

PHILOPONUS ON THE SOUL-HARMONY THEORY

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ABSTRACT. The Neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotle's works have always been considered somehow suspicious. That is partly related to the doctrinal commitments of the commentators, partly with the hermeneutical strategies to which they seem to recur. Both of these reasons have also give place to the accusation of distortion and misunderstanding of Aristotle's philosophy. In the following paper I want to perform an exercise of disclosing the hermeneutical procedure that one of this commentators applies to one of the passages of the first book of the *De Anima*. The commentator is Philoponus, the passage is the refutation of the soul-harmony theory. My aim is to show that, despite the doctrinal commitments that the commentator may have, his methodology follows Aristotelian guidelines. I hope that this could open perspectives on the value that the commentators must have as philosophers, rather than merely interpreters or paraphrasers.

KEYWORDS: Harmony, Suitability, *De Anima*, Aristotle, John Philoponus.

One of the objectives of an Aristotelian commentator, even if he is committed to a particular philosophical dogma, is to make sense of Aristotle's exposition. Seeking to find coherence in Aristotle's text, though, is a twofold procedure: on the one hand there is, of course, the necessity to understand what Aristotle may wanted to say (for sometimes he is not clear, the terms are ambiguous, or he just did not say as much as he was expected to say). The exegetical procedures are traditionally thought to be concerned primarily with this task. But, on the other hand, 'to

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make sense' means for a commentator, too, to understand the very structure of the investigative procedure as a whole.² For commentators it is very important to picture Aristotle's projects as a unity and, because of that, they tend to avoid the temptation to ascribe inconsistency to Aristotle whenever he seems to be contradicting himself.³ In those cases they apply exegetical devices that, the most of the times, are embedded in an alien philosophy.

That kind of attitude lies on, at least, two hermeneutical principles: first, the commentator needs to proceed under the charity principle, and needs to avoid a negative judgment on Aristotle from the very beginning.⁴ That is why it is very common to encounter in the commentators reconstructions of Aristotle's presumed reasoning, inferences, and suppositions that are not occurring in an explicit way in the text but are believed to be implicit there. Secondly, the commentator needs to work under the premise that everything has a reason for being, in particular for being at the place where it is. What that means is that the commentator tries to reconstruct a puzzle where all the pieces should have a place and, consequently, a function. The result is a resistance to eliminate or disregard passages, even if the text would seem much better or economical without them. A good example of such hermeneutical principles at work is to be found in Philoponus' commentaries. This particular writer is celebrated for his charity with Aristotle, together with a display of exhaustiveness.

Now, one of the big questions is how Aristotle's dialectical passages enter into the scope of this particular hermeneutical strategy. This is a very good question considering the following two facts: first, if the commentator is concerned about Aristotle himself, the dialectical passages where we find catalogues on ancient opinions would have very few to comment about (Blumenthal 1987, 101). The fact that the commentators did apply their work to those passages make us think that the task of the commentator is not just a particular work or domain, but a comprehension of Aristotle's philosophical inquiry as a methodology. If this is so, the dialectical procedures need to be explained as constitutive parts of the work, and as having an important function in the whole project.

Recently I have learned a word existing in Canadian French to refer to the act of ruining someone else's film by telling the end in advance: "divulgâcher". This

² There are, of course, cases where this aim cover a wider scope: in the introduction to his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, for example, Philoponus seeks to show how this particular book is a piece in Aristotle's logical corpus (*In An. Post.* 3.13), or in the natural science as a whole (*In Gen. Corr.* 2.19).

³ This preoccupation is explicitly exposed in 'Simplicius' introduction to the commentary on the *De Anima* (*In De an.* 1.14).

⁴ See, for example, the opinion that Simplicius has on Aristotle and his works (*In Cat.* 3.4)

may be an annoying consequence of the commentator's aim for charity, exhaustiveness, but most of all, of their quest for coherence. They all present in advance the outcomes of the hermeneutical procedure they are about to perform on Aristotle's text. It may be somehow present in all of them, but it is a distinctive trait of Philoponus' facet of commentator. Besides of diluting the expectation that Aristotle's surgical procedure naturally harbors, it produces a very undesired effect on readers: they just read the beginnings of Philoponus' exegesis, convinced that this is all you need to know about his interpretations on Aristotle. As a consequence of that, on the one hand, many people think they know what the commentary is about by ignoring the very procedure; on the other, they think that Philoponus did not understand Aristotle or that he just interpreted him in a very Platonic or even Christian way. And maybe this is why most of the people refuse to recognize in the commentators (in general) the work of a philosopher.

In the present opportunity I want to show that there is something to learn about Philoponus' procedure performed on one particular thesis of the Aristotelian dialectical treatment on ancient views in the first book of the *De Anima*. It is the case of the soul-harmony theory, a view that has been considered as the ancient view most akin to Aristotle's own conception of the soul as a form (Hicks 1907, 203). And maybe this was not just a modern opinion. In fact, it seems to me that in this very case we can find the philosophical richness that lies behind the interpretive value of a commentary.

In what the modern editions of the *De Anima* present as the fourth chapter of book I, Aristotle starts by mentioning "another theory" on the soul that has been transmitted by his predecessors (*De an.* 407b27-408a30). There are some particular features of that particular location and theory that deserved to be highlighted. The first one is that this is a theory that does not have a very clear or anticipated role in the *De Anima*'s plan, for immediately after Aristotle is dealing with theories that ascribe motion to the soul as the main characteristic, and we hope to expect after them the analysis of the theories that do the same, but with sensation (*De an.* 403b25).⁵ We may think that those theories dealing with sensation can be successfully transcribed as the ones making of the soul "a composite made out of the elements" (*De an.* 404b8), which is what we encounter with the soul-harmony theory. That will follow Aristotle's plans, except for the fact that the exposition of this theory is going to be abruptly stopped for regaining the topic on motion. That leads to the second element to highlight: why is that this discussion on the soul harmony theory occurs in that particular place? If is not concerned with motion, and the topic is going to be dis-

⁵ On Aristotle's interpretation of this theory, see Sánchez (2016, 179).

cussed after this little “corollary” with the soul-harmony theory, then, what did Aristotle obtain of the soul-harmony theory?

Besides those two points, we can focus on a peculiarity of Aristotle’s treatment of this theory: what did he mean by characterizing this opinion as “plausible to many” and that “has given reasons, as in an audit, also in public discussions” (*De an.* 407b27)? For, certainly, for being a theory that is going to be refuted, it is presented in somehow positive terms. So, an additional query that one could make to the text is if this strange and anonymous theory, although refuted, is not going to be completely discarded but exploited in the dialectical process with some kind of positive result. And if this is the case, how does it happen.

These seemed to be the kind of questions that Philoponus asked himself when facing this theory in the Aristotelian text. For example, it is clear that the commentator has an explanation for the position of the theory at this very place⁶:

Aristotle has just criticized collectively all those who have spoken about the soul for saying nothing about the body that is to receive it. They ought to have done so, since it is not that a random soul enters a random body, but rather that the body needs to possess a particular kind of suitability in order to receive a particular kind of soul. For the mixture and the composition of animals that are conspicuous for the spirited <part of the soul> differ from those of the animals that are conspicuous for the appetitive <part of their soul> and from those of the cowardly animals; and, generally speaking, both of the mixtures of the elements of the body and the arrangement of the <bodily> organs correspond to their suitability to the activities of the soul. Having said these things, he now appropriately connects this with a doctrine of the soul that follows from this. For some people had the same thing in mind, viz. that while the body does not have a share in soul in whatever sort of state, it requires a mixture of a particular kind, just as harmony does not arise from strings that are in whatever sort of state, but requires a particular tension. Therefore they thought that the soul, too, is a harmony of the body, and that the different kinds of souls correspond to different harmonies of the body. It is this theory, then, which he expounds and refutes; and in the present passage he just reports the doctrine itself, but a little later he states also the arguments on the strength of which these people arrived at. (*In De an.* 141.22-142.3)

Philoponus sees that this theory follows from the last problem stated by Aristotle in the previous chapter. Furthermore, the commentator does not only see a thematic continuity, but he also expresses some sort of agreement between this theory and Aristotle’s own position. For this is a theory that connects somehow body and soul: in fact, under this theory, the entity of the soul depends on the bodily constitution. So, in that sense, this thesis not also is worthy to be dis-

⁶ For Philoponus’ commentary on the first book of the *DA*, I will employ van der Eijk’s translations (2006).

cussed, but it also entails plausibility: it is plausible because of the terms on which it was formulated; it is worthy of being discussed because it takes in account the body and, thus, attempts to explain what is common to soul and body, and so, how the soul could act over the body.

Nevertheless, this seems to be a quite different problem to that of motion. As a matter of fact, it is. The most of chapter 3 was consecrated to refute the mobility of the soul. Aristotle's strategy to do so involved several arguments employing his own physical theory, but also the formulation of absurdities on which a conception of a mobile soul could fall. At the end of chapter 3, one of this ludicrous explanations is stated, for if someone accept that the soul can move by its own movement, that person may be willing to believe that soul can enter and exit from one or several bodies (*De an.* 407b20). This is manifestly absurd; for there is no way that a soul could perform its effects in any body whatsoever, just like the art of carpentry cannot be executed with kitchen utensils. So, then, the soul-harmony theory is introduced as a sort of corollary of the discussion on the soul's motion (and not according to Aristotle's initial plans). But it gives the impression to carry something more, or at least Philoponus seemed to think so. And there is where the plausibility of the thesis, and the procedure to which it has being object of in public discussions become important.

Philoponus explicitly says that Aristotle's procedure on this thesis can be divided in two different moments. In the last passage he said that those stages where something that corresponds with a presentation and, then, the reasons of its plausibility. This can be understood just as a stylistic procedure, except for a line where Philoponus seems to say that there is something in between those phases:

That the opinion that says that the soul is a harmony of the body is plausible, he states here without qualification, though later after the objections against it he adds why this is a plausible opinion. (*In De an.* 145.12-14)

There is a very difficult sentence to understand in the Aristotelian text related to this opinion.⁷ For Aristotle connects in his presentation the plausibility of the theory with the fact that it has "give[n] reasons, as in an audit, also in public discussions" (λόγον δ' ὡσπερ εὐθύνοις δεδωκυῖα κἀν τοῖς ἐν κοινῷ γεγενημένοις λόγοις). The phrase has been the motive of a real puzzle for modern interpreters⁸; strangely, not for Philoponus. As a matter of fact, the commentator explains that "to give reasons, as in an audit" is a way to say, "when subjected to arguments it was corrected (ἠὲ θύνηθη) and refuted as false" (*In De an.* 145.19). There is no doubt that the

⁷ I have already advanced this interpretation in Sánchez (2016, 184).

⁸ On the problematic wording of this phrase, see Hicks (1907, 265) and Ross (1961, 195).

thesis was refuted as false, by Plato in the first place as a matter of fact (*Phd.* 85e3-95a1). What is not that clear is what means that the thesis was “corrected”. Philoponus does not provide an accurate explanation. He just adds that these corrections, effected in the frame of “public discussions”, must refer to the conversations with his friends (the dialectical practice of examining opinions) or in his exoteric writings, as his dialogues.

There are several things to retain of Philoponus understanding of this line. The first is the fact that the soul-harmony theory was refuted and/or corrected in a dialectical context, where the thesis may be used as the point of departure of an inquiry, for the aim of discussion, training or coinage of principles (*Top.* 101a25-b4). The philosophical utility of dialectic has also been source of many discussions among interpreters.⁹ For our purposes, always delimited by Philoponus’ exegesis, may suffice to say that the commentator understand the dialectical procedures not just as refutations with the aim of discarding an opinion or showing philosophical strength, but as a system to take profit of positions that can be corrected and used in an investigation. That explains the way on which Philoponus understands Aristotle’s work on the thesis. For the soul-harmony theory is going to be refuted immediately after it is presented (and maybe so corrected), but afterwards its virtues are going to be displayed.

After expounding all the refutative procedure, followed by an application of this criticism to Empedocles’ thesis on the configuration of things from a mixture of elements,¹⁰ Philoponus says that now is the moment when Aristotle is going to explain in what consists the plausibility of the soul-harmony theory. The strength of the thesis, however, is obtained from a different source than the thesis itself, that is, showing that there are some phenomena that this thesis appears to be successful in explaining. That seems to be an interesting source of discussion, for if the soul cannot be a harmony, but the harmony does serves to explain some-

⁹ For the discussion on the scientific uses of the dialectic, see Bolton (1999). For a broad perspective of the utility of dialectic in scientific and philosophical enterprises, in a positive way, see Galston (1982, 87) and Baltussen (1992, 32). For the specific use in the *De Anima*, see Sánchez (2016, 77).

¹⁰ Empedocles does not talk properly about the soul as a composite of elements, but he seems to explain psychic functions in such a way. In the Aristotelian testimony the idea of the soul as a composite of elements is also attributed to Critias, who held that the soul was blood (there are, nevertheless, some who think that Aristotle’s mention of blood intend to include Empedocles, like Inwood 2001 (163 n. 14). For Empedocles blood is a perfect mixture of elements, hence it is a good candidate to be soul. For a reconstruction of this exegetical process in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, see Sánchez (2016, 209).

thing about the soul, there may be some truth in this thesis that calls for attention. Let us check how it is that the thesis is plausible:

'If the soul is something different from the mixture', that is to say, if the soul is not a harmony, and the harmony <intended> is one of mingling and mixture (for there is also a harmony in the sense of combination), 'why then is being flesh destroyed simultaneously with being the other parts of the living being? This is equivalent to: why is it that when the harmony of one bodily part is destroyed, the harmony of the remaining parts is also destroyed? <He expresses himself like this> in order that we conclude on external grounds that 'when the harmony of all bodily parts has been destroyed, the soul is destroyed as well'. (*In De an.* 151.21-27)

The first phenomenon where the soul-harmony theory seemed to be a plausible explanation is death. For it seems to explain well why when a corruption process is triggered in a living being it does not affect just one part, but affects simultaneously the whole of the being. So then, it seems plausible to think that the soul is the responsible for a living body exist holding together all its parts.

Philoponus, in his customary way, first explains the passage in his own words, as he understands it and applying to it his own categories; then, he reproduces Aristotle's reasoning (what is quoted above). In this case, the commentator exploits an example that has been employed by him regularly in the text. For, when a harmony that is being played with the lyre is stopped, that does not imply the destruction of the lyre player, neither of the lyre (*In De an.* 151.15). So, if the soul, or the ensouled body, were something different to harmony, it follows that they should not disappear when the harmony is gone. But they do fade away as soon as the harmony ceases. So there are reasons to think that the soul is a harmony or, at least, that it behaves as such.

Aristotle's strategy to illustrate the case is built in a particular way, and Philoponus seems to have a need of advising that this is just an analogy and nothing more. Indeed, for him, the fact that Aristotle's reasoning is built upon the flesh is because it is an evident case when we see that the corruption of a bodily part entails the other's: in fact, the flesh does not corrupt alone, but together with the nerves and the blood vessels. But for the commentator that is not the important thing, for the example is constructed attending to something very evident; in other words, something that is more known to us.¹¹

The passage offers an additional point of interest. Besides of being a commentator (with the importance that it supposes for the textual transmission of the

¹¹ He does not use in this very passage the explanation of "what is more known to us". Nevertheless, it seems to me that we are authorized to infer this from other passages where Philoponus explains Aristotle's choice of examples appealing to that expedient (*cf.* 148.25).

Aristotelian works and Presocratic fragments), Philoponus is an exceptional witness of the scholarly activity in Late Antiquity. One of the precious testimonies that he led to us is the one which has to do with Alexander of Aphrodisias, who is invited to this particular discussion on the plausibility of the soul-harmony theory. And it happens that in this case, both Alexander and Philoponus are in the same page:

This is the way in which Alexander explains the passage, and he does so very appropriately, so that the problem is at the same time the solution also for the other things that have been said against the harmony view. Or rather, of the one that says that a consequence of saying that the soul is a harmony is that the living being has many souls. For if, he says, the soul were not a harmony but something different from the mixture, why is it that when the mixture of the flesh is destroyed, the mixture of the other parts is destroyed too? For if that is the case, there would seem to be just one mixture of all parts and not many. For why would all <mixtures> be destroyed together with the one? In this way the soul will also be one and not many, which was the absurdity to which the view that the soul is the harmony was thought to lead. Yet it seemed absurd to reduce this to the view that says that the soul is a harmony. Therefore, if the living being is destroyed, when one mixture is destroyed, the soul, being a harmony, will be one harmony as well. (*In De an.* 151.31-152.10)

According to what Philoponus says it seems that the soul-harmony theory not only has some plausibility, but it was somehow rescued. This could be the case, for the formulation of the *aporia* to which leads the plausibility of the soul-harmony theory, at the same time, results in the occasion to make it overcome one of the objections with which it was before refuted, namely, that of the multiplicity of souls that could reside in a body (if it is true that the soul is a harmony, both understood as a combination or a proportion, but mainly as the proportion or ratio of the whole bodily mixture). The alleged “correction”, then, serves to state that, whatever the soul is, it is a principle that serves to unify and give structure to the ensouled being.

There is still another challenge produced by the soul-harmony theory, although it is not a completely new one. For this second *aporia* is stated as the reverse side (ἀντίστροφᾶ) of the former one. But, albeit being the reverse side of the first difficulty, it does have something new to offer, for it is based in the ‘correction’ already effected on the thesis:

If, then, it is not the case, he says, that there is soul in each individual part, i.e., if the soul is not a harmony –which is why, when he became aware of the unclarity, he repeated what he said by saying ‘if the ratio of the mixture is not soul’- he then adds ‘what is it that perishes when the soul leaves the body?’ This is instead of saying ‘when the living being perishes at the departure of the soul, we see nothing perish except the mixture and the harmony of the body’. For the elements that have been

mixed <themselves> do not perish, but still exist. Therefore the soul is a harmony, if the perishing of the soul effected nothing else but the perishing of the harmony of the body. (*In De an.* 152.32-153.8)

So then, it is evident that this difficulty is, in fact, produced over the correction of the former. That could mean that, once overcame the difficulty of the several souls, the thesis became even more plausible than before, that is, it endorses more the soul-harmony theory as a real explanatory position. The question to rise now is to what purpose did the correction served? Or better, for what reason the thesis needed to be corrected after it was already been discarded? Both of these questions demand an answer in order to understand Aristotle's procedure, because after the formulation of these difficulties, the discussion abruptly comes back to the problem of motion. So our initial enigma still prevails: the inclusion of this thesis in the middle of the discussion on motion, then, seems to be nothing more than a corollary on one absurdity stated by Aristotle with refutative aims. Furthermore, we still do not know why there could be any need of rescuing the theory. It is not clear for us, neither for the commentator:

Now, when raising the problem, Aristotle did not add the solution, as if this was clear and had in a way already been said in the preceding sections. The solution is as follows, as we have said elsewhere... (*In De an.* 153.8-11)

Philoponus' complaint on Aristotle's discourtesy providing information includes the only possible direction in which we may look to solve our puzzles, given that in the *De Anima's* text the discussion ends radically at this very point. That direction is back, supposing that Aristotle's lack of clarity resides in his feeling of already have said that. The question, of course, is *back* exactly where? There is just one possibility to be fruitful enough, that is, the discussion that introduced, in the first place, the soul-harmony theory. Thus:

The elements that have been combined and the ratio of their mixture, which is the same as saying the harmony, stand to the soul in a relation of a *condition sine qua non*; for if they are not present, it is not possible for an organic body to exist, and if there is no organic body, it is impossible for the soul to be present in it; yet these things are not soul, just as, though there cannot be a house without bricks and wood, the house is not just bricks and wood; and just as light is not actualizes if there is no transparency of air, yet light is not the same as the transparency of the air, it is like this with the soul and the harmony of the body. (*In De an.* 153.11-18)

There are several things in this passage to comment on. For in this passage is not only evident the reason of the plausibility of the soul-harmony theory and the necessity of correcting the thesis with the aim of preserving it; there are also some alien concepts to this discussion. For that reason, it is mandatory to under-

stand the way in which the commentator sees the Aristotelian philosophical procedure.

The first thing that must be said is that it may be difficult to state where did Aristotle provide a reason, but Philoponus actually said it before. I have referred before to the Neoplatonic commentator's habit to divulge the outcome of the arguments in the very introductions to them. This is exactly the case here, for the *conditio sine qua non* (ὄκ ἄνευ λόγον), is the reason why the soul-harmony theory was introduced in the *De Anima*, namely, that a soul could not enter in any body whatsoever. For a soul to perform its effects needs a body which possesses a particular 'suitability' akin to the happy realization of those effects. We are all familiar with Aristotle's hylomorphic functionalism: for a body to actualize the faculty of vision needs to be in possession of an organ, an eye, and an appropriate one. In the same way as a house made of chocolate and sugar bricks is not proper to serve as a shelter, likewise and eye made of glass has no suitability to see.

Now, it is somehow strange that Philoponus anticipates the importance of the soul-harmony theory with the term 'suitability' and, then, in the very commentary of the passage he changes to the formula translated as *conditio sine qua non*. That leads to the following question: from where does the term 'suitability' come? Why Philoponus has some prevention in ascribing it directly to Aristotle?

The noun ἐπιτηδειότης is not common in the Greek corpus before the Hellenistic times. The idea, of course, can be traced through the most attested usages of the adjective ἐπιτηδέιος. Nevertheless, that does not say too much about the importance of the term employed in a technical way in the context of Philoponus' exegesis.¹² Even if it could, whatever the case it may be, the term is not present in the Aristotelian *De Anima*. So, we can be sure that this term is part of Philoponus' exegetical device, whence is understandable that he uses to interpret Aristotle but it does not ascribe it directly to him.

The practice of replacing terms in order to perform interpretations on ancient theories is not Philoponus' innovation. He is rather following or impersonating an

¹² The concept of 'suitability' (ἐπιτηδειότης) in Philoponus should be a matter of a more detailed analysis, involving more passages and works. Nevertheless, Philoponus employment of the term opened an interesting discussion. It was Sambursky in the first place who claimed that the concept of ἐπιτηδειότης started to be used in the second century in a technical way to refer the sufficient conditions for a potentiality to be actualized (1962, 106). That idea was endorsed by Dodds, who besides that proposed three nuances to be distinguished in those technical usages (1963, 344). Both of them were, nevertheless, criticized by Todd (1972), who does not accept a technical usage of the concept, even if he gives to the concept the importance and relevance that it seems to have. For a reconstruction of this debate, see Hauer (2016, 65).

Aristotelian hermeneutical methodology.¹³ That procedure could be seen as mandatory in exegetical grounds if the source term that is going to be explained or borrowed is in disuse, for example. If this is the case, then, we need to discover which term is being replaced by ἐπιτηδειότης here.

The first possibility is, of course, to look in the refutation of the soul-harmony theory. There we find that Aristotle's analysis of the term 'harmony' stands on the disambiguation of the term in the concepts of combination (σύνθesis) and proportion (λόγος) (cf. *DA* 408a5). But the very starting of Philoponus' last passage shows that it does not seem that ἐπιτηδειότης stands for one of the two terms for harmony, but for both of them. That leaves us with the only, but somehow disappointing solution, that the term replaced by ἐπιτηδειότης is 'harmony'. However, that does not explain a lot, for the term 'harmony' is alien to Aristotle's own theory.

So we need to go back a little more. We have, then, what Philoponus stated as the introduction to the soul-harmony theory in Aristotle's dialectical process. For Aristotle complains about the fact that the theory that makes of the soul a mobile entity (and other theories too) says nothing about the body. In Aristotle's mind, this omission leads them to the absurdity of thinking that any soul can enter in any body. Aristotle cannot accept this because:

It seems that everything has a peculiar form (εἶδος) and structure (μορφή).
(*De an.* 407b23)

This sentence shows us a different direction for the commentators' necessity of introducing a new term. For the replacement of terms also occurs where some concept is ambiguous, or where it can be confused with another one, or there is a lack of clarity that calls for remedy. Unluckily, even if Philoponus did not comment this passage, it could be the case that, although he recognizes a link between the two concepts (which will reinforce a reading of an epexegetic καί), he also acknowledges a difference:

And it is not only form in the way of account that he calls "actuality", but also form in the way of shape. For indeed in the *Physics* both are discussed. For the shape of the statue is its actuality.¹⁴ (*In De an.* 211.20-23)

This passage is interesting for it seems to rephrase in Aristotle's terms a similar problem like the one that the soul-harmony theory stated. For here soul is a form in a twofold sense: as λόγος (a term also deployed in the analysis of harmony),

¹³ On the "translations" that Aristotle effected on his predecessors' opinions in order to include them in his dialectical examinations, see Sánchez (2016, 149).

¹⁴ This translation, as the passage does not belong to the first book, is taken from Charlton (2005).

and as μορφή (which would be analogous to the bodily combination). This “shape”, then, needs to correspond in Philoponus’ analysis to the *conditio sine qua non* that a soul needs to accomplish its function on the body. The soul needs a proper bodily combination or structure, that is, its perfect suitability (cf. *In De an.* 141.28).

But if this is so, then, what is wrong with the soul-harmony theory? We may think that the harmony theory, in its quality of plausible, after some corrections effected through the dialectical process, could fix Aristotle’s own account. But the situation seems too simple to be true. And Philoponus is aware of that.

In order to understand the commentator’s worries we need to find why the soul-harmony theory has such an important place in the dialectical inquiry that justifies the forced intrusion that it seems to have in the whole plan of the *De Anima*’s book 1. For we said that Aristotle complained about the lack of presence of the body in the attempts to define the soul, but we did not say why he thought that to be important. The problem to tackle by including the body in those explanations is how the soul could act upon the body, that is, how it can cause all those things by which we say that a body is alive, In Aristotle’s words this is the problem of the community (κοινωνία) between soul and body. And there is where Aristotle’s hylomorphism is called to make a difference.

In fact, from the last passage examined one could say that the bifurcation of the soul into λόγος and μορφή could in some way provide a solution.¹⁵ Except for, to Philoponus’ eyes, it does not:

But from this another difficulty arises: for perhaps the soul is one in substance, but in relation to the different mixtures and suitabilities of the bodies it has different activities in <different parts of the body>, vision in the eye, hearing in the ear, and so on, one in this, the other in that; and if that is the case, what is inferior will give form to what is superior, and matter will be the cause of the form, and the form will come to be on account of the matter. For the matter will be that of the sake of which (for vision will be for the sake of the eye), and the form will be that which is for the sake of something; but this is a reversal of the nature of things. If this is absurd and impossible, the differences in activities of the soul do not occur in the parts but in the substance. (*In De an.* 195.12-23)

Now, by looking at the problem we realize how big the commentator’s worries are: the soul-harmony theory, though plausible, does not explain the soul but the body. And it seems that a naïve application of the Aristotelian hylomorphism could lead into that very mistake. And that is why Philoponus’ need to avoid the

¹⁵ For example, ‘Simplicius’ seems to go in that direction. On his interpretation of this very passage of Aristotle’s *De Anima*, see Sánchez (forthcoming).

possibility to read Aristotle as a physicalist (like the harmony theorists), and he does so by obscuring the term *μορφή* into *ἐπιτηδειότης*.

One may say that this is nothing but semantics. But it is not. In fact, Philoponus' solution has been traditionally seen as consisting in the customary Neoplatonic strategy of solving a problem by including an intermediary item in the equation. I do not deny that the commentators' procedures could be described like that. But I do not think that this description could satisfy what a full analysis of the procedure must be. For instance, instead of saying that Philoponus introduced a new element, I would rather say that he tried to dissolve an ambiguity by refining some concepts that were somehow already there. And commenting the Aristotelian discussion on the soul-harmony theory gave him the hermeneutical tools to perform an exegesis that avoids the problem.

Now, which exegesis is that? It has to do with the concept of 'suitability', for in a way or another we already accepted that the proper disposition of a body is a necessary condition for a soul to accomplish its functions. Nevertheless, the concept needs to become safe, what means that it could not be used to design the soul in any way, for we cannot accept the soul to be a product of the material disposition. This of course has a Platonic translation: the soul cannot be formed out of what is ontologically inferior. But somehow it has too an Aristotelian translation.

If it is the case that the concept of 'suitability' has a main role to obtain a solution, it must be explained how Philoponus obtains a hermeneutical profit of the inclusion of that term. We do have one lead: it cannot apply to soul. So, bearing in mind that Aristotle decants the term soul into that of *ἐντελέχεια*, we might expect that the 'suitability' come to play a role in the opposite side of the equation:

The body which is already perfect and organized is what has life in potentiality, whereas semen does not have life in potentiality, but is capable of having life, that is, it is organized in potentiality. So "in potentiality" as applied to semen is [in potentiality] by virtue of suitability. For it has the suitability for being able to become organized and animate. It is not that already. That which is already perfected and has organs, such as our bodies, these things already have live in potentiality. (*In De an.* 222.25-32)

For since that which is in potentiality is twofold, one first and one second, one by virtue of the suitability only without the disposition and one by virtue of the disposition without the activity, he says that semen and in general the matter of the animal is in potentiality a thing that perceives by virtue of suitability. (*In De an.* 305.34-37)

Both of these texts show that the term 'suitability' is intended to explain a distinction that is in fact in Aristotle's text, although without having an specific name, that is, the duplicity of "potency" (cf. *De an.* 417a25; 417a30). The term 'suitability', then, is introduced by Philoponus too early in the commentary, at a place

where the contexts allowed it, with the aim of put a remedy on such anonymity afterwards.

If that is correct, the procedure that the commentator performs on the dialectical passages where Aristotle is sifting ancient opinions is exactly the same that Philoponus is effecting on the *De Anima*'s text in order to present it as coherent as a whole. This hypothesis, of course, needs to be proved on the basis of further evidence, like on Anaxagoras' or Democritus' thesis, which are going to have a fundamental role in Aristotle's psychological views. For the moment, I hope that this could work as a shy provocation to invite our efforts to disclose the functioning of the hermeneutical devices that the Neoplatonic commentators apply to Aristotle's texts, in the aim of considering those solutions maybe Neoplatonic in spirit, but Aristotelian in method.

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