the embodied soul is founded on the argument that the human mind is not an isolated metaphysical entity, but rather a phenomenon which develops primarily through social interaction and communication. Nevertheless, some of the arguments in the book give us the impression that the neurocognitive and social elements in the development of consciousness are overemphasised. Consequently, many subjective elements related to consciousness are suppressed or neglected. It is not only through social interaction and communication that we acquire knowledge. We cannot neglect the part played by reflection, reasoning, or introspection by the subject on the elementary information that he receives from others, from society. It is a fact that human beings are social animals, but it is also a fact that they are unique individuals. It seems that Gillet has failed to address the fact that even though we are social beings and share a large amount of objective information, the way we think, feel, comprehend, reason, analyse, and finally, adapt to specific social situations are extremely unique and individualistic. Individualistic or subjective elements in the development of consciousness shall not be neglected.

Nevertheless, the creativity and intelligence which are revealed in Gillet's descriptions in *From Aristotle to Cognitive Neuroscience* are quite impressive. Through the systematic development of the thesis of *discursive naturalism* based on Aristotelian *autopoiesis* and with the support of the many present-day theories about the soul, the author manages to establish his ideas about the development of human consciousness. This is a book with its complexity meant for the readers advanced in topics like the philosophy of mind and cognitive neuroscience. It would be helpful for the readers who wish to substantiate their information on the theory of the soul from a new perspective, i.e., *discursive naturalism*.