

Aristotle's *De Anima*

I. The Nature of the Soul

What is the soul? According to Aristotle, it is a “sort of principle of animals.” (402a7) But what sort of principle?

As we saw in the *Physics*, substances are composites of matter and form. In *De Anima*, Aristotle appeals not only to this account of substance, but also to an understanding of form and matter as actuality and potentiality. And he goes on to claim that the “soul (*psuchē*) ... must be substance as the form (*eidos*) of a natural body (*sōma*) that is potentially alive.” (412a20) In other words, the soul is the form of the body of a living substance. (Those things are said to be living that engage in self-nourishment, growth, and decay. (412a15)) In a later passage (417a22ff), Aristotle further distinguishes between different kinds of actuality and potentiality; he claims that, for example, there are different senses in which one can be said to be a knower:

- (a) insofar as one is a human being (that is, one has a general innate capacity/potentiality);
- (b) insofar as one has some bit of grammatical knowledge (i.e. one has actual knowledge which gives one the capacity or potential to act in a certain way); or
- (c) insofar as one is actively attending something in thought (that is, one's knowledge is fully actual because one is using/employing it at the time).

In Aristotelian jargon, these correspond to the following:

- (a) First potentiality
- (b) Second potentiality = First actuality
- (c) Second actuality

Therefore, according to Aristotle, “the soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive.” (412a27) In other words, the soul contributes to the body a certain kind of capacity to act in certain ways. But this view has the consequence that “the soul is not separable from the body.” (413a4) Or, as he puts it later, the soul “requires a body; for it is not a body, but it belongs to a body, and for that reason it is present in a body, and in this sort of body.” (414a21-22) So, here we have another important point of disagreement with Plato, who held that the soul is separable from the body. (In *De Anima* III.4-5, however, Aristotle brings up what has come to be known as the “active intellect”, and some have suggested that this can exist apart from the body. It does, for example, in the case of god.)

II. The Functions of the Soul

In *De Anima* II.2, Aristotle begins his discussion of the different functions of souls, which leads to his account of the hierarchy of souls.

- (1) ***Nutritive soul.*** All living beings have “an internal potentiality and principle through which they both grow and decay in contrary directions. For they grow up and down and in all directions alike, not just up rather than down; they are continually nourished, and they stay alive as long as they can absorb nutrition.” (413a28) That is, this is basic and common to all forms of life.

- (2) **Perceptive soul.** All animals have the ability to perceive their environment, at the very least by the sense of touch. (413b1-3) And if an animal has the perceptive part, they also have desire. (414b2) Further, some animals have the ability to move themselves.
- (3) **Rational soul.** Human beings and “any thinking being that is different from, or superior to a human being” have a thinking part (*dianoētikon*) and intellect (*nous*). (414b19)

Another way to think of this hierarchy is: human beings have the rational, perceptive, and nutritive souls; other animals have only perceptive and nutritive souls; and plants have simply the nutritive soul.

Now, according to Aristotle, the soul exists as a cause in three of the four ways discussed in the *Physics*: “as the source of motion [efficient cause], as what something is for [final cause], and as the substance of ensouled bodies [formal cause].” (415b10-12)

III. The Nature of Perception

Aristotle claims that perception is a kind of alteration, occurring when the mind is moved or affected in some way. Each sensory modality – sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell – has a “proper object”: of sight, color; hearing, sound; taste, flavor; etc. Moreover, motion, rest, number, shape, and size are the objects common to several sensory modalities.

In Chapter 12 of Book II, Aristotle goes on to make the important claim that “each sense receives the perceptible forms (*eidea*) without the matter.” (424a18-19) He continues, “each sense is affected by the thing that has color or flavor or sound, but not insofar as it is said to be that thing <for instance, a horse>, but insofar as it has a given quality <for instance, color> and in accordance with the form <of the sense>.” (424a22-24) So, the picture seems to be this: When I perceive a horse, the quality of color, the proper object of sight (for example, brown) and the quality of the horse’s shape, a common object of sense, are transmitted to my soul (or mind, if you like). That is, my soul, or mind, or form, is affected by the form of the perceived horse.

IV. The Nature of the Intellect

According to Aristotle, the intellect (*nous*) is unaffected but receptive of forms. Further, “since it understands all things, [it] must be unmixed.” (429a19) In other words, the intellect is immaterial or not mixed with the body. This is what allows Aristotle to make a compromise with Platonism: “those who say that the soul is a place of forms are right, except that it is the intellectual soul, not the whole soul, which is – potentially, not actually – the forms.” (429a28-29) The intellectual soul, then, is immaterial and contains forms (*eidea*) as objects of knowledge (like Plato); but it is not the soul *tout court* that can be said to be immaterial (unlike Plato). Moreover, the claim that the intellect is immaterial need mean only that material components affect the intellect in no way. In other words, it is still not going to be the case for Aristotle that the intellect or intellectual soul is *separable* from body.

A further contrast can be seen with Plato in Aristotle’s claim that the potentiality of the intellect “is that of a writing tablet with nothing actually written on it.” (430a1) That is, we do not have any kind of innate knowledge or innate ideas; our minds are blank slates when we are born.