A Missing middle term: De Anima II,2

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In de Anima II,1 Aristotle presents us with three related definitions of soul, as follows:

1) the form of a natural body having life potentially in it 412a21
2) the first grade of actuality of a natural body having life potentially in it 412a28
3) the first grade of actuality of a natural organized body 412b5

In spite of the air of ascending approval attached to these three definitions, he then, at the beginning of II,2, appears to find fault with the results of his efforts. He opens this new chapter by reminding us that “what is clear or logically more evident emerges from what in itself is confused but more observable by us;” we ought, he says to “reconsider our results from this point of view” 413a12. In other words, he wishes to place this fresh discussion in the familiar contexts of 1) his general epistemology as outlined in Metaphysics I, 1 and Posterior Analytics II, 19, and 2) (more specifically) the distinction between better known to us and better known absolutely, as at Posterior Analytics I, 2 and elsewhere. With these familiar points in mind, he complains that definitions nowadays are given “in a form analogous to the conclusion of a syllogism” 413a16, in that they exhibit the mere fact (to hoti), rather than displaying the ground (ten alitien). The implication is that he regards his proposed definitions of II, 1 as subject to this type of adverse criticism: they constitute the conclusions of syllogisms and fail to exhibit the ground.

Aristotle’s self-criticism very naturally recalls what he has to say about the fact and the reasoned fact in Posterior Analytics I, 137. As an example of the first we find

All non-twinklers are near
All planets are non-twinklers

All planets are near

1 Or four, if we follow Robert Bolton, “Aristotle’s Definitions of Soul” Phronesis XXIII,3 1978 (250). He sees a fourth at 412b15-17. Joseph Owens, in “Aristotle’s Definition of Soul” Philomathes 1971 (127), also arrives at four definitions, by inserting soul as “the entelechy of the kind of body just described” 412a21-22. One could well add 412b11-13. None of these additions really affects my main problem.

2 I have used the Oxford translation of Smith unless otherwise noted.

3 The parallel is discussed in detail by Owens (131-33), but is judged, in the end, not to succeed (145).

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and of the second

All near heavenly bodies are non-twinklers
All planets are near heavenly bodies

All planets are non-twinklers

The first, which gives as its conclusion the fact but not the reasoned fact, employs the better known (to us) of the two reciprocals as the middle term. (Non-twinkling is better known than nearness). In order to supply the reasoned fact, however, the middle term (or proximate cause) needs to be the one of the two reciprocals which is better known absolutely, i.e., nearness. As Aristotle remarks, “it is not because the planets do not twinkle that they are near, but because they are near that they do not twinkle” 78a37 Tredennick.

In the final sentence of II, 2 Aristotle gives a fresh definition of soul which, one is to assume from what has gone before, meets his initial criticism. That is, the fresh definition will give the reasoned fact rather than just the fact. Again using the model of Posterior Analytics I, 13, as well as bearing in mind his example, at 413a17, of squaring as the discovery of the mean proportional, we have to assume that

4) an actuality or formulable essence of something that possesses a potentiality of being besouled 414a27*

qualifies as a definition that is not simply the conclusion of a syllogism, but that somehow exhibits the ground. Are we then intended to construct the syllogism of which this new definition is the conclusion? To do so would mean to chose a middle term to function as proximate cause. The framework would then be this:

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* It is immediately noticeable that Aristotle’s final definition in II, 2 414a27 is rather colorless when compared with the definitions in II, 1; it omits both the concept of first actuality and of a natural organized body. (The reference to body in 4) as “something that possesses a potentiality of being besouled” recalls the oblique manner in which Socrates refers to soul in the Crito 44E.) I have a suggestion to offer as to the reason for this: it is that Aristotle is trying to avoid the too close association of this set of definitions with one particular kind of living things, namely animals. So, for instance, the notion of first actuality is rather specially associated with animals, since it is in animals that sleep is most prominent. Plants do not sleep, as he specifically says in Generation of Animals V, 1 779a2 and in the de Somno I 454b25-33 and cf. 454a15-17. Nor is it likely that thinking sleeps. Plants do resemble animals in having organs, although there is a slight aura of special pleading in Aristotle’s remarks on this point 412b1-4. There is, notoriously, no organ of thought, so that it could reasonably be claimed that the definitions of II, 1 are more appropriate to animal life than to other forms of living. But by selecting and retaining the middle term I suggest below, he can exhibit the causal connections of the different kinds of life (in their pyramidal ordering) with his (quite general) final definition while at the same time avoiding the difficulty of a too close association with one single mode of living.