Aristotle's *De anima*

Aristotle's *De anima* is the first systematic philosophical account of the soul, which serves to explain the functioning of all mortal living things. In his commentary, Ronald Polansky argues that the work is far more structured and systematic than previously supposed. He contends that Aristotle seeks a comprehensive understanding of the soul and its faculties. By closely tracing the unfolding of the many-layered argumentation and the way Aristotle fits his inquiry meticulously within his scheme of the sciences, Polansky answers questions relating to the general definition of soul and the treatment of each of the soul's principal capacities: nutrition, sense perception, *phantasia*, intellect, and locomotion. The commentary sheds new light on every section of the *De anima* and the work as a unit. It offers a challenge to earlier and current interpretations of the relevance and meaning of Aristotle's highly influential treatise.

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for Susan

Thus it seems to me, he said, the person not knowing his own power is ignorant of himself. Οὕτως ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ, ἔφη, ὁ μὴ εἰδὼς τὴν αὑτοῦ δύναμιν ἀγνοεῖν ἑαυτόν.

Xenophon *Memorabilia* iv 2.25

Do you think, then, that it is possible to reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the world as a whole? Ψυχῆς οὖν φύσιν ἀξίως λόγου κατανοῆσαι οἴει δυνατὸν εἶναι ἄνευ τῆς τοῦ ὅλου φύσεως;

Plato *Phaedrus* 270c

His account of the soul is unclear: in three whole books you cannot say clearly what Aristotle thinks about the soul. (Ὁ) δὲ Περὶ ψυχῆς αὐτῷ λόγος ἐστὶν ἀσαφής· ἐν τρισὶ γὰρ συγγράμ<μ>ασιν ὅλοις οὐκ ἔστιν εἰπεῖν σαφῶς ὅ τι φρονεῖ περὶ ψυχῆς Ἀριστοτέλης.

Hippolytus *Refutatio omnium Haeresium* vii 19.5

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Preface

Near the *De anima*'s beginning, after indicating how fine and important inquiry into the soul is, Aristotle comments about the extreme difficulty of the enterprise: "In every way and altogether it is most difficult to gain any conviction concerning it" (402a10–11). If Aristotle then manages to develop a compelling account, we must be impressed and pleased with the accomplishment. But examination of the text may prove unsettling because it seems frequently obscure, and continued study may disclose discouraging tensions and disagreements. What are we to make of this work?

Thinkers prior to Aristotle audaciously sought comprehensive understanding of the world and its prodigious array of phenomena, living beings holding special fascination for them. The tradition of the history of philosophy initiated by Aristotle suggests that philosophy very soon turned its attention from the near at hand to the wider cosmos, and only later with Socrates focused on the human life (see *Metaphysics* 982b11–17 and 987b1–4).[1] In fact, however, the human being and life-bestowing soul were of interest right from the start. The first philosophical fragment, that of Anaximander (DK 12B1), compares the scheme of the universe to the system of human justice, and Anaximenes (DK 13B2) has the human soul unifying us much as the cosmos is unified. Surely Xenophanes and Heraclitus, as well as Parmenides, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus, reflect deeply upon human life. With Socrates and Plato the reflection intensifies and perhaps turns in some new directions. Hence considerable previous investigation must be taken into account when Aristotle sets out to produce his treatise on the soul. He continues and expands the project of comprehensive understanding of his predecessors with enhanced

[1] Aristotle invents the history of philosophy, even though he imitates Plato's *Phaedo* 96a ff. in tracing in *Metaphysics* i the thought about causes of the predecessors. Aristotle rather than Plato speaks of the earlier thinkers starting with Thales as philosophizing (e.g., 982b11–12, 983b2, b6). For Plato only those admitting Forms are philosophers, and hence he may view Parmenides as depicted in the *Parmenides* as a philosopher, but he never calls any other of the Presocratics "philosopher." He does ironically speak of Evenus (*Phaedo* 61c) as "philosopher" and the soldiers in *Republic* 375e, but for him the only genuine philosophers accept the Forms.

methodological awareness and sensitivity. He attempts to fit analysis of soul within the entire framework of the sciences that he has elaborated.

Contributing to the difficulty of the *De anima*, then, is not only the recalcitrance of the subject matter itself but also the considerable existing work containing dazzling proposals and Aristotle's preparation for producing a rigorous treatment of his subject. Despite the appearance of and commentators' occasional complaints about untidy, careless, or inconsistent passages, Aristotle's work will be shown to be remarkably systematic and to display meticulous organization. From start to finish he is in control of his material.

Aristotle scrupulously attends in the *De anima* as throughout his corpus to what is appropriate within specific sciences. While living beings may serve as subject matter for theoretical, practical, and productive sciences, the *De anima* is the concentrated theoretical examination of soul and its leading faculties. He first traces perplexities confronting his inquiry and his predecessors' conflicting positions on the soul. This leads to his own "most common account of soul" presupposed for developing acounts of the major powers of soul. The general definition clarifies the relationship of soul to body, demarcates the parts of soul, and illuminates the connections of these parts.

His investigation proceeds typically from what is most widely shared to what is less universal. Hence subsequent to the general account of soul, the soul's most widely shared capacity, nutrition, is analyzed, followed by sense perception and then mind. This pattern takes us from the more readily to the less readily understood faculties, even if these are ultimately more intelligible, and from the more necessary to the more exalted. There are some crucial exceptions. For example, sight is investigated before touch, though contact sense is most widely shared, because Aristotle must introduce the sense medium to oppose the way many predecessors turn all perception into a kind of touch. And mind comes before locomotion because both sense perception and intellection can provide the cognition directing progressive animal motion. The order of treatment is thus always quite deliberate and contributes as well to his manner of treatment. Throughout, he tracks analogy pervading the faculties of soul. This adds lucidity to his analysis and completeness. Functional parts of soul, in accord with the priority in intelligibility of actuality to potentiality, are understood in terms of their operations and these in terms of their objects. Moreover, he focuses on the fundamental operations of the soul in relation to their most basic objects, for example, sense perception of proper sensible objects, as color for vision and sound for hearing, and intellection of the key intelligible objects, essences apart from matter. Thereby he gets to what is most essential and attains greater precision at the suitable level of generality. Design can thus be seen to govern every aspect of Aristotle's treatment of soul.

The exactingly planned treatment holds special interest if it provides a thoroughly worked-out portrait of soul based upon penetrating self-understanding. Might this first fully systematic account of soul and its capacities employ approaches and contain insights that challenge our own lines of reflection, or is it merely a relic of outmoded thought? The continuing pertinence or lack thereof of Aristotle's treatment of soul remains a disputed topic among scholars throughout the intellectual

tradition until the present.[2] The most vexed issues are how to understand his general definition of soul, what sort of account of sense perception he is providing, and how he conceives of mind. This commentary, through persistent attention to Aristotle's exceedingly well-constructed text, strives to resolve these long-running issues in the interpretation of the *De anima*.

The *De anima*, complete and comprehensive as it seeks to be, is remarkably compact. Words are not wasted; lines that seem merely repetitious or summative add something. Phrases initially appearing opaque can be seen to lend themselves to highly structured argumentation. Yet the vital arguments are not always flagged or are barely flagged. The reader often has to formalize the arguments. The Greek text can frequently bear several possible readings, and occasionally a claim appears to contradict something said previously. Such obscurity, inexplicitness, and tension in the text can be viewed as intentional, serving pedagogical and other purposes. Though commentators tend to fasten upon a single correct reading, Aristotle sometimes deliberately utilizes disciplined ambiguity.[3] Key terms with several meanings permit subtle distinctions that skirt apparent contradiction. And a passage sustaining multiple readings may introduce several reinforcing points or come into play in several concurrent arguments. This many-layered argumentation contributes to the exhaustiveness of inquiry and exposition.

This commentary devotes itself to philosophical argumentation and presentation as much as to doctrine. Establishing the argumentative contexts clarifies obscure terms, statements, and passages. Despite his aspirations for comprehensiveness, Aristotle is quite careful about what concepts and methods are suited and employed for each particular context. Caution must therefore be exercised about appealing to other places in Aristotle's corpus, or even relying on later sections of the *De anima* itself for following the argument. One should patiently locate and construe an argument within its immediate surroundings and through its own progressive development. The urge to jump ahead or elsewhere must be resisted so that attention remains upon what the author actually is saying, no easy task. Sometimes when needed, Aristotle himself refers explicitly to other treatises or contexts. In reconstructing the argumentation, we need to follow its unfolding and allow for multiple

[2] Burnyeat 1995a pointedly raises the question whether Aristotle's "philosophy of mind is still credible" and answers no because he claims that Aristotle finds little role for physiological change in his account of sense perception. Burnyeat has followers, such as Broadie 1993 and Johansen 1997, but even more opponents, such as many of the authors in Nussbaum and Rorty eds. 1995, Silverman 1989, Everson 1997, and Caston 2005.

[3] Barnes 1992, 267–270, observes, "The ancient commentators take it for granted that Aristotle is obscure – and they standardly ask *why* he was obscure" (268). Barnes quotes Simplicius for the answer frequently offered by the Neoplatonists, "The ancients did not want vulgar cobblers to lay hands on their wisdom, which they therefore disguised: some used myths, others symbols – and Aristotle preferred obscurity. [He did so] perhaps because he disliked the indeterminate meaning of myths and symbols . . . perhaps because he supposed that such obscurity would exercise our wits" (quoting *In cat.* 7,1–9). While Aristotle may deliberately conceal, the obscurity of the treatises probably has more to do with their function as educational materials and the difficulty of their topics. If ambiguity is deliberately employed and passages are obscure, this may help explain textual variations in manuscripts: ancient readers and copyists have tried to lessen ambiguity and obscurity.

levels of meaning. By such an approach we may access Aristotle's intense effort to secure full understanding of soul. Doing justice to the text enjoins the exhilarating task of capturing the very soul of Aristotle's account of soul.

What I hope emerges is a work that may helpfully be read continuously or consulted for a troubling passage or term. As Aristotle aims for a complete and comprehensive understanding of soul, my goal is comprehensive understanding of Aristotle's text in its pursuit of such fullness. The orderly progression of argument, its manner of articulating its field, and the connection of this treatise with the rest of the treatises are special concerns, along with its endlessly stimulating positions on soul, sense perception, and mind. In producing this work that tries to offer light everywhere and throughout, I have sought to deal fairly with the wealth of existing secondary literature, a large task in itself.

Some years ago Myles Burnyeat led a seminar on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* vii–ix that I was fortunate to attend. In discussing ix 6.1048b18–35, Myles insisted that the passage that introduces the distinction of motion (κίνησις) and activity (ἐνέργεια) does not really belong within the *Metaphysics*. This view is hardly unprecedented because the passage is absent from the best manuscripts. What was surprising, however, was his further insistence that the passage does not belong at all in theoretical contexts in Aristotle but only in practical works. This provoked me to show that the distinction plays a vital role in the *De anima*, obviously a theoretical text. Thus began this commentary. It is my view that this distinction is crucial to Aristotle's thought about the soul, yet he refrains from using it too explicitly since it has no clear place within natural science or physics, the study of movable beings and their natural principles. Since the study of soul seems to belong largely within physics, the distinction will appear infrequently and bashfully. Attention to the distinction does have some basis occasionally in the text itself (e.g., 431a4–7). Yet we can explain why the distinction does not appear often and more explicitly by noting Aristotle's persistent regard for what is contextually appropriate. In tracking the way Aristotle might then have resources to go beyond what fits strictly within physics, even when he does not typically avail himself of them, we need not run afoul of my urging to stick closely to what he says in the order in which he says it. In correspondence Myles has indicated that he agrees with me that in fact Aristotle has the distinction in play in the *De anima* but inexplicitly because it goes beyond physics.[4] Our disagreement regarding the place of the notion of activity in theoretical contexts seeming to have evaporated, my investigations, which had already greatly outgrown the original intention, nevertheless continued. The reader possesses the results.

[4] Myles has provoked considerable controversy with his interpretation of *sense perception* in the *De anima*, and his denial that much takes place in the body when sensing occurs (see Burnyeat 1995a). But he perhaps surprisingly presents his interpretation without introducing the distinction of motion and activity that might seem so central to it. Sense perceiving is activity rather than any sort of motion. It will be a contribution of this commentary to show that distinguishing activity and motion permits Aristotle to have sense-perceiving be psychical activity while also involving some bodily motion.

Along with my gratitude to Myles for provoking this project, and Beatrice Rehl, Sarah McColl, James Dunn, Janis Bolster, and Susan Thornton from Cambridge University Press for seeing the manuscript through to completion, I thank for many sorts of inspiration those involved in the reading group on the *De anima* at the University of Pittsburgh. Participants over the years have included Andrea Falcon, James Lennox, Helen Cullyer, Greg Salmieri, Sebastian Roedl, Jessica Moss, James Allen, Allan Gotthelf, Tiberiu Popa, Kathleen Cook, John Anders, Tony Coumoundouros, Pat Macfarlane, Michael Ivins, Evan Strevell, John Russell, John Harvey, Sasha Newton, Rhett Jenkins, and Tophur Kurphess. Carl Lemke provided assistance regarding signet rings. My graduate students at Duquesne University, especially Michael Ivins, Bay Woods, Mark Brouwer, Tony Coumoundouros, Pat Macfarlane, Emily Katz, David Hoinski, Joseph Cimakasky, Michael Daley, Eric Mohr, Dominic Alvarado, Geoff Bagwell, and Patrick Reider, have also aided me. Andrea, Greg, Tony, Patrick, Geoff, Dominic, and Michael, along with John Sisko, Fred Miller, Ben Schomakers, Allan Bäck, Arnis Redovics-Ritups, and an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press, offered many constructive suggestions on many parts of the commentary. I am most grateful for their help. Each new effort to read Aristotle's text has disclosed new possibilities.

My debts to my wife, Susan, are greatest of all, and to her I dedicate this book.

Abbreviations

Works of Aristotle

Cat.	*Categories*
DA	*De anima*
DC	*De caelo*
De incessu an.	*De incessu animalium*
De insomn.	*De insomniis*
De int.	*De interpretatione*
De juv.	*De juventute*
De long.	*De longitudine vitae*
De mem.	*De memoria*
De motu	*De motu animalium*
De resp.	*De respiratione*
DI	*De interpretatione*
EE	*Eudemian Ethics*
GA	*Generation of Animals*
GC	*De generatione et corruptione*
HA	*Historia Animalium*
Meta.	*Metaphysics*
Meteor.	*Meteorology*
MM	*Magna Moralia*
NE	*Nicomachean Ethics*
PA	*Parts of Animals*
Phys.	*Physics*
Pol.	*Politics*
Post. An.	*Posterior Analytics*
Rhet.	*Rhetoric*

Other Works

Apol.	Plato *Apology of Socrates*
DK	Diels, H., and W. Kranz. 1951. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 5th edn. Berlin: Weidmannsche.

D.L.	Diogenes Laertius *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*
Enn.	Plotinus *Enneads*
Il.	Homer *Iliad*
LSJ	Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones. 1940. *A Greek-English Lexicon.* 9th edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Od.	Homer *Odyssey*