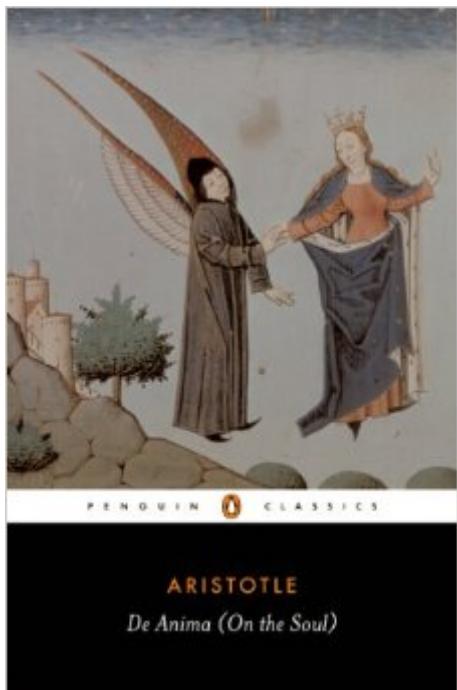


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De Anima (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

For the Pre-Socratic philosophers the soul was the source of movement and sensation, while for Plato it was the seat of being, metaphysically distinct from the body that it was forced temporarily to inhabit. Plato's student Aristotle was determined to test the truth of both these beliefs against the emerging sciences of logic and biology. His examination of the huge variety of living organisms - the enormous range of their behaviour, their powers and their perceptual sophistication - convinced him of the inadequacy both of a materialist reduction and of a Platonic sublimation of the soul. In *De Anima*, he sought to set out his theory of the soul as the ultimate reality of embodied form and produced both a masterpiece of philosophical insight and a psychology of perennially fascinating subtlety.

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Book Information

Series: Penguin Classics

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics; Reissue edition (June 2, 1987)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140444718

ISBN-13: 978-0140444711

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #168,500 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #46 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Epistemology #119 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Epistemology #307 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Greek & Roman

Customer Reviews

Aristotle's short but profoundly influential work, *De Anima*, is set within a rich supporting text authored by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, the Penguin edition's translator and editor, that absorbs almost

three-fourths of this volume. Besides his lengthy introduction, the editor provides a useful glossary of translations, summaries before each chapter, copious endnotes, and a short bibliography, but no index. Unlike more widely read, fully formed, straightforward books by Aristotle, such as *Politics* and *Ethics*, *De Anima* asserts cryptic ideas and advances viewpoints that seem quite strange today. The editor's Introduction addresses such potential impediments for the Aristotelean neophyte and amplifies problematic issues of interest to philosophers of any acquaintance. Aristotle's subject is a general "principle of life" intrinsic to all plants and animals, not any contemporary notion about the soul (*psyche*) suggested by its English title, *On The Soul*. Aristotle's soul includes his psychology and topics such as sensation and thought. Lawson-Tancred argues that Aristotle is indifferent to the issue preoccupying epistemologists and psychologists during recent centuries, Descartes's division of subjectivity into the body and mind. He claims that Aristotle is concerned with general features of life, not with purely human issues like consciousness. In discounting consciousness, Aristotle concurs with anti-Cartesian positivists, but Lawson-Tancred argues that when Aristotle says the soul is substance, he really means it, contradicting physicalist contentions that it is an epiphenomenon or a list of special attributes. Aristotle's soul is substance, but Aristotle rejects reducing the soul's properties to the body's material. Teleology is explanation implicating final causes, e.g., things fulfill purposes for which they were created. Scientists reject creation and ultimate purpose, and censure Aristotle for his teleological explanations. Regarding the soul, however, Aristotle suggests that to understand biological phenomena, the arrangement of material and its relationship to functions it performs is key. Recent rethinking about Aristotle's functionalism has reinvigorated his status in modern biology. Theologians generally view Aristotle's work favorably, especially his emphasis on built-in purpose and final causes. Lawson-Tancred recounts Aristotle's powerful influence on intellectual history from his immediate successors, to assimilation in the neo-Platonic West, through incorporation by Islamic and Christian theologians, connections that made *De Anima* so important for over 2000 years. Lawson-Tancred also discusses Aristotle's personal history and intellectual development; his mentor, Plato, and their mutual influence; ideas of other philosophers that Aristotle encountered, and *De Anima* in context of his other works. He concludes by criticizing the interpretations of Aristotle by the philosophers Brentano and Wilkes. Lawson-Tancred helps the reader to understand many ideas, but two essential concepts Aristotle developed elsewhere are prerequisite to understanding *De Anima*: entelechy (*entelecheia*) and substance (*ousia*). Substance or essence is the fundamental reality of existence. Form, Matter, and their composite are types of substances. Matter is the inanimate, elemental substrate of which things are composed, e.g., earth made into a statue. Form is the structure and function outlined by a formula (*logos*), e.g., a statue

artfully shaped to resemble a woman. Things exist either in actuality (putting to use) or potentiality (unexploited capacity). Form is actuality; Matter is potentiality. Aristotle's theory is that Form combines with Matter following the Form's plan to actualize potential. Entelechy is the possession of this intrinsic goal that is realized when Form and Matter combine. Thus, Aristotle's teleological approach is called "Entelechism." Aristotle uses entelechy repeatedly to describe the soul, as the following summary of *De Anima* shows. In Book I, Aristotle describes his subject: the soul, "the first principle of living things," and considers its relation to intellect, emotion, etc. He comments on other philosophers' works: whether the soul is material, and what kind; its characteristic features (it moves, senses, and lacks body); how it produces bodily movement; etc. He criticizes theories that the soul is quantity or harmony or participates in the whole universe. He concludes that the soul lacks motion and is not material nor made of elements. Instead, the soul comprises several faculties: e.g., cognition, appetite. Book II begins with an important formulation: the soul is the "form of the living body which potentially has life" (the organism's first actuality). Having a soul distinguishes living from inanimate objects. The soul's nutritive faculty is essential for all organisms, but animals have the faculty of sensation, separating them from plants. Thus begins a hierarchy of faculties from nutrition to intellect. In sensation, the sense organ and sense-object, like the soul and body, participate in the Form/Matter relationship. The sense organ receives the object's Form, not its matter, in Aristotle's words, "as the wax takes the sign from the ring without the iron and gold." He discusses each of the five senses, and makes a famous distinction among perceptual elements (special, common, incidental). Aristotle concludes discussing sensation in Book III by proposing functions of the perceptive faculty that integrate individual senses. Imagination, a faculty producing imagery, mediates between sensation and intellect. Aristotle's remarks about intellect are among his most renowned, fecund, and difficult. He describes the intellectual faculty, which includes thinking and supposition, with the same physiological approach of his sensory theory. The organ of thought receives the Form of the thought-object to realize thinking. He calls the intellect a repository of Forms and distinguishes the active from the passive intellect, providing inspiration for Thomas Aquinas's psychology. Aristotle concludes with a discussion of motivation, i.e., what puts the organism into action. No other work contains a psychological theory like that presented in *De Anima*, excepting Aquinas's derivative. Its resemblance to attribute (behaviorist) theories of the mind cannot obscure Aristotle's radically different foundation. His Form-Matter and Actuality-Potentiality concepts are not explanatory, only a framework for inquiry. Its relevance, as Lawson-Tancred notes, to modern psychology depends upon identifying an empirical approach to Aristotle's Form. Aristotle's proposal that life has, or is, a principle provides an alternative point of departure for scientists who

find contemporary materialist dogma lacking direction. *De Anima*, one of the most important books ever written, and long neglected by scientific psychology, still puts life in an eternal debate.

The treatise itself is arduous but worthwhile reading, and very interesting. However, it is less psychological and more proto-biological or metaphysical than I anticipated; lots on potentiality and actuality and movement, etc. There are some very cool insights in general, and especially on the relationship between taste and touch, motivation, and the hierarchy of faculties in the soul. Reading it is obviously key to any broader understanding of Aristotle. But reviewing a classic text like this is very beyond the point— I'm just saying this stuff to give you an idea of what's in here. It's not the best place to start with Aristotle (see: *Ethics*), even though it appears to be short. So then, the edition. Lawson-Tancred's introduction is 117 pages — longer than the treatise itself! — and not very useful or interesting, unless you are interested in specific interpretational disputes. Similarly, his notes were a bit smarmy and nitpicky and perhaps too heavily interpretive, in a seemingly shallow way. I didn't much like his translation either, which is prone to using really weird words (congeries?). Overall I would recommend just about any other translation you can find.

Good translation and ancillary materials (if a bit dated). This would work well for an undergraduate course in ancient philosophy.

Needed it for school, came fast.

This book is something that everyone who is interested in truth and beauty should read. Every other philosophical writing is a mere foot note to this book and this particular edition is so accurate that it doesn't leave you wondering why.

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