

Pneuma as Core Concept of Aristotle's Philosophy

Abstract

Aristotle was an avid student of all that lives in nature. He argued that all living beings contain soul-principles which are carriers of the specific form. But he also said that the activity of every soul is connected with pneuma (πνεῦμα). This part of Aristotle's philosophy has not received enough attention. Experts who did give it consideration were often unsure what to make of it.

Exactly a hundred years ago the famous German scholar W. Jaeger published an article, 'Das Pneuma im Lykeion', in which he claimed that *On the Life-Bearing Spirit* (Περὶ πνεύματος) could not possibly be Aristotelian but must be dated to around 250 BCE. (At the same time he defended the authenticity of Aristotle's *Motion of Animals*, in which pneuma is designated as the soul's 'instrument' for the motion of a living being.) In today's lecture I want to argue that Jaeger seriously impaired our knowledge of Aristotle, but that the real culprit was Alexander of Aphrodisias (200 CE). He had misinterpreted the well-known definition of 'the soul' in Aristotle's *On the Soul* II 1.

This definition reads: the soul is the first entelechy of a natural body which potentially possesses life and is 'organikon' (Anim. II 1, 412b5-6: ἐντελέχεια ἢ πρώτη σώματος φυσικοῦ ὀργανικοῦ. Cf. 412a27-8).

From Alexander onwards the word 'organikon' has been translated as 'equipped with organs'.

But Aristotle meant: 'the soul is the first entelechy of an instrumental body', i.e. of pneuma. The soul is not what enters the body at the moment of birth, as Plato had it, but is inextricably bound up with a pneumatic body from the moment of fertilization, and pneuma is the entity which, guided by the soul as blueprint, brings into being the new living specimen.

Aristotle also needed pneuma to explain perception. Pneuma is located in tubes (πόροι) which lead from the eyes and the ears to the heart, where the soul is situated as centre of perception.

It is also pneuma that converts signals of the soul into contraction and expansion and thus effects motion of the visible body.

But pneuma is not an extra, sixth element! It is expressly 'different from and more divine' than earth, water, air and fire. It is an analogue of divine ether. Aristotle saw it as ether in disguise, ether incognito, ether within the sublunary sphere, always mixed with the four sublunary elements. It is something of divine origin in the sphere of mortality.

Of course, if we agree that Aristotle assigns an important role to the 'innate vital heat' or pneuma, the question remains: why does Aristotle explicitly mention this in *Generation of Animals* II 3 and III 11 but not in *On the Soul*? The answer must be: because only the soul of

living beings that are generated is connected with pneuma. The soul of the celestial beings is not connected with pneuma but with ether as its 'instrumental natural body'! (For that matter, in *On the Soul* Aristotle does talk about 'vital heat').

When we have truly understood the importance of pneuma for Aristotle's philosophy, we will also be able to leave more room for the brief text *On the Life-Bearing Spirit* and the work *On the Cosmos* (Περί τοῦ κόσμου), in which the Aristotelian doctrine of pneuma is explained and defended against the Platonic doctrine. We will also be able to do much more justice to the unity in Aristotle's philosophy, also between his lost writings (his dialogues like the *Eudemus* or *On the Soul* with its 'Revelation of Silenus to King Midas' on being born as the worst of all things to happen to a human being because it is the beginning of a long period in which his intellect is not manifest, and his *On Philosophy*) and his surviving works, and we need no longer take those works to be results of three periods of development or three different conceptions, as Jaeger proposed in his 1923 book.

The great importance of pneuma in Stoic philosophy can only be understood if we have done justice to the role of pneuma in Aristotle's philosophy.

I started my crusade against the standard view of Aristotle's philosophy with a lecture entitled 'Aristotle's *De Anima* II 1: the Traditional Interpretation Rejected' at the International Conference on 'Aristotle and Contemporary Science' which Prof. D. Sfendoni - Mentzou organized in Thessaloniki in 1997. I am glad that I can now deliver it fifteen years later in a more developed form.

Abraham P. Bos

February 27, 2013.

Department of Philosophy, VU-University, Amsterdam
Private address: Frans Lisztlaan 2, 2102 CK HEEMSTEDDE, The Netherlands
E-mail: apbos@xs4all.nl