

Wendy Lynne Lee

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Feminist Critique of Aristotle

Much recent feminist critique of Aristotle focuses on how “woman” has been constructed, located, valued, and devalued in Aristotle’s political and moral philosophy, or on the biological determinism that appears to pervade his account of species reproduction. No doubt feminists have made valuable contributions to our understanding of women’s assigned roles in the histories of Western cultures, and hence to the emancipatory projects which define contemporary feminist theory. Nonetheless, a good deal of comparative and analytical work remains to be done within Aristotle’s corpus in order to appreciate how and how deeply our conceptions of nature, essence, psychology, function, and life are informed by his philosophical legacy.¹

The aim of this essay is to contribute to one such project. Divided into two foci, I will first argue that Aristotle’s *de Anima* definition of what counts as a living thing relies on his claim that living things can move themselves and nonliving things cannot, and on the notion that by enumerating the powers or *dynamis* of living things he can establish their *telos* or final cause in a way that supports the psychic (vegetative, sentient, intellective) and social hierarchy (plants, animals, human beings) he goes on to develop in *de Anima* and elsewhere. If this is correct, two consequences follow: First, Aristotle’s conception of *psyche* or soul is necessarily *hylomorphic* as opposed to dualistic. That is, *psyche* denotes a principle of organization or form of a potentially animated body as opposed to a discrete immaterial entity; minds are embodied principles of animation, not independent souls. Living things do not have souls, but are rather ensouled. Second, Aristotle’s conception of

¹ Thanks to Marquette University’s Richard Taylor, John Jones, and the late Joan Kung for showing me the richness of beauty of Ancient Greek philosophical ideas.

a living thing is ecological in that living unlike nonliving things actualize or fulfill their *telos* through an interactive relationship to and with a particular external environment via the exercise of powers specified by their forms. The powers that Aristotle enumerates early in *de Anima* as self-movement, nutrition, sentience, locomotion, and intellection each involve the living thing as an actor or agent in an environment and not merely as something acted on by external efficient causes.²

The second focus of this essay is to work out the implications of Aristotle's view of living things for his psychic/social hierarchy, particularly with respect to the ambiguous place of women at the level of the intellectual *psyche*. As many feminists note, Aristotle's view that women are capable of intellection/discursion, but disabled with respect to deliberation, renders their place in his psychic hierarchy unclear at best. For others, however, the issue whether Aristotle is sexist and/or inconsistent is not adequately resolved by appeal to works whose relevance to his politics is more obvious—*de Anima*, the *Politics*, or *On the Generation of Animals*—but calls for a more comprehensive analysis of his metaphysics and epistemology. My view is that the situation may be both better and worse than either Aristotle's critics or his proponents think: Better in that, given the role played by environment in the actualization of *telos*, Aristotle's hylomorphism may offer a more defensible view of living things than the mind/body dualisms criticized by both feminists and nonfeminists, worse in that the support this view lends to his psychic and social hierarchy renders the "place" of women irreconcilably ambiguous. One option is to divorce Aristotle's hylomorphism from his psychic and social hierarchy. This, however, will not do because it ignores the metaphysics of what, for Aristotle, it is to be a living thing, namely, to be able to exercise powers (*dynamis*) defined hierarchically qua levels of self-movement and ecologically, qua the causal role played by a given power in the actualization (*energeia*) of a given *tele* or purpose.

At least two consequences follow: First, the ambiguity which attends including women at the level of the intellectual *psyche* compromises any definition of what it means for a woman to be a living thing. Because it is not clear at what level

² See for example Owens [1981].

of his psychic/social hierarchy women can be expected to interact with a natural environment that for a rational animal includes the cultural, social, moral, and political as well as the ecological, it is also unclear whether women can be expected to become effective deliberators. Does a disabled capacity to deliberate locate women as highly sentient, but not fully intellectual creatures? Or as intellectual but limited by some other feature determined by their form (reproduction, for example)? Can women be appreciated as fully human in either case? The answer is “no”; if the *telos* of a living thing is actualized through the exercise of those powers that characterize the kind of thing it is, and if women are precluded from the full exercise of that power that defines human being, namely, the deliberative self-movement of the intellectual *psyche*, then women cannot be said to count as fully human.

Second, given this “no,” the only conclusion we can draw is that Aristotle’s metaphysics of living things naturalizes women’s inferior status not only in his psychic/social hierarchy, but in their correlates, the household and the *polis*. Moreover, just as with every other relationship of lower form to higher in the psychic hierarchy, women constitute an ontologically necessary condition for the actualization of what stands higher on the scale, namely, the actualization of intellect manifest in those most capable of replicating in knowledge that which composes the world or *cosmos*. Not surprisingly, Aristotle identifies these as non-en-slaved citizen Greek men. Just as the lower forms of *psyche* (nutritive and sentient) and their powers (growth, locomotion, and perception) provide the ontological conditions for actualizing higher forms (intellection), so too in the household and polis lower forms of human being (slaves and women) provide the conditions whereby higher forms can actualize the *telos* of human being, knowledge, justice, and beauty. The difference between the plant’s relation to the sentient animal and that of women to men is that conditions which manifest themselves in one case (plants eaten) are proscribed in the other as an undertaking of labor.

From a feminist point of view, there seems little to recommend Aristotle’s psychic hierarchy. A consistent reading generates persistent ambiguity about the place of women in polis, household, and nature, the result of which legitimates

women's subordination to men. To insist that Aristotle does conceive women as fully human seems to defy not only his politics but his metaphysics of living things. One possible response, however, appears toward the end of *de Anima* where Aristotle draws a distinction between what he calls the active—abstracting conceptualizing—intellect and the passive—receptive sensory data sorting—intellect. Perhaps the ambiguity about women's place can be resolved by finding textual evidence which supports locating women at least at the level of the passive intellect; cold comfort to any feminist view of equality, but less ambiguous than the human, but not human being with which we seem to be left.

This conclusion, however, achieves little improvement. Even if Aristotle could concede to women the receptive and translating functions of the subservient passive intellect, whose mission is to act as the embodied interface between perception and higher reasoning, he nevertheless reserves to men the superior attributes of the active intellect whose own abilities depend upon its divorce from the body. Women not only remain well outside the capacity to deliberate, they remain identified with a body posited as subservient to a mind at least in the sense that the active intellect, as Aristotle makes the point, must remain “unmixed” with the body. Courting, then, the dualism he explicitly rejects, the question for Aristotle is: Why, given the attraction of a hylomorphic view of living things generally, resort to a view of intellect so inconsistent with other aspects of *psyche*?

Aristotle's hylomorphic conception of *zoe* (life)

In an earlier paper, I argued that contrary to the more standard view that he has completed the task of defining *psyche* by the end of *de Anima* II.2 (DA). Aristotle intends the several definitions he surveys to be understood as tentative because he has not yet provided satisfactory criteria for distinguishing life (*zoe*) from non-life.³ This distinction is central to Aristotle's philosophy of psychology whose aim it is to develop a science of living things, and thereby differentiate psychology from physics. Providing this criteria, I argue that the main focus of DA II.3 where what appears to be a cursory enumeration of the powers (*dynamis*) of *psyche* (nutri-

³ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 27-48; DA 412a 19-21, 412a 27-8, 412b 5-6, 412b 15-17.

tion, perception, locomotion, and intellect)⁴ is in fact key to Aristotle's view of the *tele* or final causes of living things.⁵ It is through the exercise of the powers understood as dispositions directed to the actualization of the "what it is" or *logos* of an entity,⁶ that living things are living things; it is through their teleologically specified functions (self-preservation, sentience, and intellection, respectively) that he can define *psyche* as the functional organization or form of a particular kind of body, namely, a body with life potentially.⁷ Such a definition of *psyche* is necessarily hylomorphic in that it denotes a principle of organization specific to potentially animated enmattered entities--not the immaterial soul of mind/body dualism. To make Aristotle's claim that living things can move themselves and nonliving things cannot is simply to acknowledge that the *dynamis* of a living thing instantiates a principle internal to its embodiment.⁸ It is in this sense that living things do not merely have souls but are ensouled; a living thing is *enmattered* so as to be able to actualize a given *telos* within that environment best suited to the kind of thing it is.⁹

The relationship of living things to their environments is not on this account exhausted by reference to efficient or material causes alone.¹⁰ Unlike nonliving things whose *tele* are "determined by the homogeneous and elemental arrangement of their physical constituents"¹¹ or the design of their maker¹²:

[t]he kind of causality which we may ascribe to a power...is not strictly that of agent to patient, but of actuality to potentiality. The living thing is not merely acted upon by its environment but...acts reciprocally with it...the *telos* of a living

⁴ See for example Manning [1985]. For an alternative reading, see Allen [1985].

⁵ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 28, Charlton [1987] p. 277-287.

⁶ See for example Ben-Zeev [1986] and Charlton [1987].

⁷ DA 414a 26-8. Also see Martha Nussbaum's translation of Aristotle's *Movement of Animals* (DM, p. 149-50): "A body can be potentially living only if it has an organic structure of a certain complexity; soul is the functional organization of such a body."

⁸ Ben-Zeev [1986] p. 438. See for example DM 701b 34-5.

⁹ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 31.

¹⁰ *Physics* III 1-3, Charlton [1987]p. 281-2.

¹¹ *Meteorology* IV 8, 12; DA 423b 27-30.

¹² *Physics* II.1, 192b 16-19, Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 33.

thing is immanent in a way that, through the exercise of its powers, an organism is preserved and benefited.¹³

The environment best suited to the actualization of living things is that through which the exercise of that power both common and necessary to the preservation of all living things is made possible. For Aristotle, this power is made manifest in the nutritive *psyche*:

[E]verything which is living and has a soul [*psyche*] from the time it is generated till it is destroyed must, as such, possess the nutritive soul, for that which is generated must grow and reach maturity and deteriorate, and these are impossible without food; so it is necessary for the nutritive power to exist in everything which grows and deteriorates.¹⁴

The function of the nutritive *psyche* is to mediate between living things and the environments within which those motions conducive to self-preservation are made possible. Given, then, that self-preservation is itself governed by *telos*, it seems clear that the powers of the nutritive *psyche* cannot be adequately explained in terms of agent organisms acting on patient environments, but must be explained in terms of those interactive processes (consumption, assimilation, elimination) involved in the actualization of specific *tele*. The nutritive *psyche* “instantiates the interactive relationship between the life of an organism and its environment”.¹⁵ Because this *psyche* “signifies the most fundamental of relations among the powers,” hylomorphically conceived, “we may reason that it is as part of a teleological process that this translation of potentiality to actuality receives its specific direction”.¹⁶

For Aristotle, the nutritive *psyche* is both common to living things and the necessary condition for actualizing the higher and more complex powers, sentience and intellect.¹⁷ The function of the nutritive *psyche* is to preserve the lives of

¹³ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 32.

¹⁴ DA 434a 22-5. Also see DA 412a 14-15 and GA 735a 14-22.

¹⁵ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 41.

¹⁶ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 38, Edel [1982] p. 152, Ben-Zeev [1986] p. 436.

¹⁷ DA 413a-b.

living things for the sake of actualizing their *tele*. Without nutrition the higher powers could not function;¹⁸ it is “the most common because it is the most necessary”,¹⁹ and is thus the same for any living thing.²⁰ The nutritive *psyche* differs only with respect to its relationship to other powers as these are evidenced in the behavior of those living things that clearly do more than consume, assimilate, and evacuate. While the *telos* of things like plants may be fully actualized through the nutritive *psyche*, it fulfills the role of necessary but not sufficient condition in actualizing the *tele* of sentient creatures. *Psyche* is thus an inherently hierarchical principle of animation precisely because the roles played by its powers are differentiated in terms of what constitutes a necessary condition for some higher level of development:

[plants] clearly have within themselves a potentiality and principle of the right kind through which they take growth and decay in opposite directions...Now this faculty can be separated from the others but the others cannot be separated from this in mortal beings. And this is obvious in the case of plants, as they have no other potentiality of the soul. All living things then have life in virtue of this principle, but they are not animals unless they have perception.²¹

According to Aristotle, what motivates living things to actualize their particular *telos* is the natural desire to “partake in the eternal and the divine”.²² Given, however, that “none of the mortal things admits of persistence as numerically one and the same”,²³ that is, as living things eventually die, the only avenue through which this desire may be realized is sexual reproduction²⁴:

For this is the most natural of the functions of such living creatures...to make another thing like themselves, an animal an animal, a plant a plant, so that in the way that they can they may partake in the eternal and the divine. For all creatures de-

¹⁸ DA 415a 9-10.

¹⁹ Lee-Lampshire [1992] p. 39, Charlton [1987] p. 282.

²⁰ DA 414a 32-414b 19.

²¹ DA 413a 31-b6.

²² DA 415a 25-b9.

²³ DA 415b 6-8.

²⁴ DA 415a 27-9.

sire this and for the sake of this do whatever they do in accordance with their nature.²⁵

To the extent that this desire forms an important feature of the *tele* of living things, a hierarchy that differentiates what living things are in terms of those powers through which that desire can be realized must consist of levels impervious to the possibility of a creature who exemplifies one level but exhibits traits or behaviors associated with the powers of a higher level. The desire to participate in the divine just is the desire to be what one is as this is made possible through the reproduction of another whose own place in the psychic hierarchy is as fixed as the original.

On this view, plants are only plants and animals are only animals in that while the *telos* of the former is actualized exclusively through the machinations of the lowest level of *psyche*, the latter both depends on this level and instantiates another higher, distinct form of *psyche*, namely, sentience²⁶:

We must, then, seek out in each case what the soul of each living thing is, what for instance is the soul of a plant and what of a man or a beast, and we must consider from what reason it is that they stand thus in a series. For while there is never the perceptive faculty without the nutritive, in plants the nutritive is separated from the perceptive...Ultimately and most rarely, some have reasoning and thinking. For those of the perishable beings that have reason have all the other faculties but not all of those that have each of them have reason.²⁷

Hence, a thing is not an animal unless it has perception, and it is a plant only if it occupies the most common level of *psyche* and no other. The interaction of living thing and environment can only be mediated through the powers which instantiate a thing's definite location within the hierarchy. Natural selection's transitional species are not only unlikely, they're metaphysically impossible; the possibility of a sentient plant (Venus Fly Traps) makes as little sense as a non-human animal capable of intellection (Chimpanzees). Such beings cannot be accom-

²⁵ DA 415a 27-b3.

²⁶ DA 415a 20.

²⁷ DA 414b 32-415a 10.

modated within the teleological metaphysics of this “first kind of knowledge,” namely, that of the *psyche*.²⁸

Women’s place in Aristotle’s psychic and social hierarchy

Christine Senack argues that if our aim is to gain some purchase on Aristotle’s view of women’s place in the psychic hierarchy, since he “is known to take an anatomy is destiny” approach to living organisms, it’s intuitively logical to begin with Aristotle’s theories about the biology of women”.²⁹ She suggests that, given that his account of sexual reproduction is both wrong and “culturally biased,” perhaps this aim would be better served if we began our investigation elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus.³⁰ Concurring with the feminist view that no point of departure is likely to be free of bias, Senack recommends beginning where Aristotle himself advises, in *de Anima*, paying particular attention to the extent to which his psychic hierarchy supports and naturalizes the inferior social status to women.

According to Senack, Aristotle’s gender bias can be made clear against the backdrop of his view of the male and female contribution to the generation of new human life. What the textual evidence shows, argues Senack³¹, is that Aristotle identifies males with higher levels of *psyche* (both qua sentience and intellect) and females with the lower levels (nutrition and appetite), hence males with the rational and females with the irrational:

The sentient faculty [power] is present in all animals. It becomes important in the discussion of the soul [psyche] of men and women because it is the faculty of the soul that the male contributes to the generation of a new human...The nutritive faculty of the soul is yet another key when comparing and contrasting the souls of women and men. This faculty is contained in all living creatures, both plants and animals...[But] Aristotle speaks of it mainly in terms of the woman’s soul.³²

²⁸ DA 402a 4-9.

²⁹ Senack [1988] p. 223.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 224.

³¹ See for example GA 471b 7 and NE 1102a 33.

³² Senack [1988] p. 226.

She goes on to connect Aristotle's view of *psyche*, understood in light of the male and female contribution to reproduction, with his view of the *polis* arguing that the identification of women with the lower levels of *psyche* serves to naturalize and thus justify hierarchical sex roles in the household and the state. As Aristotle puts the point in his *Politics*:

Here the very constitution of the soul has shown us the way; in it one part naturally rules, and the other is subject, and the virtue of the ruler we maintain to be different from that of the subject; -- the one being the virtue of the rational and the other of the irrational part. Now it is obvious that the same principle applies generally...But the kind of rule differs; -- the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative capacity at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has but it is immature.³³

For Aristotle, Senack concludes, "social relationships are determined by natural constraints".³⁴

While Senack's reading of the relation between Aristotle's politics and his psychology has much to recommend it, I am not convinced that it takes adequate account of the role played by Aristotle's hylomorphism in the constitution of *psyche*. On one hand, Senack is on the right track when she draws a connection between reproduction and *psyche*. As philosopher Nancy Tuana confirms in her essay *Aristotle and the Politics of Reproduction*:

[I]t seems to fly in the face of reason to say that man, who neither gestates, bears, nor lactates, possesses reproductive capacities superior to those of women. Yet this is exactly what Aristotle did... Furthermore, he argued that women's role in reproduction...[is] the cause of her intellectual inferiority to man.³⁵

On the other hand, Aristotle's claim that while the parts of *psyche* are present in all living things "they are present in different degrees" does not square

³³ *Politics* 1260a 4-16.

³⁴ Senack [1988] p. 227.

³⁵ Tuana [1988] p. 189.

with an account that postulates a psychic hierarchy composed of fixed levels. The nutritive *psyche* acts as necessary but not sufficient for the sentient, the sentient for the intellective. But the sentient *psyche* has, on this interpretation, no “presence” within the nutritive, nor the intellective within the sentient. There is no way to accommodate differing degrees of “presence” at the level of the next lower *psyche*. Moreover, if what the actualizing of a particular *telos* requires is that it be able to be specified in terms of the kind of thing it is qua the powers, themselves defined in terms of specific abilities, then the notion that a thing could have some “degree” of intellective *psyche*, but not be fully defined at that level of the hierarchy makes little sense. On this view, it would be possible for a thing to be, for example, somewhat alive. A preposterous conclusion, such possibilities are clearly not in keeping with Aristotle’s mission to distinguish between what it means to be ensouled as opposed to merely informed.

Aristotle might counter that his enumeration of powers within the sentient *psyche*, including (in order of priority) vision (DA II.7), hearing (II.8), smell (II.9), and touch (II.11) provides an example of degrees. However, while it is true for Aristotle that the different senses are present in some animals and not in others, and are perhaps even more acute in some animals than in others, they are not present within the sentient *psyche* like deliberation is present in the intellective. A sentient animal could have hearing but not vision (naked mole rats), but an intellective animal could not have deliberation without reason. Thinking creatures can deliberate, but hearing creatures cannot necessarily see, for deliberation does not belong to intellection like vision belongs to sentience. Moreover, whereas the senses are separable and discrete, intellection is not similarly divisible (a feature of Aristotle’s view that becomes problematic where, later in *de Anima*, he is at pains to define the active intellect by its potential to become the objects of its contemplation).

While Aristotle does articulate powers differentiated by function for the sentient *psyche*, he offers no analogous treatment of intellection. Instead, he divorces the intellective from lower levels in the psychic hierarchy, hinting that intellection’s difference is not merely functional, but qualitative: whereas the functions of the nutritive and sentient *psyches* are distinguished by their ecologies, e.g.

their material instantiations and hierarchical place, the intellective *psyche*--in order to become the forms of the objects of its contemplation--must be immaterial and independent. But this seems a retreat to the dualism Aristotle rejects; it is in any case of dubious consistency with his hylomorphism.³⁶ More central, however, is that the possibility of the presence of degrees can be fitted neither into a hylomorphic nor a dualist account of *psyche*, hence we have little motivation on the grounds of locating women's place for preferring one account to the other.

In her essay on what she calls the principle of necessary verticality, Judith Green offers additional reinforcement to the view that *psyche* cannot accommodate degrees:

For Aristotle, "the masculine" and "the feminine" are principle bundles of complementary oppositions in all of Nature, the most fundamental value-creating differences from which other value-creating differences arise...These complementary principle-bundles in all their embodiments are correlated by what I call "the principle of necessary verticality," which serves two purposes: (1) it creates the coherence within compounds that allows them to remain unified and to achieve their function, and (2) it generates a dynamic of up-ness following down-ness that allows all things within Nature to achieve their *telos* of an eternal circular motion like that of all celestial beings beyond the lunar sphere...Aristotle attributes the subordinate proper places of women and slaves within the polis to their participation in the subordinate "feminine" principles of Nature.³⁷

On Green's reading, Aristotle's order of nature is not only hierarchical but oppositional in that what is most fundamental to the material and hence functional coherence of living and nonliving things, as well as to the actualization of their *tele*, is governed by principles that determine sublunary place in terms of opposing powers (or their privation) themselves arrayed along vertical axes that include good and evil, up and down, male and female.³⁸ Given, then, that these principles govern every aspect of being from what determines material coherence, to what distinguishes life from non-life, to what defines hierarchical place--psychically,

³⁶ DA II.2, especially 24-9.

³⁷ Green [1992] p. 71-2.

³⁸ *Politics* 1254a 20-32.

socially, and cosmically—it is difficult to see how Aristotle’s metaphysics could accommodate “differing degrees.” Such would amount to postulating degrees of being, an absurd result on its face.

Green’s view is confirmed in Senack’s account of the distinction that Aristotle draws between the rational and the irrational,³⁹ as well as in his view that “women and men are more than mere opposites, specifically woman is a privation of man, and that which she lacks is important and vital to being treated as equal”.⁴⁰ The subordination of women, in other words, is justified on the grounds that women are rightly identified with a “principle bundle” not amenable to the presence of degrees of intellect, but is instead identified as the privation of these powers. Here, however, Senack’s view runs into another problem in that while she recognizes the ontological relationships between reproduction, *psyche*, *polis*, and *telos*, her account stops short of the full implications of Aristotle’s view of *psyche*.⁴¹ This line of development is precluded at the outset because it assumes precisely what Aristotle’s hylomorphism is unable to accommodate, namely, a view of the intellectual *psyche* not clearly located at the apex of the psychic hierarchy. To claim that an irrational (element of) *psyche* could overrule the rational is tantamount to claiming that the sentient *psyche* could overrule the intellectual. But were this the case, Aristotle could not claim ontological status for the psychic hierarchy required for the actualization of a living thing’s *telos*.

Consistency and the status quo: *zoe*, ontology, and value

We appear to have three choices: (1) Ignore Aristotle’s view about degrees of reason, maintain that he is consistent across texts, and conclude that because women do not participate in the intellectual *psyche* they are not fully human in the sense required by the psychic hierarchy; (2) Assume (1), except for the inferior place assigned to women in *psyche*, reproduction, household, and *polis*, insisting instead that this adjustment of Aristotle’s view does not constitute any fundamental alteration of his metaphysics; (3) Grant that Aristotle is not consistent. On

³⁹ Senack [1988] p. 226-7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

this latter view, degrees of reason are inconsistent with Aristotle's hylomorphic, hierarchical, and oppositional metaphysics of ensoulment, hence the place of women qua *psyche*, household, *polis*, and *cosmos* remains ambiguous. More, however, is at stake here than conceptual ambiguity: because (1) implies that women cannot become fully actualized deliberative beings, they cannot be candidates for any of the benefits which thereby accrue, including that specific happiness or *eudaimonia* available only to creatures capable of reason. The situation for (2), however, is little better in that it requires ignoring substantial parts of Aristotle's work in the interest of a reading that, while it sports a more attractive view of women, is both ahistorical and of dubious exegetical value. Making (2) even more difficult is that material relevant to the status of women is often embedded in or implied by passages devoted to other topics, for example, reproduction, education, the good life, or the composition of the just state. Because this material, however, is more likely to support (1), we seem dispatched again to (3), and the somewhat cold comfort that Aristotle is not alone in the history of philosophy in having advanced a world view which at every turn seems to support and require the subordination of women.

Questions of consistency aside, what does seem clear is that, as opposed to articulating a view of *psyche* potentially compatible with at least some alternative visions of household and *polis*, Aristotle's is compatible with only one, the very Greek state within which he himself is a privileged member. This would not be a surprising conclusion save that as an observer of nature (and son of a physician) he was keenly aware of the importance of suspending assumptions prior to the examination of evidence. Yet it seems never to have occurred to Aristotle that the assumptions he shared with his privileged contemporaries about women and non-Greeks might be mistaken. The subordination of women emerges as a natural consequence of Aristotle's metaphysics of living things, the centerpiece of his philosophy and, ironically, the product of a privilege sustained through the labor of the women and slaves whose fates are reconfirmed in his claim (and through sheer lack of leisure) that philosophy is accessible "ultimately and rarely" only to those few capable of reasoning and thinking.⁴²

⁴² DA 415a 8-9.

What is special about Aristotle's case—or especially disappointing—is that wedded to his at least superficial rejection of mind/body dualism is the hope of an alternative view of ensoulment more defensible to theorists of mind, feminist and nonfeminist alike. Even this hope quickly fades, however, once we reach *de Anima* III. 4-6, where Aristotle discusses the specific qualities of the active as opposed to the passive intellect. Here, he argues that the former must in some respect be separable from the latter so that it may become the forms of the objects of its contemplation without obstacle imposed by the body.⁴³ But how should we read this? If literally, it seems to reintroduce the dualism earlier rejected; such an intellect seems unaccountable to the hylomorphic notion that *psyche* is the organizational form of an enmattered living thing. If metaphorically, or for the sake of the explanation of the differing functions of the passive and active intellects, then how should understand the following remarks?

[n]ow as to that part of the soul by which it has both cognition and understanding, whether this be separate or not indeed spatially separate but conceptually so, we must consider what its characteristic features are and how thinking occurs as any time.⁴⁴

[t]hat part of the soul then that is called [active] intellect (by which I mean that whereby the soul thinks and supposes) is before it thinks in actuality none of the things that exist. This makes it unreasonable that it be mixed with the body--for, if so, it would have to have some quality, being either hot or cold, or indeed have some organ like the perceptive faculty, whereas it in fact has none.⁴⁵

Whereas the first remark leaves open whether the active intellect is separable from the passive, the second implies that it must both be separable and independent to avoid contamination by bodily qualities that can adversely affect its objectivity. As a kind of pure potentiality the active intellect can only become the forms of all things insofar as it remains completely free from the influence of the body:

⁴³ DA 413a 4-5.

⁴⁴ DA 429a 10-13.

⁴⁵ DA 429a 21-8.

[a]nd indeed there is an intellect characterized by the capacity to become all things, and an intellect characterized by that to bring all things about, and to bring them about in just the way that a state, like light, does...Now this latter intellect is separate, unaffected and unmixed, being in substance activity.⁴⁶

The epistemic function of the active intellect seems perfectly consistent with the *telos* of the intellectualive *psyche* in that an “unaffected and unmixed” intellect is purposive to the actualization of the knower.⁴⁷ “[C]ontemplative knowledge,” Aristotle claims, “is the same as that which is thought”.⁴⁸ Moreover, the knower comes to know himself--intellect comes to think itself--in the contemplation of its objects:

[a]nd it [the active intellect] is itself thinkable just as the thought-objects are, for in the case of things without matter that which thinks is the same as that which is thought. For contemplative knowledge is the same as what is so known.⁴⁹

A capacity as “ultimate and rare” as the knowing subjects for whom the *polis* has its *raison d'être*, Aristotle appears to court mind/body dualism for the sake of preserving the status quo.

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⁴⁶ DA 430a 14-19.

⁴⁷ DA 430a 20-25.

⁴⁸ DA 430a 4-5.

⁴⁹ DA 430a 2-5.

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