



ELECTRYONE
ΗΛΕΚΤΡΥΩΝΗ

ISSN 2241-4061

9 772241 406118

ABOUT THE TRUTH: ARISTOTLE AND JOHN PHILOPONUS

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ABSTRACT: The paper is about the philosophical inquiry of truth and falsehood on the Aristotle's treatise "De anima" and the Philoponus' commentary on the Aristotelian work (*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*). Since, the philosophical game of truth and falsehood is directly related with the cognitive process the current study mainly focuses on the definition and the analysis of the intellect, which retrieves stimuli from the senses and imagination in order to operate effectively. For that reason, there is an explanation in the two distinct chapters that are concerned with the concept of the Aristotelian intellect and its interpretation from John Philoponus, in order to extract potential philosophical differentiations or similarities.

The Aristotelian intellect (*nous*) anchors the initial data through a logical judgement and follows the diversity of the combinations of reality. During that combinatorial operation of logic that derives from the senses and imagination (*phantasia*), it is possible for falsehood to be inducted, in such way that the combinations will no longer meet the existing combinations of reality.

The most essential element of Philoponus' philosophy on truth and falsehood is intertwined with the composition of a theory regarding the distinction of *nous-dianoia-doxa* and the distinction of simple/impartitionable (*amerista*) or divisible (*merista*) things and not of meanings. Among those, the distinction between human-

divine intellect (which is identical to the truth) is preceding and that may put at risk the aristotelian work, as it could connect it with the neo-platonian theory.

KEY-WORDS: Aristotle, Philoponus, *De anima*, *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*.

The intellect according to Aristotle

The sense (*aisthêsis*) according to the Philosopher accepts the sensible things (*aisthêta*) without matter (*hylê*)¹ and it is therefore an essential condition for the intelligible species (*noêto eidos*) and passions². Imagination (*phantasia*), as a motion that derives from the senses and transcends them, creates images³ through the interpretation of the senses, as an opinion on the sensible things or by mobilizing without senses towards images. Thus, the role of the imagination resembles with light, as it leads the sense into an actuality (*entelekheia*). Under this logic, imagination rescues, holds and interprets the sensations and the images by creating a process of cognitive action⁴. The intellect (*nous*) as part of the soul that accept the configuration (*morphê*)- the species (*eidos*), the intellectual substance (*ousia*) of things, is initially cognitively empty (*tabula rasa*). Therefore, the Philosopher does not accept that there are innate cognitive elements, general structures that relate to specific objects and events • there is not ideas that pre-exists, an opinion based on the Platonic concept. Instead, it is clear that the sensible things (*aisthêta*) are recorded in an empty consciousness, same as the traces of gold or iron on the candle⁵. The levels of the soul from the sense and imagination in intellect represents a continuous alteration from the potential to the actus.

¹ Aristotle, *De anima*, 424a 17-22.

² Ibid. 432a 3-4.

³ Ibid. 428a.

⁴ Ibid. 433a 1-30.

⁵ Ibid. 424a 17-30, 450a 10-14, 30-33.

In *De Anima* C5⁶ Aristotle introduces an obscure subject: the *passive* or *active intellect* (*nous poiêtikos*). The relationship between the two kinds of the intellect is introduced either in the aristotelian model of matter (passive intellect) and form (active intellect)⁷ or under the general distinction between potential and active being⁸. The passive intellect it is a matter that takes all forms, it does not separate from the body, but it is subjected to the laws of decay that rules all the natural beings. "Is what it is by becoming all things"^[1] By this Aristotle means that the passive intellect can potentially become anything by receiving that thing's intelligible form.

The aristotelian active intellect as a concept creates several difficulties. The Commentators of the Philosopher tried to explain the dark points in terms of its own nature and functions by forming a variety of versions according to its intentions and philosophical aims. Alexander of Aphrodisias, due to transcendence, autonomy, absolute cognition and pure activity of the active intellect, gave a religious dimension and extension to the aristotelian active intellect⁹.

The active intellect is clearly defined as separated, in order to declare its non-involvement in the body¹⁰, but also the possibility of self-existence, the eternal existence, as it appears to belong to a different category of the being¹¹. It is also defined as being abstract and separate from everything in man and soul, organs and qualities of the body, passions and feelings, experience and self-perception¹². As an immortal, everlasting and impersonal has no knowledge and within its own autonomy it transcends the body to which it belongs. It is not part of the subject's consciousness, in which it acts by inducing thought and knowledge, but acts as an actuality (*entelekheia*) for the time that exist in man as an element of his soul. Its origin, however, is not clear whether it is God or something divine to man or the natural power of the world or something else.

Aristotle surrorts that the active intellect (*nous poiêtikos*) is then required to illuminate the passive intellect to make the potential knowledge into knowledge in act, in the same way that light makes potential colors into actual colors. The analysis

⁶ Ibid. 430a 10-25.

⁷ During, 1994, 408.

⁸ Georgoulis, 1962, 331.

⁹ Ntotsika, 2014, 79-85; Foteinis, 1998, 300-301.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *De anima*, 429a 4-25-27, 429b 4-5; Papadis, 1994, 264.

¹¹ Papadis, 1994, 265-266.

¹² Aristotle, *De anima*, 413b 24-26, 413a, 6-7; Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima*, 113.21-24.

of this distinction is very brief, which has led to dispute as to what it means¹³. The light allows the visual organs to actually see and also gives the ability to visual object to be seen¹⁴. In the same way, the active intellect allows to the passive, which is indeed a potential, to become known and obvious and moreover it allows to the potential object to be revealed. In this way, it makes the intellectual things active, so that the soul can simulate them¹⁵. The intellect, therefore, works freely and constructively¹⁶ as an active element on the inferior and individual thinking. The passive and active intellect, far from their differentiations, are a single and unique unity, the one of the logical/rational soul.

The Philosopher, however, locates falsehood in the synthesis of the understanding of things (*noêmata*) in a unit¹⁷ (for example sentences¹⁸), where combinations of direct data of the senses and imagination appear. According to Aristotle, in order the intellect (passive and active) to compose, to judge and decide go back in senses and imaginations. Intellect connects the initial data and through a logical sequence observes the combinations of the reality. During this combination process, which is based upon logical sequence, it is possible for the false to interfere in a way that the combinations would not any longer be corresponded with reality. Thus, falsehood according to Aristotle derives from the incorrect combination (*synthesis*) and separation of the meanings, so that human knowledge agrees completely with reality, when the combinations are correctly. Since there is nothing wrong, the world is exactly as our senses and intellect reveals, when there is no mental nor pathological disorders of the senses or intellect.

Thus, the Philosopher supports that through the senses (*aesthêsis*) and imagination the human intellect is able to understand the world's structure and arrive to the knowledge of the principle and causes. Active intellect is the agent that brings the passive intellect's potential knowledge of objects to actuality and it is separable, unmixed, and impassable. Simultaneously, a distinct substance that is given to the intellect separates it from the rest functions of the body and ultimately from the material bodies itself. This actuality (*entelekheia*) of the intellect is the only part of

¹³ Aristotle, *De anima*, 430a 15-17, 14-17, 429a 13-18.

¹⁴ Ross, 1991, 213-214.

¹⁵ Georgoulis, 1962, 331.

¹⁶ During, 1994, 406.

¹⁷ Ibid. 430a 26-30.

¹⁸ Ibid. 430b 1-2.

the soul that is able to exist separately from the body, without stopping remaining a pure cognitive energy and a necessary element for the understanding of the intelligible species (*noêton eidos*).

The interpretation of the aristotelian intellect by John Philoponus

The commentary by John Philoponus titled ‘‘*Εἰς τὴν Περὶ Ψυχῆς Ἀριστοτέλους σχολικαὶ ἀποσημειώσεις ἐκ τῶν συνοουσιῶν Ἀμμωνίου τοῦ Ἑρμείου μετὰ τίνων ἰδίων ἐπιστάσεων*’’¹⁹, is the most extended ancient tool for the researcher who wishes to focus in the major issues of the Aristotle’s treatise ‘‘*De anima*’’²⁰. In the six hundred seven pages of this commentary, ten times and more than the initial Aristotle’s work²¹, there are several explanations by both named and unnamed ancient Commentators.

Philoponus explains the whole complex third book of ‘‘*De anima*’’²² by cutting the aristotelian text into small parts²³. In every part sets a first base and presents the content of the specific part having no commitments in following the exact line of the Aristotelian text (*θεωρία*). But this memorandum, coding of the Aristotelian text, tends to follow new compositions or structures (*θεωρία*) as it is not obliged to follow strict understanding forms and structure of the text.

By the beginning of the C4 Philoponus expressed his general point of view and his theories in relation to the other Commentators. According to him since Aristotle distinguished the non-rational soul by rational ‘‘now he comes to distinguish the rational only’’²⁴. So philosopher comes to seek three elements: a) If rational soul is imperishable or perishable, b) the difference between her and the senses, c) and how to understand is accomplished²⁵. After the presentation of the second chapter, Philoponus presented a brief historical frame concerning Alexander’s, Plutarch’s and Ammoniu’s intellect elements and meanings²⁶. By the three kinds of intellect Alexander and Plutarch stress that the third refers to the completely perfect and

¹⁹ Philoponus, *De anima*, 1.1-607.22.

²⁰ Siasos, 2002, 31–32.

²¹ Aristotle, *De anima*, 402a-424b 18.

²² Philoponus, *De anima*, 446.2-607.22.

²³ Ibid. 10.20, 25.

²⁴ Ibid. 516.8-9.

²⁵ Ibid. 516.9-18.

²⁶ Ibid. 517. 33-520.7.

external intellect (*nous thyrathen*), which acts upon the human body and is divine, an explanation that Philoponus does not accept²⁷.

Philoponus believes that the active Aristotelian intellect is not identical to the divine, because among other elements, the “*De anima*” does not consist a theological treatise²⁸. Philoponus although marks correctly the pre-mentioned and accepts that the Aristotelian active intellect is not identical to the divine, he separates triply the intellect as *nous*, *dianoia*, *doxa*²⁹. *Doxa* has to do about all the simple thoughts that anyone accepts without specific nor deep reasons, for example we know that soul is immortal although we are not aware the reason of being so³⁰. This is because *doxa* understands souls immortality, but not the cause of this state, which is rather beyond any sense. So it becomes obvious that *doxa* does not refer to a fully and systematic understanding³¹.

In the next level, *dianoia*³² actually is identified as the intermediate stage between *doxa* and *nous* and it matches sort of to the human soul, which is presented as an intermediate in the universe³³. According to Philoponus *nous* consists the higher intellectual level, which views directly the intellectual objects. There is no way of transmission from the known to the unknown, but actually it is a direct view and approach of the intellectual reality³⁴. *Nous* is working only on simple things, while the *dianoia* with the complex ones. Because of this fact actually Philoponus marks the fact that *nous* is always true, while the *dianoia* is true or not, because of the fact that it has to do with the complex things³⁵. However very few of the philoponical pairs can be traced in the text of Aristotle.

According to Philoponus, although *nous* is the superior level of the intellect, people cannot take part in it, but can only approach some views or traces³⁶, sort of “common meanings” as it is said³⁷. Human intellect cannot fully view all the intelligible (*noêta*) as it happens with the superior form of intellect (*hyperthen nous*),

²⁷ Ibid. 518.7-18, 30-31, 518.32-519.12-15.

²⁸ Ibid. 519. 37-520.3.

²⁹ Ibid. 553.19-24.

³⁰ Ibid. 1.18-19.

³¹ Ibid. 2.24-26.

³² Ibid. 2.2-3.

³³ Ibid. 2.17-24.

³⁴ Ibid. 2.14.

³⁵ Ibid. 553. 19-30.

³⁶ Ibid. 3.16-17.

³⁷ Ibid. 3.17-19.

which is perfect and nothing is incomprehensive to him³⁸. This is because as the human soul, which approaches the sensible, cannot approach the theory of divine, that sees as figures and facts³⁹. In *Timaios* it is marked that the most difficult thing for humans⁴⁰ is to be able to view the theory of the divine and this because imagination gives the impression that the divine has actually shape and body⁴¹.

Already in the introduction of Philoponou's comment says that soul includes the reasons of the facts⁴², which does not create, but simply reveal⁴³. The teachers do not just set upon their student's shoulders the existing and secret knowledge, but they bring it to light instead⁴⁴. And we form true or not judgments "by the hidden meanings, which exists in the human soul"⁴⁵.

Apart from the above mentioned, the most important side-effect is that Aristotle in the treatise *De anima* (and *De interpretatione*) spoke about compose or division of the conceptions (*noêmata*), while Philoponus was tending to add a teaching about compose and division things (*pragmata*). Because of this major mark can be said that there are some simple and impartitionable (*amerista*) things and a) the true can be found in the simple and impartitionable (*amerista*) things and b) the false exists in the complex and divisible (*merista*) things. So at this point, cognition is shown as a revelation of a parental heritage⁴⁶, which exists in the soul and the body (because of the birth) hinder from appearing while intellect consists the superior level of thinking, the direct view of the intellectual issues, things that point to the Neoplatonic philosophy.

Conclusions

According to Aristotle, understanding (*noêsis*) is actually a process, which takes part in the human soul, which actually takes her material from the senses and transmit to the imaginations (*phantasies*) and intellect (*nous*). On the contrary, in Philoponus the superior kind of intellect deals with the simple things and for this is

³⁸ Ibid. 2.14.

³⁹ Ibid. 2.26-29.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 2.30.

⁴¹ Ibid. 3.1-5.

⁴² Ibid. 5.1.

⁴³ Ibid. 5.1-2.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 5.4-5.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 5.12-14.

⁴⁶ Verbeke, 1985, 465.

always true, while intellect is true or false as it deals with the complex things⁴⁷. The superior form of the intellect consists the direct and true view of the objects.

Moreover Aristotle in his treatise *De anima* refers in a composition or a division of the meanings or understanding (*noêmata*), while Philoponus tends to form a theory about composition or division both for simple or complex things. The truth is only in the simple things, while in the complex false can be found mainly. An approach like this sets the automatic or the stable knowledge in particular places of things or beings. The aspect which is the most characteristic and says that soul contains the source of the principle (*logoi*) of things ...“just like a hidden spark which lies hidden in the ashes”⁴⁸ steps directly on the neo-platonism and not to aristotelian philosophy. It is rather the most interpretive divide that the Aristotelian philosophy has been under by the ancient Commentators and Philoponus and this because it places inside it a special neoplatonic gradation of the being. There it is introduced an escalation of both beings and things on the basis of cognition while it transforms the whole aristotelian structure and theory to neoplatonic one.

A.N.

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⁴⁷ Philoponus, *De anima*, 553. 19-30.

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