

Interview: Mark Shiffman, Villanova University

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Aristotle's De Anima (On the Soul) is a forbidding work. Unlike the Nicomachean Ethics, which is popular in undergraduate philosophy courses and even with general readers, the De Anima is a formidable work of metaphysical biology that relies on extensive knowledge of the Aristotelian corpus. But our frustration with the text is also fruitful, as Aristotle forces us to think in ways to which we are not accustomed. The recent (2009) edition of De Anima published by Focus Press and translated by Mark Shiffman, Associate Professor of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions at Villanova University, preserves the text's complexity while making it available for the curious (and diligent) reader. I interviewed Prof. Shiffman in October 2011. Below is a transcript of our conversation.

Spiro: What are the unique challenges to translating and understanding the *De Anima*?

Shiffman: The hardest thing specifically about *De Anima* is that in a way it's the least independent text of Aristotle's. It's at the juncture of physics and biology and metaphysics and the psychological dimension of ethics. So with his other texts, there's a sense in which they can stand on their own as starting points. But with *De Anima* you have to start out with some understanding at least of the *Physics* and of the language in which he discusses things in the *Physics*. So for the kind of translation that I want to do, it's much more challenging if you're not committing yourself to translating the whole corpus – which I have no intention of doing! I don't think you can improve much on Joe Sachs' [translations of] *Physics*¹ or *Metaphysics*².

Spiro: What was your process of translation? How long did this take?

Shiffman: Basically, I tried to spend some time with one sentence at a time and make sure I've thought about the different possible meanings of all the words and the different ways of construing all the grammar, and then spend some time letting the whole thing sink in. Then I tried – once I had a sense of what the sentence means or what several things it could mean – then I tried to come out with something in English that captures as much of that as I can. So one of the things that I tried to make room for was the ambiguities that are present in much of the text.

Spiro: How long did it take?

Shiffman: From the time that I agreed to do the translation to when I finished, it was something like ten years. Partly what I did in the meantime was write a dissertation that was largely about

Aristotle, so I got a deeper understanding of Aristotle's thought in general. And then really I did the bulk of the translation in about two years. For the last year or so, it meant getting up at four in the morning and taking a few hours to translate a paragraph.

Spiro: I've noticed that too – Aristotle makes more sense in the early morning.

Shiffman: You allow your mind to adapt itself to the Greek first thing in the morning so there's no clutter yet! It is very much a contemplative process, especially with Aristotle. That's what characterizes his writing style in distinction from just about anyone else: it's the contemplative intensity of his way of putting things.

Spiro: Reading your translation, I found myself going back to "On the Movement of Animals" and "On the Parts of Animals."

Shiffman: Sachs has "Memory and Recollection" in his appendix. You could have a translation of *De Anima* with about eight other works as appendices! In my original proposal I had wanted to do big chunks of "On the Parts of Animals" and a little of "On the Generation of Animals," but the *De Anima* turned out to be plenty of work.

Spiro: Your translation has a Heideggerian feel. You translate *energeia* as "being-at-work" and *entelechia* as "being-fully-itself."

Shiffman: Well, Joe Sachs was a big inspiration to me. I'm a big fan of his translations. And I agreed to do this translation before he had done one.

Spiro: Is this Aristotle-via-Heidegger?

Shiffman: I don't think so. I think Heidegger's attempt to dig back into the thought that Greek philosophers are trying to express is extremely valuable, especially for a translator. If what you want to do is try to bring the thinker intellectually back to life in a way that's as immediately engaging with the things that they're thinking about, as well as you can possibly manage, then I think you have to confront the challenge that Heidegger is so good at showing: what's present in recovering an understanding of the Greek that you can't just get from a lexicon.

I suppose it would be fair to say, more generally, that my translation and my sense of the translator's task are very much influenced by phenomenology. So not only by Heidegger, but partly by Husserl and partly by students of theirs.

Spiro: You cite Hans Jonas favorably in your introduction.

Shiffman: In my dissertation, one of the things I was dealing with was the legacy of Gadamer, Strauss, and Klein as influenced by Heidegger in the hermeneutics of ancient philosophy. They were all engaging critically with the way that he read – especially – Plato. In that earlier work of mine I was extending by analogy their criticism of Heidegger's interpretation of Plato into the reading the Aristotle. In one way there's a very deep influence of Heidegger, but it's not a

“Heideggerian reading” or through the lens of Heidegger *per se*. Rather I was taking Heidegger seriously but in a critical dialogue with his interpretations.

The translation of *energeia* is something I shamelessly stole from Sachs! But I wasn’t entirely satisfied with his translation of *entelechia* so I worked out something that was more literal and etymologically correct, and less forcefully interpretive. Even though I don’t much disagree with his interpretation of what it means.

Spiro: You read Aristotle’s account of the human soul such that we are made to be contemplative, as if in order to be (fully) human one must wonder about what it means to be human. This also recalls Heidegger’s notion of *dasein*, and it’s central to the question of Aristotle’s relationship to Plato.

Shiffman: Possibly in comparison to Plato, Aristotle thinks we’re more contemplative than we know. That is, as I was saying before, already in apprehending anything we have some purchase on the intelligible content of it, even if only implicitly. Intellect is what distinguishes us from other animals, and Aristotle does have a sense – a stronger sense than you find in Plato – of the way in which natural beings are oriented toward the fulfillment of their powers. In that sense we are implicitly always contemplative beings and always on the way to achieving that nature. But, again, to really carry that through requires learning to contemplate. And a lot of attention is given, in chapters four and five of Book Three, to the intellect *per se*: the receptive intellect, the active intellect. What struck me in working through the translation – and especially it struck me because it was a very difficult part to translate – was the discussion of analogy that follows those chapters. I think that’s where Aristotle is really trying to show very palpably what this intellectual capacity is. Because in recognizing an analogy between things, we’re recognizing something that’s purely intelligible. It’s not *in* either of the things, but requires recognizing something important about them. But what we apprehend is not strictly... what we apprehend is the relation, and the relation is nowhere other than in intelligibility. Unless, of course, one of the places where that recognition takes us deeper into understanding the structure of being, is precisely in the analogies in the parts of animals and parts of living things more generally, something responsible for them having analogous parts that helps you make sense of all of them. So although I’m not a huge fan of IQ tests, I can see why they put a huge stress on questions of analogy. There’s something proper about that.

Spiro: In your introduction, it sounds as if you think that contemporary thinking about soul – to the extent that there is any such thinking at all – is too influenced by Descartes. How does the *De Anima* give us an alternative? How does Aristotle challenge our assumptions?

Shiffman: [Long pause.] It seems to me that there was not the same kind of methodologically explicit dualism in Aristotle’s time – not even in Plato do we find that – nonetheless the problem seems to exist at least implicitly for Aristotle. Certainly [Aristotle considers] the problem of how the earlier natural philosophers tried to deal with the question of whether we actually know

things outside ourselves and how they tried to generally bridge that gap with materialistic solutions of some kind. So in *De Anima*, that's one thing Aristotle is trying to come to grips with. That is, concerning the faculties of soul that are critical or apprehending faculties, how we can understand what exactly they do apprehend in the world. And what we find, or what the helpful alternative he provides to something like Cartesian dualism, is ... I'm tempted to lean on Jonas³ more than I really want to, because I've taught that piece and thought about it a lot in relation to *De Anima*, but that's not really what was driving my approach to the question, which goes further back than that. The important thing to understand about Aristotle's philosophical approach is that it's not methodological in any modern sense. Which is to say that it's trying to keep alive the problems as problems, in a way that Descartes doesn't really seem concerned to do. It's easy for Descartes to start with a kind of pure doubt that we do apprehend anything, and then figure out how to overcome that position, and I think he's not very successful. That is to say Descartes' solution is something that's very much open, or something that really demands criticism of the kind that we find in Kant and Nietzsche. Whereas Aristotle, in keeping a number of problems in play and moving back and forth between them, arrives at a plausible understanding of how the forms that we apprehend in our senses are the sign, the indicator, of the form that's the principle of being of the thing we're apprehending. So there's no chasm; there's a continuity through which we progress by examining and thinking about things that start out as given to us and our senses but already implicitly have a kind of intelligible content to them that by Aristotle's account is the beginning of apprehending the intelligible content of the very being of the thing. So as opposed to Descartes, for whom there are two fundamentally different kinds of being that you have to find some way of connecting, for Aristotle they're not fundamentally different; but the process of establishing the union of the two is the laborious one.

Spiro: Laborious but necessary.

Shiffman: Laborious but necessary. And can't be accomplished by starting from universal doubt, but can only be accomplished by this gradual process by which we recognize some of our errors and the sources of those errors that skew our interpretations of things. So there's a kind of self-knowledge that the Aristotelian process demands and engenders that the Cartesian process simply tries to leap over.

Spiro: There are cognitive scientists who think of consciousness not as a spirit or an illusion but as a process. Are they being Aristotelian?

Shiffman: I think they're trying. As Aristotle would say, they're being "led on by the truth itself," but there are two impediments that are really one impediment: they don't raise metaphysical questions because they don't see that those are fundamentally within their purview and at issue in their endeavors. Even if they do want to negate a Cartesian metaphysical formulation, they're substituting another dogmatic one in its place, which is largely from ignorance, I think, of the possibility of a more robust, classical understanding of metaphysics. And, I think, the very methodological demands from which they're beginning are already a

compromise with Descartes (or the Cartesian spirit), which is not simply a matter of dualism but has to do with the question of whether you can apprehend what's real and intelligible with something other than a kind of conceptual construct. So, in a sense, you could say they're more Hobbesian, and the parting of ways between Descartes and Hobbes is really not so much one of method but of in what interests the methods are being applied. Descartes is a minimalist in the assumptions that he will allow himself, in the interest of clear representation of the phenomena; Hobbes is a methodological minimalist in the interest of the coherence of an explanatory system. If that's your priority then materialism makes a lot of sense. But both of those methodological approaches are united in abandoning the kind of dialectical – and what you might call phenomenological – approach that Aristotle takes.

Spiro: If the student of nature must consider metaphysics, does this mean contemporary scientists should expand the scope of their inquiry? Or is this more a matter for the curriculum: students should be required to study philosophy – and metaphysical philosophy – along with biology and physics?

Shiffman: That's a good question, a difficult question to address. On the one hand I want to say that scientists ought to have a better understanding of the ways in which their sciences open on to philosophical questions and are not really, can't really be hermetically insulated from them. And ideally that they would be able to understand the philosophical alternatives that open up as areas. But on the other hand I don't have a lot of, I think what generally passes as "philosophy of science" or "philosophy of biology" is typically too narrow and not always that helpful. So it would be great if everyone educated in science also had to be educated in the philosophy of several traditions and understand its bearing on the questions that they're not asking. Otherwise what tends to happen is what John Henry Newman said would happen when you're missing disciplines in your education, which is that other disciplines start encroaching on their territory and thinking they can address the questions that don't really belong in their discipline. You can see this in for example the conversations surrounding Intelligent Design in America, and the question of whether it's a scientific idea or a religious idea, when really it's a philosophical idea, but philosophy is not a part of the cultural conversation in a way that lets people recognize that.

Spiro: Does the *De Anima* help us understand, say, the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Politics*? Some people just read those two books and slight or even ignore Aristotle's other works. Are they missing something?

Shiffman: Yes. I guess partly the question is, assuming Aristotle's metaphysics and biology are entirely wrong, would his practical philosophy be essentially right? I think in order to maintain that, you would have to explain how you can convincingly ground his thinking about the human person, about the household, about the tensions between household and city (and individual and city), without a strong understanding of the good and natural goods. The only way you really could do that is by treating the practical arguments as dialectical in the Aristotelian sense: that is, dialectical in the sense of articulating the most persuasive view of what would make a human life

satisfying, without what I think is the stronger and on the whole valid foundation for that view in Aristotle's understanding of nature. One of the places that I found this most crucial is in the discussion of the household and of economics in Book 1 of the *Politics*, where Aristotle offers what is really a critique of, in our terms, a critique of an economy that's centered so nearly exclusively on money. I don't find that most of the people who favor focusing exclusively on the practical philosophy tend to take that as seriously as I think Aristotle does, but they treat it more historically. Whereas I think what he's providing there is a powerful critique of how life becomes deformed as "wealth" is considered more and more in terms of money, fungible wealth, rather than what he calls "natural forms" of wealth.

Spiro: Who is Aristotle's audience? Is he just speaking to Athenians or is he speaking beyond (or past) them? Does he identify himself and his work against or outside of Athens?

Shiffman: I do think, and this is very much what my dissertation was about, I think that he's taking the starting points of the Athenian audience – mostly an aristocratic, youngish audience – and gradually showing the limitations of that and moving their understanding towards something more true to the phenomena. And also something toward a more accurate understanding of what the philosophical life or philosophical engagement means as a way of life, as a spiritual condition. So in that way my reading is to a certain extent influenced by Pierre Hadot.⁴ However, I think that in the case of Aristotle, first of all Hadot's understanding of what Aristotle's up to is not very good, not quite adequate, partly because in his interpretations of the ancient schools, he is privileging the Stoic and Epicurean models. That doesn't work so well for people like Plato and Aristotle, for whom the question of how we arrive at the truth and what sort of spiritual condition that itself requires is really central.

Spiro: How is Aristotle misunderstood?

Shiffman: There are lots of ways. To start with, some marginal observations, he's thought not to have a sense of humor! And I think he does. And probably more importantly from the interpretive point of view, most interpreters I think don't appreciate how the movement of his thought in the different writings is never a linear movement. It's always dialectical in two senses: there's the Platonic sense of dialectic, in which, among other things, in order to understand something you follow out different possibilities of how to account for it, and then that process gets you deeper into the principles that you need to recognize in order to understand it, and you come back on that basis and reconsider it; but also there's the sense in which Aristotle himself tends to use "dialectic" which more has to do with the common opinions about things. And there's a way in which Aristotle ... here's a good example: in *De Anima*, there's a question that he spends quite a bit of time on: whether our thoughts are best understood as images, as imagination, as "concepts" as we would say, as constructs of our own process of trying to grasp things, or whether our intellect is able to pass beyond the confines of our mental apparatus to apprehend something intelligible in itself. And I think that interpreters want to find an answer to that question in *De Anima*, and I think Aristotle develops the question to the point at which he's

clarified what's at issue as much as he possibly can, but to go any further in trying to resolve the question would require claiming a perspective on ourselves that we can't have: an external perspective on the process of thinking, which we can't attain. That's one of the things that people often fail to appreciate, that he's really leaving some very important problems at the point where the problem itself is clearest, where he doesn't see any way of progressing further. This essentially, if you take that question and put it into medieval terms, turns into the realist/nominalist debate, and then questions persist to this day, should we understand Aristotle as a nominalist or a realist; and I think the answer is "no."

Notes

1. Aristotle. 1995. *Aristotle's Physics: a Guided Study*. Trans. Joe Sachs. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
2. Aristotle. 2002. *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Santa Fe: Green Lion Press.
3. Jonas, Hans. 2001. *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
4. Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Trans. Michael Chase. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.