

Frans de Haas (Leiden): The Human Body and its Physical Environment

Abstract

Aristotle is well aware that in many respects the human body is no more than an ingeniously designed set of mixtures of the four elements, and thereby subject to common physical interactions. In his physics and psychology Aristotle differentiates the animal and/or human body from other bodies in ways that modern interpreters have often taken as ways of distinguishing the corporeal from the mental. I shall argue that Aristotle was in fact largely differentiating between different kinds of physical interaction, and is insensitive to the modern distinction between corporeal and mental causation.

If so, it is quite understandable that ancient reports on Aristotle have ascribed to him a variety of determinism. Alexander of Aphrodisias saw the need to rescue Aristotle from any determinism whatsoever by using the form/matter distinction to distinguish the mental from the corporeal in ways that still echo in our modern discussions. In my talk I shall focus on pre-Alexandrian comments in order to reconstruct a maximum version of Aristotle's physical theory of the human body.