

The Human Intellect:

Aristotle's Conception of $\text{No}\ddot{\upsilon}\varsigma$ in his *De Anima*

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I. Introduction

What is it to truly understand something? What do the activities of understanding that we engage in tell us about human beings and about our relationship to the world? My dissertation examines Aristotle's answers to these questions. I carefully consider his account of $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$, the intellect or power of understanding, in the *De Anima* (*DA*) and the implications this account has for Aristotle's conception of the human being. For Aristotle, understanding is what distinguishes human beings from non-human animals. Some animals share with us capacities for perception, memory, and imagination but no animal is able to understand what something is. In this dissertation I argue that, for Aristotle, understanding is crucially different from all the other activities of ensouled living things because it is non-bodily. This activity belongs to human beings just in virtue of our souls, not our bodies. On my interpretation, what I will call the Human Intellect interpretation, throughout the *DA* Aristotle's claims about $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ or intellect are about the human intellect, including those that describe it as everlasting and undying. On my view, the non-bodily character of the activity of understanding means that it can continue after the destruction of the body, allowing human beings to survive death through the continued exercise of the intellect in understanding. The human soul can exist and perform intellectual activities apart from the body.

Aristotle's *De Anima* is one of the fundamental texts in psychology and the philosophy of mind and has remained so from antiquity to the present day, engaging a wide array of thinkers throughout the centuries. There has been much recent discussion on Aristotle's conception of the soul and its relation to the body, both generally and with a particular focus on Aristotle's understanding of perception, but Aristotle's conception of

νόησις, understanding, has been relatively neglected, despite its prominence in the tradition of commentary stretching from antiquity through the Renaissance and beyond. Νοῦς or intellect is central to Aristotle's thought. An adequate grasp of Aristotle's theory of the intellectual capacities is crucial for grasping his view on the relationship between the soul and the body, since the intellectual capacities are the human soul's most distinctive faculties and have the most complex relationship to the body. Νοῦς is also central to Aristotle's ethics and first philosophy. The claim that νοῦς is the most divine aspect of us and the identification of the activity of νοῦς with happiness, εὐδαιμονία, are some of the central and most striking features of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Aristotle's first philosophy, he claims that the divine being on which all of nature depends is identical to the perfect activity which is (divine) νοῦς. Careful study of Aristotle's conception of understanding in the *De Anima* lays the groundwork for better understanding and appreciating the significance of Aristotle's use of νοῦς in the other parts of his philosophy. Aristotle's carefully articulated account of understanding is worth examining in its own right. It also gives us a better grasp of Aristotle's natural philosophy as a whole and contributes to understanding other areas of Aristotle's thought.

I will now lay out the structure and overall aims of the dissertation. In **chapter two** I present Aristotle's metaphysical framework, as it relates to living things. For Aristotle, a human being is composed out of the human soul, the form that accounts for what the human being is, and a human body, matter organized in the appropriate way for carrying out human activities. Although soul and body are intrinsically connected, Aristotle asks at the beginning of the *DA*, but postpones answering, whether the human soul might be separable from the body. He presents a separability condition: the soul is separable

from the body if it has some activity that can be done without the body, with the activity of understanding being the most plausible candidate. I argue that Aristotle is offering a condition for separability in existence, not just a condition for separability in definition or kind.

I then outline the main interpretations of $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ as it is discussed in the *DA*. On my preferred view, in the *DA* Aristotle consistently uses the term $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ to refer to the intellect or power of understanding that belongs to individual human beings. Other interpretations hold that (at least in some *DA* passages) the $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ that Aristotle speaks of is a separately existing substance. Different versions of this interpretation offer different accounts concerning the nature of this substance, but they all hold that $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ in this sense is not a power internal to the human being. I present evidence from the first two books of the *DA* in favor of my interpretation. In **chapter three** I discuss passages from *DA* I and II that initially seem to provide support for the other interpretation. I argue that a reading that takes $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ to be a power internal to the human being does a better job of explaining them.

In **chapter four** I examine Aristotle's views on what a human being is and, in particular, his views on what the proper subject of human activities and affections is. I argue that for Aristotle the human being, composed of body and soul, is the underlying subject of human activities, not the body or the soul. Although the composite human being is the subject, the human soul, the goal-directed capacity for performing human activities, plays a crucial role in accounting for what human beings are and for what we do. Against some interpreters, I argue that the soul is not merely the set of capacities or powers possessed by the living body as such. For Aristotle, the soul is prior to the body: it is

the form and actuality that makes the living thing the specific unified being that it is. The living body has its existence and characteristics because of the soul, not vice versa. I then discuss the criteria Aristotle uses for determining the value and distinctiveness of an activity.

In **chapter five** I consider whether the separability of intellectual activity from the body would be compatible with Aristotle's overall views on the soul and its relation to the body, particularly his claim that the soul is the form of the body. I present two alternative interpretations of Aristotle's conception of the soul: (1) the soul is constituted by a unified and interrelated set of powers; (2) the soul is ontologically prior to its powers and is not constituted by them. I conclude that both interpretations are compatible with the relevant texts. Using these interpretations of the soul, together with my earlier claim that the composite human being is the proper subject of human activities, I argue that the separability of intellectual activity from the body is compatible with Aristotle's overall view of the soul. If the intellectual power and its activities can exist separately, then when, after the destruction of the human body, they do exist separately, the human being also continues to exist. I argue that this view is preferable for textual and philosophical reasons to a position according to which the primary subject of understanding is the intellect or the soul or one according to which understanding switches primary subjects after death. On this scenario, after the destruction of the body, the human being is no longer a composite of soul and body but instead comes to be constituted by the soul, with its single power of understanding.

I turn to *DA* III 4, the beginning of Aristotle's main discussion of $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$, in **chapter six**. I present Aristotle's account of the aboutness or intentionality of cognitive states,

both perceptual and intellectual. This is based upon a distinction that he lays out in *DA* II 5 between material changes, in which one material quality is replaced with another from the same range (e.g. the greenness of an apple is replaced by red), and cognitive changes, in which a cognitive subject goes from (only) potentially cognizing to actually cognizing something (the person goes from being able to see to actually seeing a red apple). Undergoing a material change is not sufficient for cognition (although certain material changes may result in or contribute to cognitive change) but undergoing a cognitive change is.

I reconstruct and defend Aristotle's argument in *III* 4 that the intellect cannot have a bodily organ. I discuss Aristotle's views concerning the requirements for serving as a bodily organ of cognition. I show why Aristotle holds that bodily organs limit the scope of the cognitive powers that operate through them. What if the intellect operated through a complex combination of bodily organs? For Aristotle, some of the things that we understand do not have distinctive bodily or material characteristics and thus could not be cognized by any sort of combination of bodily organs. I employ his account of the differing characters of perception and understanding to further illuminate his reasons for insisting that understanding has no bodily organ. For Aristotle, cognitive powers with bodily organs, such as the senses, are always spatiotemporally limited, but the understanding is not. Aristotle claims that our understanding applies to all instances of the thing understood wherever and whenever they exist. Given the characteristics of understanding, it cannot have a bodily organ. Aristotle's own account allows him to avoid these difficulties. The intellect in its nature is only "potential," it does not actually possess any form either cognitively or materially. Thus nothing prevents it from cognitively possessing all forms.

In **chapter seven** I address Aristotle's claim that the intellect never understands without employing images, φαντάσματα. I argue that Aristotle's empirical epistemology strongly motivates connecting our intellectual activities to the perceptual activities that are in direct contact with the world around us. Aristotle has a further motivation for holding that understanding always takes place together with appropriate images: understanding needs to operate in coordination with our other cognitive powers. If human beings are constituted so that we cannot understand something when our perceptual powers are focused elsewhere, our intellectual activity will not conflict with or take attention away from more immediately necessary concerns related to perception and movement. Although images are a precondition for understanding, I argue that they are not part of the activity itself. Aristotle's account of what it is to understand something does not involve the imagination or its organ. Further, unlike in the case of the sense-organs, the images that we employ in understanding do not determine what we understand. The same image can be employed to aid in understanding many different things and many different images can be employed in order to aid understanding the same thing.

I present my interpretation of *DA* III 5, a notoriously difficult and contested passage, in **chapter eight**. I argue that Aristotle introduces an intellectual power, the productive intellect, which draws out the intelligible characteristics of things from the images we possess, in order to produce understanding. Such a power is needed since, for Aristotle, enmattered things are only potentially intelligible. The intelligible characteristics that they possess cannot act directly on the intellect in the way that perceptible qualities act on the perceptive powers. I argue that this intellectual power is part of the human soul and that Aristotle's claims about the undying and everlasting nature of the intellect are

claims about the human intellect. I also consider and develop alternative interpretations of this chapter according to which the productive intellect is an extra-human intellect. I compare the strengths and weaknesses of my interpretation and its rivals. I argue that my preferred interpretation does a better job of explaining what this chapter adds to Aristotle's psychological account of understanding. My interpretation shows how Aristotle uses the productive intellect to explain how we acquire understanding.

In **chapter nine** I evaluate the overall evidence concerning Aristotle's views on the separability of the human soul and present the two most plausible interpretations. (1) Aristotle denies that human beings or any of our components persist after the destruction of the body. Although he does not think that any bodily process is a constituent of understanding, the dependence of understanding on imaginative activity means that it is not done without the body. Hence it fails to meet Aristotle's separability condition. Aristotle carefully inquires into whether the soul is separable from the body, both because this is an important question in its own right and because he wants to conduct a serious examination of Platonist views concerning the immortality of the soul, but in the end he does not think that understanding meets the separability condition. The everlasting and undying intellect mentioned in III 5 does not belong to an individual human being. (2) Aristotle introduces the separability condition because he thinks that understanding meets it. Understanding is not an activity that is done with the body, it only employs the soul. Human beings persist after death because we continue to understand, although we can no longer remember or experience emotions. Aristotle can reasonably maintain that understanding no longer requires images after the destruction of the body. The loss of the body removes the possibility of conflict with other cognitive powers, as these are no longer

operative, and the need to coordinate our understanding with our spatiotemporal life, thus the intellect does not need to employ the imaginative power when separated from the body. Aristotle's empirical constraints on the acquisition of knowledge are still satisfied, as the objects of understanding would be limited to things that had been grasped while embodied. I address several objections to this second interpretation based on alleged inconsistencies with other parts of Aristotle's thought. I conclude by arguing that Aristotle's views on the intellect clearly show that he is neither a materialist nor a Cartesian dualist. We should accept one of the two intermediate positions I have presented. I argue that the second interpretation, on which human beings persist and continue to understand after death, makes better overall sense of Aristotle's account of the non-bodily character of intellectual activities and on his insistence that our understanding is both human and divine.