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Aristotle, *De Anima (On Soul).* Translated by David Bolotin. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018, xi + 152 pp., $18.00 (paper).

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David Bolotin's translation of *De anima* is magnificent.

Bolotin provides, I believe, what Aristotle himself had in mind to provide with his *Peri psuch*ēs (*De anima*, or *On Soul*—as Bolotin translates, rightly doing away with the traditional but incorrect English "the" before "soul"): a way toward soul and world that facilitates the potential journey without removing the reader's necessary (and necessarily intense) labor and reflection; while removing—or perhaps better, shining light on—the stumbling blocks that lend themselves toward blocking that way. He uses, predominantly, Wilhelm Biehl's 1884 edition of the Greek text (revised slightly by Otto Apelt),[1] while also consistently consulting Paul Siwek's 1965 edition as well as the 1966 Budé edition of Antonio Jannone. While trusting Biehl's editorship more than any other editor (viii), Bolotin clearly assumes the responsibility of painstakingly editing his own "edition" of the Greek to translate, closely examining every available manuscript variation for particular passages, justifying his choice—and this especially in the rare instances where he feels compelled to emend—and providing equally careful translation, in footnotes, of the texts from which he departs as he does of the texts he accepts. I know of no other translators of *De anima* (or more generally) so consummately humble before the texts they have, and before the work of those predecessors with whom they might disagree. Bolotin's translation

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[1] *Aristoteles Über die Seele*, trans. W. Theiler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1995); Greek edition originally published in 1884 as *Aristotelis De anima libri III*, ed. W. Biehl (Leipzig: Teubner), revised slightly by Otto Apelt in 1896.

is obviously not directly of Biehl's edition—Bolotin thoughtfully disagrees with what Biehl accepts from the manuscript tradition on many points, and in particular with emendations that Biehl makes that he feels are unnecessary—yet Bolotin nevertheless provides his reader with a virtually complete translation of Biehl's Greek text by which to compare his own philological decisions. This is remarkable.[2]

My review of Bolotin's translation is, I should note, unconscionably tardy—I had intended to complete it over a year ago. I blame Bolotin. His extraordinary translation—and his utterly meticulous examination of the differing readings of the extant texts of *De anima* from the manuscripts (every footnote should be read with great care, and rewards it), compelled me to comprehensively reexamine what I had thought I understood of Aristotle's examination of soul.

That reexamination, or self-reflection, led me to reconsider elements of Aristotle's teaching that I had not experienced before. I have long considered—and still consider—Joe Sachs's translation of *De anima* to be an exceptional English translation of Aristotle's book. Sachs's devotion to precision in trying to corner the *ultimate* literal meaning of Aristotle's terms—many of them extremely difficult to translate—struck me as essential. And I am still grateful and deeply impressed by his efforts. For *entelecheia*, a crucial Aristotelian neologism, Sachs translates "being-at-work-staying-itself," for example. That is pretty exact. I might substitute "being-at-work-completing-itself," but I am pretty impressed with Sachs's formulation.

So what could be better?

This is what my reconsideration of *De anima*, with the help of Bolotin's translation, has led me to understand, or perhaps better, to begin to understand: we may profit more by slowly and arduously struggling with necessary ambiguity than by having a final meaning (even if accurate) spelled out for us at the outset. And this especially with respect to soul. In *De anima*, as in all of his works, Aristotle is a teacher in the true sense of the word: he teaches not in order to teach, but in order to provide a possiblity for his students to learn. (For those new to classical thought, there are many things, and these the most important things, that cannot be "taught" simply, but that can nevertheless

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[2]   Ultimately, there is only one thing I would fervently have desired to see in Bolotin's *On Soul* that is not there: facing Greek text for the almost critical edition Bolotin has implicitly but clearly compiled of *De anima*, corresponding to his extraordinary translation. For Bolotin's meticulous accomplishment as translator of Aristotle's *On Soul* is clearly preceded by his diligence, acuity, and constant reflective consideration as editor of the Greek manuscripts. I for one, would be grateful for his Greek edition.

be learned with the right teacher—and pupil.) Bolotin's translation captures this in a breathtaking way: having himself been a teacher at one of the last and greatest true teaching colleges in America (St. John's) for decades, he has crafted a literal translation of *De anima* with which students of that work may *learn* by reading it carefully and carefully considering it. His translation is demanding—but Aristotle's book is demanding. And spoon-fed *De anima* is *De mundo*.

How does Bolotin translate Aristotle's subtle neologism, *entelecheia*? "Completion." Too complete, I initially thought—but reflection on Bolotin's translation let me consider the potential *duration* of completion (e.g., "during the completion of her investigation"). And also potentially the endurance of the actualization of completion. And so on. The English word does not suddenly "complete" or match the Greek—it rather *does* in English what Aristotle's Greek word *does* in Greek—it opens the possibilities of its various meanings, once and if understood. Likewise Aristotle's subtle neologism *energeia*, which Bolotin consistently translates as "actuality" or another form of "actual" (and likewise reserves these words only for *energeia*). This translation allows, as Aristotle's Greek allows, that there must be a potential seamlessness between completion and actuality. It might also lead a serious and reflective reader to consider what is meant, in general, by the English word "actuality," for example—that is, what we typically gloss over in speech and mind and heart with this word. The benefits of literal and consistent translation are not confined to a one-way "best English" (or any other language) term for a Greek (or any other language's) term: Bolotin's translation lets his English readers reconsider their own language in addition to offering accurate substitute terms for Aristotle's. Aristotle's extreme economy in neologizing—adding the two-letter preposition *en-* in this case, and in the case of *entelecheia*, to a very common Greek word—suggests that he thought the common words he neologized might be beneficially reconsidered with respect to their common uses, and bespeaks, perhaps, an awareness that completely departing from common usage may lose as much or more in meaningfulness as it might gain thereby in precision. As Matthew Linck insightfully draws our attention to in his *Wakefulness and World*, "Aristotle would have us pay attention to the fact that we have such restrictions on meaningful speech."[3] Perhaps Aristotle privileged the possible dispositional impact of such a procedure on his reader over the epistemological clarity that might be afforded by a more radical

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[3] Matthew Linck, *Wakefulness and World: An Invitation to Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2019), 69.

neologism that would have left common usage behind (if participation *in* soul turns out to be a more accurate potential or actual experience—and therefore description—than *having* one's own separate soul, for example). Whether such a speculation is correct or not, the (to repeat) extreme economy of Aristotle's neologisms is evident to any reader of the Greek manuscripts that have come down to us: the mere fact of an Aristotelian neologism in the Greek does not authorize just any English neologism whatsoever as a proper or fitting translation. "Actuality" as a translation of *energeia* is a word that may be meaningfully reconsidered by a careful and thoughtful reader of an English translation of *De anima*, within the specific contexts that Aristotle discusses it. "Being-at-work," while accurate, does not provide the same actual or active opportunity. And as Bolotin insightfully notes, "Aristotle often uses the word *energeia* without emphasis on activity, but rather to mean something like 'actuality' or 'reality' as opposed to mere potentiality (i.e. being actually what something is capable of being)" (5n7). An English reader prompted to reflect that by even the ordinary use of "actuality" he or she must necessarily mean particular potential actualized in a particular and ongoing way may, by that reflection alone, have taken a step along the difficult path of understanding Aristotle's understanding of soul. It is obviously true that translation as such is necessarily imperfect and even dubious (*tradutorre*, *traditore*). There is no "method" available to rectify the problematic nature of translation as such. But at its best, literal translation can provoke a mutually beneficial conversation between (and about) specific languages, and Bolotin's translation of *De anima* is literal translation at its best.

In keeping with this, Bolotin's translation preserves ambiguity where Aristotle does not settle ambiguity: in particular with touch, perception, connection of soul, and so forth; that is, all interactions with world that soul might experience. The Greek words, on their own, for such potential or actual interactions involve permanent ambiguity concerning actual experience and inherent potential. For example, at 430a17, an English (and in fact, a Greek) reader might be sorely tempted to resolve the ambiguity as to whether Aristotle suggests that the "making" intellect (*nous*) is *separate*, or *separable* in its being "when it is in actuality" (119–20). Aristotle's *chōristos* could be interpreted either way (William of Moerbeke translates *separabilis* [separable], and the impact thereof on Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of the *De anima* is notable). Bolotin does not presume to interpret where he is not compelled to in his translation: at the expense of a certain awkwardness, and the gain of very important accuracy, he simply translates "separable/separate" (119).

The reader of Bolotin's translation is therefore in for a difficult but rewarding treat. Rather than slowly narrowing the possible interpretations of ambiguous terms and phrases toward some particular interpretation, Bolotin lets the slow accumulation of Aristotle's own ambiguities fall upon his reader, such that the responsibility for wrestling with them comes to light as the *reader*'s task. Nor does Bolotin's translation present this task as one of deciding or deciphering once and for all the "true" meaning of Aristotle's *On Soul*. Rather the task is presented, as Aristotle presented it, with great care, as one of continual rumination and self-rumination on soul.

So also with difficulties, with which the text of *De anima* that has come down to us presents many. Bolotin is extremely reserved in emending the text merely because it presents difficulties. He favors discussing the difficulties in detail (again, I strongly urge readers to attend to every word of every footnote in *On Soul*) rather than heedlessly changing the Greek; and the difficulties themselves, as Bolotin brings to light, are fruitful to consider, to think through, and in some cases to remain with. It is not clear that soul itself is without difficulty or contradiction.

For Aristotle, the study of the nature of soul is first philosophy: the question of knowing how we might know anything, and why, precedes particular knowledge in dignity, but is subsequent to the particular desire to know in time. What is the thing that wants to know, and how is it capable of knowing—if indeed it is? In the absence of a comprehensive answer to these questions, no particular knowledge may be held to be firm. Aristotle calls the desired knowledge of soul *eidēsis* (402a1)—a word that, as Seth Benardete points out, is used here, once, by Aristotle, and nowhere else in his extant work.[4] Is there a single "science" of soul? Certainly we cannot—and Aristotle does not—presume so.

Aristotle calls the thing that wants and has a possible capacity to know "soul" (*psuchē*). He does not assume that he—or anyone—is "thinking" nor that such an assumption would prove that one *is*. His only assumption is the wonder he experiences at the manifest desire to know that prompts his investigation. He is astonishingly rigorous in his refusal to build any conclusion into his premise. For "modern" readers in the Western tradition, taught to casually believe that the Cartesian formula *cogito ergo sum* represents an ultimate rigor in this respect, Aristotle's investigation of soul is difficult to approach, and seems by turns bizarre, naive, perhaps useless.

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4   Seth Benardete, "Aristotle, *De anima* III.3–5," *Review of Metaphysics* 28, no. 4 (June 1975): 611.

It is not.

If we assume that knowledge of soul, in this respect, takes precedence over all questions of particular knowledge, then we are in a position to seriously consider Aristotle's considerations of soul. Bolotin's translation of *De anima* is indispensable for the English-speaking reader in this respect. It is faithful, it describes the struggles of translation with penetrating insight, it is humble in the face of a text that has few equals in its profound reflection on what remains among the highest of human questions: "What is soul?" And it is as consistent as can be reasonably achieved in translating each Greek word as a single English word (*hulē*, for example, is always "material," reflecting Aristotle's consistent use of the word in *On Soul* rather than the variability in broader Greek usage, and the variability in Aristotle's own usage elsewhere [including 416b1–3, where one of Aristotle's little puns draws our attention to the original meaning, "wood," but the context requires "material"]), drawing attention to and explaining the inevitable practical deviations from that crucial principle.

David Bolotin's *On Soul* is, frankly, a masterpiece. With the possible exception of William of Moerbeke's thirteenth-century Latin translation, it is the finest translation of Aristotle's *De anima* that I have ever read, in any language, and the most true to the text that has come down to us.