CHAPTER 4

On Touch and Life in the *De Anima*

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Remember that you, dependent on your sight, do not realize how many things are tangible.

HELEN KELLER, *The World I Live In*

Between the beautiful things with which the *De Anima* begins and the tongue with which it ends, we come into contact with an account of touch in which the very nature of perceiving is felt. “Of beautiful things” the *De Anima* begins as it embarks upon an inquiry into the soul that concludes with a gesture to the tongue and its capacity to “signify something to another.” A certain way of knowing is the beautiful thing with which the *De Anima*, like the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*, begins; and as with those texts, so with this, vision seems to be the focus of it. Where the *De Anima* says “τὴν εἴδησιν” and goes on to suggest that insight into the nature of the soul is beautiful because it is both precise and wondrous, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* say “τὸ εἰδέναι” and speak in turn of a path of inquiry from what is more familiar to us to what is first by nature, and of the delight we take in our capacity to see which “of all the powers of perceiving, makes us recognize things and brings to light many differences.”

Yet between the “beautiful things” with which the *De Anima* begins and the tongue with which it ends, we encounter the *aporia* of touch that threatens to subvert the primacy of sight. The tongue appears here in the middle as well, though not as the organ of speech, but as the very flesh by which we enter into

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2 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 402a1, 435b24–25. All translations from the Greek are my own. The question of the unity of the *De Anima* is not insignificant here, but not much depends on whether the book was fully complete for publication in Aristotle’s time. Rather, what is of interest is the text that has been inherited and the form in which it has been handed down. Martha Nussbaum challenges the best argument for the disunity of the *De Anima*, though she insists that the third book is “internally a mess.” See Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie O. Rorty, eds., *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima* (Oxford, 1995), p. 6. Ross recognizes that “[t]he plan of the *De Anima* is to a large extent a clear and well thought-out one.” He goes on to point out that the manuscript of Book III is “less carefully prepared for publication than that of the earlier books.” See Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford, 1961), pp. 12 and 14.
intimate connection with the world. If at the beginning and in the end, the De Anima articulates a path of inquiry that takes its bearings from the beautiful things said concerning the soul and finds its voice in the eloquence of the human tongue, in the middle, we are made to feel the poignant aporia of touch and to experience the possibility that our inquiry might ultimately lose its way.

This inquiry into the nature of the soul, which itself is said to “contribute greatly toward all truth, and especially toward the truth concerning nature,” proceeds along a familiar peripatetic path. Aristotle points to it in the De Anima when he writes:

> While inquiring concerning the soul it is at the same time [ἅμα] necessary, while going through the impasses through which we must pass if we are going to move forward, to take along with us [συμπαραλαμβάνειν] the opinions of all our predecessors who declared something concerning the soul, so that we might take hold of the things that have been said beautifully while, if something was not said beautifully, we might beware of these.4

Already here, as at the end, the tongue, with its capacity to signify something to another, is felt to bear upon the well-being of the inquiry itself. This peripatetic path unfolds as legomenology in its most familiar guise: the attempt to articulate the truth by attending carefully to the things said well by those who came before.5 Book I of the De Anima is thus no prologue preceding but fundamentally divorced from the inquiry itself; rather, it is a prolegomenon in the more literal sense in which the inquiry itself proceeds as a collaborative endeavor between those who came before and we who continue to seek the truth concerning the nature of the soul. Thus, Aristotle’s own peripatetic legomenology opens a determinate path for us into the received text; for if his inquiry proceeds in collaboration with his predecessors, ours ought also to proceed by attending carefully to the things Aristotle himself said beautifully even if we too must beware when something is not so said. The adverb, “καλῶς,” here as throughout the De Anima, modifies a particular way of speaking, which is said to be beautiful precisely because it articulates something of the truth. The adverb itself appears most often in the De Anima in contexts in which Aristotle

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4 Aristotle, De Anima, 403b20–24.
5 For a more detailed discussion of legomenology as a peripatetic methodology, see Christopher P. Long, Aristotle on the Nature of Truth (New York, 2011), pp. 6–11.