

Heavenly stuff and celestial bodies:
Explanatory strategies in the Peripatetic tradition

István Bodnár

Eötvös University / Central European University, Budapest

Aristotle's special celestial body – just like other physical bodies – is endowed with a nature, and with capacities. Aristotle holds that the nature of the celestial bodies, and those capacities we have access to are in complete match: there is no constraint involved in the locomotion of the celestial bodies, and these bodies cannot house any other kind of change.

This complete match, however, does not preclude that the explanation of celestial motions turn out to be a complex account, referring to an external, non-bodily mover, and to some further capacity of striving which connects the celestial bodies to this kind of non-bodily mover. Moreover, issues about the complexity of the actual celestial movements, and the several further difficulties surrounding the status of the two different manifestations of the celestial body – the different celestial luminaries on the one hand, and their several celestial spheres – need to be accounted for.

Already these difficulties require different explanatory strategies, applied to a domain where, as Aristotle submits, our cognition can only be partial. Accordingly, the way these different explanatory strategies mesh and interact is not specified by him in full detail.

In my talk I will highlight some examples for the crucially different ways Aristotle's explanatory strategies were assessed, deployed, or criticised and rejected in the Peripatus. Instead of providing a quick and hurried roll call, I outline a contrastive exposition of Xenarchus, Alexander and Simplicius, the three Aristotelian scholars where we have the most detailed evidence about their celestial theory. Even in the case of these three philosophers I need to be selective, and aside from the explanatory strategies deployed I concentrate on the status of the celestial body itself. For the clarification of the status of the celestial body I pursue two connected queries: what reassessment of the status of the celestial body, as body, is involved in these explanatory schemes; and whether and how this reassessment also allows for a reassessment of the status of other, non-celestial bodies of the universe.