Dissertation Summary

The Human Intellect: Aristotle’s Conception of Nous in the De Anima

Caleb Cohoe

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 my dissertation I examine Aristotle’s account of noue, 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.

Chapter one lays out 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 two main interpretations of nous as it is discussed in the DA. On my preferred view, in the DA Aristotle consistently uses the term nous to refer to the intellect or power of understanding that belongs to individual human beings. The other interpretation holds that (at least in some DA passages) the nous 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 nous 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 two 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 nous to be a power internal to the human being does a better job of explaining them.

In chapter three I consider whether the separability of a soul-power is compatible with Aristotle’s other views on the soul and its relation to the body, particularly his claim that the soul is the form of the body. On some interpretations, the soul is taken to be the set of capacities or powers possessed by the living body as such. On this view the soul could not have any power or activity that was not bodily. I show that this is not Aristotle’s conception of the soul. 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 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 are compatible with the relevant texts and I argue that both are compatible with the continued existence of the human soul apart from the body (if the separability condition is met).

I discuss whether psychological activities, such as understanding, belong primarily to the proximate power responsible for them, such as the intellect, or to the soul, or to the human being. I argue that given Aristotle’s aim in the DA of accounting for the unity and persistence conditions of living things, psychological activities must, in his view, belong
primarily to the human being. Some material affections and activities may belong primarily to a bodily part, but all psychological activities belong primarily to the human being. A human being understands in virtue of possessing an intellect, but the activity belongs primarily to the human being, not to the intellect. Taking this claim together with the interpretations of the soul presented, I argue that 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 one according to which understanding switches primary subjects after death. 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 nous, in chapter four. 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 five I address Aristotle’s claim that the intellect never understands without employing images, phantasmata. 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 understanding always take 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 deter-
mine 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 six. 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, material 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 consider and develop the alternative interpretation of this chapter according to which the productive intellect is a divine extra-human intellect. I note some of its strengths in accounting for the text, but also its weaknesses. I argue that my preferred interpretation accounts better for why this text is included in Aristotle’s psychological account of understanding; the chapter introduces a necessary component of Aristotle’s theory. The roles suggested for this chapter on the other interpretation are not satisfactory.

In chapter seven 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 introduces this condition to avoid alienating Platonist readers, not because he thinks that understanding meets it. The everlasting and undying intellect 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 thus the intellect does not need to employ the imaginative power. Aristotle’s empirical constraints are still satisfied, as the objects of understanding would be limited to things that had been grasped while embodied. I address a number of objections to this second interpretation and argue that it makes better overall sense of Aristotle’s account of our intellectual activities.

In my conclusion I discuss the broader implications of Aristotle’s views. I show how my interpretation of the DA helps us to understand better Aristotle’s metaphysics and ethics. Central to Aristotle’s first philosophy, or metaphysics, is his claim that the divine being on which all of nature depends is the perfect activity of understanding. My account lays the groundwork for grasping the differences and similarities between divine and human activities of understanding. I also show how the interpretation of nous that I develop helps to explain one of the most striking features of the Nicomachean Ethics: the identification of the activity of nous with happiness, eudaimonia.

Updated October 4, 2010