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Aristotle, *De Anima*. Translation, Introduction, and Commentary by CHRISTOPHER SHIELDS. (Oxford: Clarendon Aristotle Series, 2016, Pp. li + 415, Price £22.50 [Pbk.]).

This translation and commentary by Christopher Shields is an impressive achievement. To begin with, it renders Aristotle into English more accurately and precisely than the previous Clarendon translation, done by D. W. Hamlyn. Shields does a good job of making Aristotle’s reasoning clear while still being faithful to Aristotle’s terminology, with a few exceptions to be discussed below.

Secondly, the introduction provides an excellent entry into Aristotle’s views on the soul. Shields clearly presents the central topics of Aristotelian psychology and lays out the structure of the work. He helpfully presents the roles matter and form play in Aristotle’s hylomorphism while also drawing attention to the philosophical issues about defining soul and body that Aristotle’s framework raises and the complexities involved in applying this model to various living activities. Shields rightly notes that we should not think of the soul as “a set of capacities” (an influential reading advocated by Jonathan Barnes and Richard Sorabji, inter alios), because the soul is neither a set nor “an aggregative entity at all” (p. xxix). Shields recognizes the importance of the soul’s unity for Aristotle and suggests that its powers are hierarchically ordered for teleological reasons: if a living thing is perceptive, for example, it is necessary that it also have a nutritive soul—otherwise it would not be able to secure its ends as the perceptual being it is, and nature would have acted in vain in equipping it (p. 184). Shields is right to point to the central role that teleology plays in Aristotle’s views on the unity of living things, but more discussion of the underlying metaphysics would have been helpful (e.g. does Aristotle think that there are metaphysical connections between the various powers of the soul that result in a unified soul or is the connection merely teleological?). Also, while Shields does a good job of laying out Aristotle’s explanatory framework, his introduction does not fully address the controversial question of where the science of the soul fits within Aristotle’s view of reality: is it simply part of the science of nature or does it also involve first philosophy, insofar as it includes reason, which grasps being itself?

Finally, the commentary is an excellent resource for both novices and established scholars. Shields’ readings of particular passages are incisive. The commentary’s concision is also impressive: Shields get to the heart of what Aristotle says and why he says it. The commentary engages with key interpretations without getting bogged down in scholarly debate. Shields chooses his interlocutors well and the citations and extensive bibliography provide useful guides for further exploration. Shields is also willing to present opposing lines of interpretation in a charitable way. For example, his discussion of Aristotle’s views on change in perception, in the introduction and commentary on the relevant chapters of *DA* II, does an excellent job of clearly laying out two schools of thought in a way that fairly represents them both. Similarly, his commentary on III 5 takes two very different readings—one on which the active reason discussed there is the divine being of *Metaphysics* Λ and one on which it is a persisting power of the human soul— and then does an exemplary job of showing how both work to make sense of that notoriously difficult text. Throughout the commentary, Shields is cautious about making any definitive claims either about Aristotle’s own view or about the ultimate philosophical answers to the questions raised. This is appropriate, given (as Shields notes on p. xliv) the perplexing nature of the questions involved and Aristotle’s extreme concision on many of them. The commentary presents a guide to engaging the text, not an overarching interpretation.

Shields’ translation is generally sufficiently literal while avoiding excessive technicality and still as comprehensible as one could expect, given the Aristotelian text. When he departs from standard renderings, it is often because he has found a new and helpful way of getting the idea across. For example, rendering *idion* in DA III 6 as “exclusive” sense-objects (colors, sounds etc.), as opposed to the more conventional “proper” or “special,” is quite helpful to Greekless readers in getting them in contact with Aristotle’s meaning and approach.

There is, however, one notable exception: Shields’s use of reason and verbal cognates to translate *nous* and *noein*. Shields rightly notes that it is hard to find one English translation that can capture the range of meanings for *nous*, something that can refer to a faculty, a condition of that faculty, and a cosmic principle (p. 292). Shields opts for “reason” and “reasoning,” which have some advantages: they can cover both human and divine thought and they suggest something unified and normative, as *nous* is. However, the verbal and objective correlates of reason do not work for translating Aristotle’s thought in *DA* III 4-8. Consider Shields’s translation of Aristotle’s discussion of the unaffectedness of *nous*:

That the unaffectedness of the perceptual and rational faculties is not the same is evident in the case of the perceptual organs and perception. For perception cannot perceive when coming from an intense object of perception, for instance a sound when coming from loud sounds, nor when coming from strong colours or odors can it see or smell. By contrast, when it reasons some intense object of reason, reason reasons inferior things not to a lesser degree but rather to a greater. For the perceptual faculty is not without the body, whereas reason is separate. (429a29-429b5)

This is problematic. The verbal use of reasoning in English just doesn’t work for Aristotle’s claims about *noein* and makes an already difficult passage desperately hard for the Greekless reader. When one thinks about reasoning and intensity, it is natural to think that the focus is on the quality of the reasoning itself. It is not clear how the object makes a difference. It is also quite unclear what reasoning inferior things to a greater degree would be (thinking about them more? Longer? Making more arguments about them?). Rendering this passage in terms of understanding would get English readers closer to what Aristotle means and give them more to work with in interpreting his views (compare C. D. C. Reeve’s 2017 Hackett translation: “when the understanding understands something intensely intelligible, it understands inferior ones not less, but even more”, 429b2-3, p. 53). Similarly, “reasoning of indivisible things,” (430a26) Shields’ translation of *noēsis tōn adiaretōn*, from the beginning of III 6 makes Aristotle’s thought hard to grasp. “Reasoning” is used discursively in English. It cannot cover what Aristotle is talking about here: the simple grasp of a form as such, without further combinations or connections to other things. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, as Shields himself notes, he abandons “reasoning” in favor of “thinking” in most of the latter half of III 6 (p. 293). Given the importance of consistently rendering *noein* with the same verb, this is a significant strike against his choice.

Shields’ choice of “exists” instead of “being” to translate *einai* is also misleading in several passages. For example, “an animal has [the other senses] not for the sake of existing, but for the sake of existing well” (III 13, 435b20-21; p. 73). “Existing well” makes little sense in English, while “not for the sake of being, but for the sake of well-being” is much clearer. Similarly, translating Aristotle in III 4 as claiming that the power of understanding “does not exist in actuality” makes Aristotle’s view more paradoxical and seemingly contradictory than it needs to be (again, I think Reeve 2017 is better here: understanding is “actively none of the beings”).

Despite these flaws, Shields’ translation, together with his commentary and notes, is an accomplishment that can help all those who want to think with Aristotle about body, soul, and life.

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