

Aristotelian Biology and Christian Theology in the Early Empire

ABSTRACTS

Natural Sciences and Anthropology in Didymus the Blind's Commentaries on the Bible: a Possible Aristotelian Influence

By Marco Zambon (University of Padova)

First aim of my contribution is to gather from Didymus' exegetical works (in particular from the lessons on the book of Psalms and on the Ecclesiastes) all significant testimonies concerning his knowledge of natural sciences and his anthropological doctrine. Based on these materials I will briefly discuss their possible sources, trying to answer following questions:

- a) What kind of Aristotelian doctrines can we recognise in Didymus' statements concerning cosmology, biology and anthropology?
- b) Is there sufficient evidence to conclude that he had, beside the *Organon*, also a direct knowledge of other Aristotelian works?
- c) How important are methods and doctrines coming from Aristotle for Didymus' exegetical practice?

Embodied intelligence in Aristotle's natural science and embryology

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Aristotle appears somewhat perplexed when he brings up *nous* (the thinking capacity or intellectual soul) in his analysis of sublunary life. So, for example, in the *Parts of Animals*, he wonders if *nous* is appropriate subject matter for natural philosophy (*PA* I.1, 641a33-b4). And in his embryology, Aristotle is led to ask where the *nous* comes from, since it is not in the embryo to begin with (*GA* II.3, 736b5-8). In considering the operations of the human intellect in Aristotle's philosophy and biology, this paper urges a 'bottom up' approach. Rather than focusing on thinking as detached from the body, the way in which it is embodied will be more fully explored. Most modern commentators concur that Aristotle's idea of *nous* does not allow for the human soul to exist beyond the death of the body. During life, however, it need not directly involve the body, not being associating with any bodily organ (*de An.* II.1, 413a4; III.4, 429a26-27; *GA* II.1, 736b28-19). The human capacity to understand essences, through explanatory reasoning, thus mimics divine activity. But the capacity to think these eternal truths in humans also requires the living body. Aristotle makes clear that human beings cannot gain any knowledge without images (*phantasmata*) (*de An.* III 8, 432a5-6), which come through the senses and exist in the body (*Mem.* I). Furthermore, human intelligence requires an upright stance (*PA* IV 11) and delicate sense organs (*PA* II 9). The need for the body to provide humans with the opportunities to learn explains why there can be no *nous* in the embryo. *Nous* 'enters from outside' the embryo because it becomes present only later as the human animal grows, senses and learns. As Aristotle explains, the mind is not actualised until it thinks (*de An.* III.4, 429a23-24). The intelligent capacities of non-human animals also necessarily involve the structures of their living bodies (*HA* VII-VIII). Although they cannot come to control their own thought processes, and so are not truly intelligent, Aristotle's account of these animals suggests a natural basis for embodied intelligence in his philosophy.

The relationship between soul and body according to Origen's *De principiis*, in the light of proctology and eschatology

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The aim of the paper is to study the relationship between soul and body (or mind, *voũç*, and matter) according to Origen's *De principiis*, in the context of the early imperial debates about the body-soul problem. The paper pays particular attention to the interplay between the philosophical sources, specially Aristotelian, and the theological choices of Origen's doctrine. The relationship between body and soul is studied in the light of the axiom: «The end is always like the beginning» (*Prin* I 6,2). Consequently, the paper examines carefully the initial and the final step of the relation between soul and body. In fact, according to Origen's doctrine, the current relation between body and soul has its roots and horizon in proctology and eschatology.

Aristotle (and Galen) in Nemesius' *On the Nature of Man*.

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Towards the end of the fourth century CE Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in Syria, composed his treatise *On the Nature of Man*. The nature of the soul and its relation to the body are central to Nemesius' treatment of his chosen theme. In developing his argument Nemesius draws not only on Christian authors but on a variety of pagan philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the great physician-cum-philosopher Galen of Pergamum. It is therefore a fair assumption that Nemesius addressed his work to non-Christians also. At any rate he points to certain similarities between his own position and especially that of Plato and of Aristotle, for example where the conception of the soul as an incorporeal substance is concerned. In this paper I will examine Nemesius' references to Aristotle in particular: Exactly which impact did Aristotle make on his thinking? Was it mediated or direct? How does Nemesius present Aristotle? In regard to Nemesius' teleological perspective on the body-parts one should also ask what role was played by Galen alongside Aristotle. Long used as a source for earlier works now lost, Nemesius' work may provide intriguing glimpses of the intellectual culture of his time. This paper is designed to contribute to this new approach to his work.

The Soul-Body Problem in the Antique Controversy between Philosophers and Christian Theologians in Antiquity

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Tbc abstract

The Use of Aristotle's Biology in Methodius of Olympus' *De Resurrectione*

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In Methodius of Olympus' third-century dialogue *De Resurrectione*, the heterodox speaker, Aglaophon the doctor, makes the only direct reference to Aristotle in Methodius' surviving corpus.¹ His Aristotelian reference is not drawn from the typical locations of early Christian engagement with Aristotle: it is not about divine providence, the immortality of the soul, or logical method. Rather than pulling from the doxographic traditions, Aglaophon instead references Aristotle's biology, apparently directly from *De Partibus Animalium* as well as other works, to underpin his argument that the body is in a constant state of flux. The human body is a microcosm, and Aglaophon uses Aristotle's parallelization of the digestive processes in the body to the transformation of substances in the cosmos to show that the constantly changing body cannot be brought back together again in the resurrection. David Runia uses this passage of Methodius in support of the argument that Aristotle was a dangerous thinker to many early Christian writers: he suggests that it cannot be an accident that the only person in Methodius' dialogues to directly quote Aristotle is a heterodox speaker (David T. Runia "Festugiere Revisited: Aristotle in the Greek Patres," *VC* 43 (1989): 14).

However, putting Methodius' one direct citation from Aristotle in the context of other citations of Aristotle obscures different conclusions that arise from putting this passage in the context of both the dialogue as a whole as well as other medical sections in Methodius' corpus. I argue in this paper that Methodius does not let his heterodox speaker use Aristotle's name as a mark of his heterodoxy (for that same speaker also directly cites Hippocrates and the non-problematic Plato's *Timaeus*). Instead, he quotes Aristotle's biological works because of his characterization as a *doctor*. Although his theological argument is wrong, Methodius does not imply either that Aglaophon's biology is wrong, or that it is wrong in general to philosophize using biological knowledge. Aglaophon simply makes the wrong conclusions. To bring this into relief, I will turn to another section of Methodius' corpus that likewise uses ancient physiology, his *Symposium*, which relies on medical understandings of the source of semen and the process of conception to understand the ways that spiritual conception and Christ's salvific activity work. These arguments are put in the mouths of virgins who have already proven their orthodox credentials. Methodius was not at all adverse to using physiological understandings of the body to underpin his theology.

To make this argument, I will look at a moment on either side of Methodius. One hundred years before, in a text which Methodius knew, Athenagoras used precisely the same three-fold understanding of digestion and excretion to *prove* the resurrection of the body that Methodius' heterodox speaker uses to *disprove* it (*Ath. De res* 4).² And in the following generation, a heterodox speaker in the *Dialogue of Adamantius* repeats Aglaophon's medical arguments word for word, but the dialogue as a whole introduces a new type of resistance to such argumentation: the judge of that debate resists the argument *precisely because it is too medical*.³ Such general resistance would have been foreign to Methodius' work, which happily used modern physiology to make theological points, even though at times biology-based arguments were presented as erroneous and in need of correction.

¹ Unfortunately, the *De Resurrectione* does not survive in its original Greek (except for a long excerpt in Epiphanius' *Panarion* which does not include the passage of primary interest to this paper), but only in an Old Church Slavonic translation, of which there is no scholarly edition. I have therefore relied on its two modern translations: the 1881 German by Bonwetsch and the 2010 Italian by Mejnzer and Zorzi.

² We know that Methodius knew Athenagoras' treatise because he references it at section 37, Bon 130.2

³ ΕΥΤΡ. Από γραφῶν ἐπαγγελιάμενος δεῖξαι, εἰς φυσιολογίας καὶ ἰατρικὰς ζητήσεις ἐκτραπείς, τοὺς ἀνθρώπους δυνατωτέρους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀπέδειξεν. (trans. Pretty 173, ed. Buk. 212)