BASILIDES AS AN ARISTOTELIANIZING GNOSTIC

BY

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Introduction

My aim in this contribution is to argue that the information which Hippolytus provides about Aristotle has not been taken seriously enough. Study of Hippolytus’ text on Basilides can ‘benefit’ our knowledge of Aristotle’s philosophy. But a corrected knowledge of Aristotle’s philosophy can, in turn, ‘benefit’ our assessment of the system which Hippolytus attributes to Basilides and his son Isidorus.

The single point of difference between Aristotle and his teacher

In his Refutatio I 20, 3-4 Hippolytus makes a surprising statement about Aristotle’s psychology. He says:

In most points he [sc. Aristotle] is in agreement with Plato, except the opinion concerning soul. For Plato affirms it to be immortal, but Aristotle that it continues to exist; and [after these things] that it also vanishes in the fifth body, which he supposes, along with the other four [elements],—viz. fire, and earth, and water, and air,—to be something more subtle [than these], of the nature of spirit.


2 For the motif of εὐεργετῶν and εὐεργετωσθαι cf. Hipp. Haer. VII 22, 10-11; 25, 1; 26, 10; 27, 11; 27, 12; X 14, 5; 14, 6; 14, 9. For Hippolytus’ text, see P. Wendland, Hippolytus, Werke vol. 3 (GCS 26) (Leipzig 1916; repr. Hildesheim 1977) and M. Marconi, Hippolytus, Refutatio omnium haeresium (Berlin/New York 1986).
This philosopher also affirms... that the soul of the entire world is immortal, and the world itself is eternal, but that [the soul] in an individual, as we have before stated, vanishes [in the fifth body]. (transl. J.H. Macmahon with changes)³

Hippolytus' statement is remarkable. Judging only by the words used in I 20, 4, we must conclude that Hippolytus attributes to Aristotle the view that the soul consists of a physical body, if a very special, fine body. This would mean that Hippolytus ascribes to Aristotle a materialistic or at least hylozoistic psychology. Such a psychology is not to be found anywhere in Aristotle's extant work. Attempts to connect it with his lost works have been made⁴ but also vehemently disputed.

Yet it is doubtful whether the totality of information about Aristotle's psychology which Hippolytus provides in his critical discussion of Basilides' heretical doctrine⁵ should force us to dismiss this information. Hippolytus tells us here what Aristotle said about the soul, but not what happens to the intellect. In his surviving treatises Aristotle repeatedly affirms that if there is anything immortal in man, it is his intellect.⁶ For Aristotle this has

³ Hipp. Haer. I 20, 3-4; 6 (ed. M. Marcovich): καὶ σχήδια τὰ πλείστα τῷ Πλάτωνι σύμφωνον ἐστὶν πλὴν τοῦ περὶ ψυχῆς δημιουργοῦ, ὁ μὲν γὰρ Πλάτων ἀθάνατον, ὁ δὲ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐπισταμένει, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ ταῦταν ἐναραφάζεσθαι τῷ πέμπτῳ σώματι, ὁ ὑποστήθαι εἶναι μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων τεσσάρων... λεπτότερον, οὐν πνεῦμα... 6: τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὲν ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου ἀθάνατον εἶναι καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν κόσμον ἀείδον, τὴν δὲ καθ’ ἑκατὸν, ὡς προείπομεν, ἐναραφάζεσθαι.


⁶ Arist. Anim. II 2, 41b24-29. Perhaps he also argued this in his lost work the Eudemus. This is the thrust of Themist., In De an. 106, 29-107, 5 = Arist. Eudem. fr. 2 Ross; 58 Gigon. However, assuming a development in Aristotle’s thought, one might suspect that Themistius is harmonizing here between the view of the early Aristotle and a different, later position, as is suggested by J.M. Rist, The mind of Aristotle. A study of philosophical growth (Toronto 1989) 166.