

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 44 (1987)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Remarks on dualism and the definition of soul in Aristotle's De anima

Autor: O'Meara, Dominic J.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-34283>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 21.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Remarks on Dualism and the Definition of Soul in Aristotle's *De anima*

By Dominic J. O'Meara, Fribourg

Aristotle's treatment of soul in the *De anima* is sufficiently complex and incomplete (if not ambiguous) to have lent itself as support to very different, even contradictory philosophical positions. If in antiquity Alexander of Aphrodisias could emphasize Aristotle's idea of soul as the structure of a certain kind of body, the Neoplatonists would exploit other indications in Aristotle, in particular of the immateriality and immortality of the rational soul, in order to make soul a reality prior to and independent of the body. A similar conflict may be observed in a number of recent studies of the *De anima*. If on the whole Aristotle is taken to reject a Platonic dualism of soul and body, replacing it with a materialist or functionalist account of soul, the difficulty remains that he treats the intellective function of soul as in some sense immaterial and immortal, thus independent of body. How is this difficulty to be resolved? Should Aristotle's account of the intellective function be regarded simply as a vestige of Platonism (perhaps representing an earlier stage in his intellectual development), or as an echo of certain religious beliefs, neither having right of place in his mature philosophy? Is Aristotle on the contrary a dualist? Or is there a genuine and unresolved theoretical tension in the account of the soul in the *De anima*?¹

In what follows I would like to argue that Aristotle's dualistic tendency, far from being superficial and foreign to his general approach to the question of soul, is a consequence of the application of this approach. I shall begin with a brief review of some aspects of Aristotle's attempt to formulate what soul is in general in *De anima* II 1–2, and then try to bring out the ways in which the

1 Cf. H. Robinson, *Aristotelian Dualism*, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 1 (1983) 123–144; M. Nussbaum, *Aristotelian Dualism: Reply to Howard Robinson*, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 2 (1984) 197–207; and (among others) C. Kahn, *Sensation and Consciousness in Aristotle's Psychology*, Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 48 (1966) 43–81; R. Sorabji, *Body and Soul in Aristotle*, Philosophy 49 (1974) 63–84 (Kahn and Sorabji are reprinted in: *Articles on Aristotle* 4. *Psychology and Aesthetics*, ed. J. Barnes et al., London 1978); M. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De motu animalium* (Princeton 1978); E. Hartman, *Substance, Body and Soul* (Princeton 1977). For the modern inspiration of much of this work (i.e. the critique in analytical philosophy of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body) cf. H. Robinson, *Mind and Body in Aristotle*, Classical Quarterly 28 (1978) 105–124. Two recent and different attempts to make Aristotle consistent (neither of which I find convincing) are E. Berti, *Aristote était-il un penseur dualiste?* *ΘΠ* 2 (1973) 73–111, and R. Bolton, *Aristotle's Definitions of the Soul: De anima II, 1–3*, *Phronesis* 23 (1978) 258–278.

subsequent treatment of specific psychic functions, in particular sense-perception and intellection, relates to the general definition of soul in II 1–2. Inevitably, familiar ground must be covered once again and it will hardly be possible to do justice here to the complexities of the subject. However the following remarks might contribute to a better understanding of the manner in which Aristotle arrived at disconcerting and scarcely intelligible conclusions, at least as concerns the human soul, in the *De anima*.

I

Having attempted to say what soul is in general (κοινότατος λόγος, 412 a 5–6) in *De anima* II 1–2, Aristotle points out that such a formula is inadequate (414 b 20ff.). For there is no such thing as soul in general. “Soul” is rather a term designating a number of different organic functions – nutrition, reproduction, movement, perception, intellection – and it is in relation to each of these specific psychic functions that the analysis must proceed (414 b 32), as indeed it does in the following chapters. This is not to say that the task of giving a general λόγος of soul is impossible². However one might well ask why Aristotle nevertheless seeks a general formulation of soul in the preceding two chapters, and what role he intends this formulation to play (if any) in the subsequent analysis of specific psychic functions.

Looking back to the general definition of soul in II 1–2, one notices a further problem. Aristotle appears there to offer, not one, but two approaches to defining soul, one identifying soul as the form or actuality of a certain kind of body (II 1), the other designating soul as the cause of various organic functions (II 2). What is the relation between these two ways of formulating a general account of soul?

The approach in II 1 might be described as “metaphysical” in that it has as its point of departure a doctrine of substance (οὐσία). Summarizing points that are discussed with greater precision in the *Metaphysics* (in particular in Book Z³), Aristotle indicates (412 a 6ff.) that by substance might be meant: matter or potency (which is not a particular thing, τόδε τι); form or actuality (what makes something a particular thing); or what is composed of both, the individual thing. If we assume further that natural bodies and in particular living bodies are substances⁴, then they are such as composed, their bodies corresponding to

2 Cf. Philoponus, *In Aristotelis De anima libros commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 15, Berlin 1877) 257, 7ff.; D. W. Hamlyn, *Aristotle's De anima Books II and III* (Oxford 1968) 93–94; J. Barnes, *Aristotle's Concept of Mind*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 72 (1971–72) 102 (reprinted in: *Articles on Aristotle*). In translating the term λόγος as ‘formula’ and ‘account’ as well as ‘definition’, I wish to avoid suggesting a narrow meaning for the term.

3 Cf. Hamlyn, *Aristotle's De anima* 82ff.

4 Cf. *Metaphysics* Z 2, 1028 b 8ff.; indeed living bodies are treated as paradigm substances in *Metaphysics* Z.

matter, their soul being consequently the form that makes them to be such as they are, namely organisms. Aristotle goes on of course to refine this account of soul⁵. However we might already conclude that this account consists in finding for soul its appropriate place within a metaphysical theory of substance. In fact the account provides an answer to the question raised at the beginning of the *De anima* (I 1, 402 a 23–26) as to which of the categories (substance, quality, quantity) is that to which soul belongs: soul is substance in the sense of the form of a certain kind of body (412 b 10–11).

This way of defining soul yields immediate dividends, for it resolves the difficulty of the union between soul and body (412 b 6–9: soul is just the form of a kind of body) and points towards an answer to the question of immortality: there can be none for what is merely the function of a body. However, Aristotle concedes that there may be psychic functions separate from body (413 a 3–7). He is referring in all likelihood to intellection, with which he associates a little later (413 b 24–27) the possibility of an existence separate from body. Aristotle's concession is remarkable⁶. It means that his attempt to give a general account of soul in II 1 is not successful, since this account does not cover every kind (γένος, cf. 413 b 26) of psychic function. Nor is it clear in consequence how such an account could be of use if it is intended to furnish the general lines to be followed in the analysis of each psychic function in the chapters that follow. What we might call the "metaphysical" definition of soul in *De anima* II 1 must be rated, for Aristotle at least, as a failure.

In II 2 Aristotle makes a new start (413 a 13 πάλιν οὕτω γ' ἐπελθεῖν), not as if recognizing the failure of the definition of II 1, but as if finding it in need of supplementation. For, he says, a definition should show not only the fact (τὸ ὅτι), but also the cause (τὴν αἰτίαν). What he means by this is not immediately clear. We may suppose him to be indicating that a definition of soul that shows soul as the actuality of a certain kind of body ought to be supplemented in such a way that the reason or cause of soul (or perhaps of the living body) being such as it is is identified⁷. In order to do this, Aristotle refers again to the various living functions that distinguish organic from inorganic things. These functions imply a cause or principle (ἀρχή) of activity within them (413 a 26–27). As soul is what distinguishes living things, it can be identified as the cause or principle of living functions, a cause defined by them (τούτοις ὁρίζεται, 413 b 11–13).

Aristotle's approach here in II 2 can be compared to that found in the first

5 For a critical discussion cf. J. Ackrill, *Aristotle's Definitions of Psyche*, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 73 (1972–73) 119–133 (reprinted in *Articles on Aristotle*).

6 O. Gigon speaks of Aristotle's "verblüffende Nonchalance" here (*Physik und Metaphysik in Aristoteles' Περί ψυχῆς*, *Energieia*. Etudes ... offertes à Mgr. Jannone, Paris 1986, 168).

7 Cf. Philoponus *In De anima* 225, 37ff.; J. Owens, *Aristotle's Definition of Soul*: Philomathes. Studies ... in Memory of Philip Merlan, ed. R. Palmer et al. (The Hague 1971), reprinted in J. Owens, *Aristotle. The Collected Papers*, ed. J. Catan (Albany, N.Y. 1981) 112–114; G. Mavia, *Aristotele L'anima* (Naples 1979) 59–60, 285; Bolton, *Aristotle's Definitions* 260ff.

books of the *Physics*, where the attempt is made to analyse various kinds of natural change or movement in terms of the different types of causal factors (material, formal, efficient and final) required to explain them. "Nature" (φύσις) is defined there as the internal cause or principle (ἀρχή) of motion and rest in a natural body (*Physics* III 1). Thus, in *De anima*, a work in which, it is clear, soul is regarded primarily as a problem of physics, being the characteristic of the living part of the natural world, Aristotle gives to soul in the biological realm the role he assigns to nature in the natural world in general. And, like nature, soul is the principle of vital functions in terms of efficient, formal and final causality⁸.

Should we speak therefore of two definitions of soul in Aristotle's *De anima*, a "metaphysical" definition of soul as the form or actuality of a certain kind of body (II 1), and a "physical" definition of soul as the principle of various living functions in a body (II 2)? Although the definition given in II 2 does have a different (physical) point of departure than that in II 1, Aristotle clearly intends it as a supplement to the definition of II 1⁹. In II 1 Aristotle shows in what way soul belongs to the category of substance, as the actuality of living bodies, and in II 2 he identifies soul furthermore as the principle of the functions characteristic of living things. Indeed, following Aristotle's example, we can argue for the compatibility of the two approaches to soul by showing how soul, as the actuality of living body, is the formal cause of its functioning, and, as the form, is the finality of the living body. We might also try to show how, as the functional structure of the body, soul can be considered as an efficient cause¹⁰. Yet there is an obstacle to regarding the accounts of soul in II 1 and II 2 as compatible in every respect. As will be shown below, the "physical" account of soul allows analysis of *every* kind of psychic activity, analysis leading in the case of intellection to the conclusion that the process of intellection is such as *not* to be of the only type allowed for by the "metaphysical" definition of soul, that is the functioning of a particular kind of body.

II

Having defined soul in general and having indicated the need to proceed to the treatment of specific vital functions, Aristotle immediately embarks on this in *De anima* II 4 with a discussion of the function of nutrition. In dealing with this function, as with the others, Aristotle in fact applies his "physical" definition of soul, as can be seen already from the beginning of II 4. There he claims

8 415 b 8–12. The concept of 'nature' as a principle of motion and rest is introduced already at *De anima* II 1, 412 b 16–17, as however a means of specifying what *natural* body is and not (yet) as a definition of soul.

9 He returns to the definition of II 1 in the last part of II 2 (cf. 414 a 27–28).

10 II 4, 415 b 8ff. However the explanation of how soul acts as efficient cause is not free of difficulties for some interpretations of Aristotle: cf., for example, Hartman, *Substance* 136ff.

that in order to treat the specific psychic functions, we must first consider their activities, and in order to do this we must first deal with the “opposites” (τὰ ἀντικείμενα), that is with the objects to which these activities are directed, e.g. what is consumed, sensed, thought (415 a 14–23). One is reminded of the theory of opposites that is so important to Aristotle’s explanation of change in the *Physics*, and suppose in consequence that Aristotle will regard organic functions as forms of change or movement taking place in relation to opposites and explainable in terms of the different kinds of causal factors involved in the change, some (at least) of which factors may be identified with soul. As an example one might mention the case of sense-perception (αἴσθησις). Aristotle treats sense-perception as a certain kind of change (II 5, 416 b 34–35). Like all change or motion it is the actualization of a specific potentiality (or matter) in relation to objects of perception acting as opposites. Various causal factors are involved in the process (material, formal, efficient, final) and are therefore identified and discussed to some degree by Aristotle. Aristotle concludes his treatment of sense-perception with this remark: “Concerning the principle or cause (ἀρχή) whereby we say that animals are perceptive, let this be determined thus” (III 2, 427 a 14–16). He therefore recalls what I have named his “physical” definition of soul in II 2, specifying it here in the case of sense-perception.

If Aristotle’s treatment of sense-perception consists in the application of the “physical” definition of soul to this specific function, the results seem compatible with the “metaphysical” definition of soul in II 1, since the activity concerned is that of a certain kind of body. However, this is no longer the case when Aristotle moves to the subject of intellection (τὸ νοεῖν) in III 4. Here also the “physical” approach is applied: intellection is treated as a sort of change, as the actualization of a potentiality. However the potentiality in question must be unlike any other potentiality in that it cannot have, or be determined by, any particular form, if it is to be capable of thinking *everything* (III 4, 429 a 13–22). To remain receptive of all form, it must be pure (ἀμιγής) in regard to every particular form. Aristotle emphasizes this point by comparing the impassibility of the potentiality for intellection with that of sense-perception. The potentiality to perceive, although in some measure impassive, can still be affected in specific ways; it remains an activity related to body (οὐκ ἄνευ σώματος). However intellectual potentiality must remain entirely free of all determination in itself; it is therefore separate (χωριστός) from body (429 a 22–b 5).

So far the intellectual process has been approached from the point of view of material causality. We may conclude that soul is identified as the material cause of intellection, albeit a cause unlike any corporeal material cause¹¹. The objects thought may be described as the formal cause, as they are the actualiza-

11 It is remarkable that soul here assumes the role of material cause, whereas, in reconciling the ‘metaphysical’ and ‘physical’ definitions of soul at II 4, 415 b 8ff., Aristotle speaks only of formal, efficient and final causality.

tion of the intellective potentiality, and, as the completion or perfection of this potentiality, they can also be identified as the final cause of the process. The question that remains, if intellection is to be approached from the point of view of a physical analysis of change and its causes, is that concerning the efficient cause of intellection. If in sense-perception the objects of perception (along with a source of light) act as efficient causes of the process, in the case of intellection it looks as if the efficient cause that brings us to think, that actualizes the potentiality to think, lies within us. Aristotle formulates the question in this way: "Since in nature as a whole (*ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ φύσει*) we find two factors involved, (1) a matter which is potentially all the particulars included in the class, (2) a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all (the latter standing to the former as e.g. an art to its material), these distinct elements must likewise be found within the soul."¹²

This text provides further evidence that the principles that guide the analysis of specific psychic functions in the *De anima* derive from the "physical" definition of soul in II 2. Each function is seen as a kind of change of which soul is in various senses the cause. As indicated above, Aristotle does not, as in the case of sense-perception, seek to identify the efficient cause of intellection with the objects of intellection. This cause must lie within the soul: it is what would later be called the "agent intellect". As to the enormous and insoluble difficulties that this notion of intellect as efficient cause has produced for the commentators of Aristotle – Is it part of the individual human soul? How does it relate to the other psychic functions? –, we might describe them as dilemmas that result from the application of Aristotle's theory of change and its causes to the process of intellection. Not the least of these dilemmas is that created by the conclusion that the general "metaphysical" definition of soul offered in II 1 does not cover the psychic function of intellection, which seems to involve another kind of soul.

III

These remarks obviously require further qualification and a fuller defense. However sufficient grounds have perhaps been given for rejecting the idea that Aristotle's treatment of the intellect in the *De anima* as in some sense immaterial and immortal is merely a philosophical fossil or religious aberration that can safely be ignored in an overall interpretation of his theory of the relation of soul and body. I have argued that the difficulty lies deeper. Aristotle's theory of intellect does not represent a departure from his general approach to the analysis of various psychic functions in the *De anima*. Rather it is perfectly consistent with this general approach, which consists in applying to each psychic function (what I have called) the "physical" definition of soul of II 2 as prin-

¹² III 5, 430 a 10–14 (Smith trans. modified).

ciple of change. However Aristotle himself might have regarded the relation between this "physical" definition and the "metaphysical" definition of soul of II 1 as the form of a particular kind of body, the fact is that the specification of the physical definition of soul for each psychic function leads to the conclusion (already conceded at II 1, 413 a 6–7) that the metaphysical definition is seriously flawed. If the diagnosis I have suggested of the origin of the problem is correct, the simplest means, it appears, for restoring coherence to Aristotle's theory of soul (or reconciling the two definitions of soul) would be an analysis of the intellectual process that would treat it as of the same type as other Aristotelian changes, not involving, as Aristotle thought, the need to postulate a "pure" potentiality¹³.

13 Cf. however Robinson, *Aristotelian Dualism* 125–128.