

De Anima (On the Soul)

Chapter 1

The problem for Aristotle here is to give a definition of the soul that is to say what the essence (the 'what-it-is') of soul is (i.e. he sets out to say what it is to be a soul).

Initial questions:

- (1) what kind of thing is the soul? Is it a substance or an accident?
- (2) is it a potentiality (capacity) or an actuality (activity)?
- (3) does it have parts?
- (4) are there different kinds of souls?
- (5) what is the relation of the soul to the body?
- (6) what is the relation of affections of the soul to the body?

An affection of the soul is something that the soul does, like thinking, or something that happens to it, such as receiving information about the world via the body.

And, the most important question:

- (7) is there some affection of the soul which does not involve the body at all? If some function, or affection, of the soul does not require the body then it is possible that the soul, or part of the soul, might exist separately from the body; but if not, then it only exists in the composite of body and soul.

The activity of understanding, or thinking, seems to be the best candidate for such a function but according to Aristotle if understanding requires imagination it requires a body, since imagination requires a bodily organ.

Aristotle notes that all emotions seem to require a body. Anger is Aristotle's example - the proper definition of anger involves a number of different kinds of components:

- (a) anger is a desire to inflict pain in return for pain, or something of that sort,
- (b) anger is a boiling of the blood around the heart.

So the complete account will involve reference to soul and body.

Chapter 2.

To possess a soul is to be alive. The possession of a soul, and so life, is characterised by movement and sensation.

Book 2

Chapter 1

Substance as form, matter, and compound.

Once again Aristotle asks what substance is. He notes that in a way matter is substance but it is not an individual, a *this*, in its own right. In Aristotle's technical language it is not a *this-something*, that is to say an individual (*this*) of a kind, something which we can recognise at different times and which we can count with others of that kind. Socrates, for example is a *this-something*, he is *this* human being, one human being, Plato is another, together they are two human beings.

The imposition of form on matter results in an individual of a kind, a *this-something*. The individual is composite substance and the form is responsible both for its being *this* and for its being *something*.

Matter is *potentiality* and form is *actuality*. Something is actually what it is because the matter from which it is constituted has the form that it does.

Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of actuality -

(1) **First Actuality.** Example - speaking English - in the sense of being able to speak English. We can truly say of someone that that she *actually* speaks English even when she's asleep.

(2) **Second Actuality:** Example: someone *actually* speaking english - in the sense of uttering words in English.

First actuality is a potentiality with respect to second actuality.

We may distinguish a further potentiality - for example the potentiality which a baby which does not yet speak any language has for learning, and speaking English. This potentiality is the *first potentiality* to speak English, it is actualised as the first actuality which Aristotle also calls the second potentiality since it is a potential for speaking English which is not being exercised.

Some natural bodies are alive, where being alive is engaging in self-nourishment, growth, and decay.

Every living natural body is a composite substance - a composite of matter and form. Something has a soul if and only if it is alive and its soul is that in virtue of which it is said to be alive. Body is matter and substrate, or subject, and so not said of anything. It follows that soul cannot be body and matter. So soul must be form.

Aristotle's definitions of soul:

- (1) A soul is a substance. It is the form of a natural body that is potentially alive.
- (2) A soul is the actuality of a specific kind of body.
- (3) A soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive.
- (4) A soul is the first actuality of a natural organic body, i.e. a of a body with organs.

Soul and body are one, and united, in the way that potentiality and actuality are one. The soul / form is the what-it-is, or essence, of the thing in question. Aristotle suggests an important thought experiment. Suppose an axe were a natural body. Being-an-axe would be its soul and essence. If what makes an axe to be an axe were removed it would be an axe only *homonymously* (i.e. an axe in name but not in definition). Axes have to be made out of the right kind of stuff in order to be able to cut. The possession of a soul is likewise the possession of abilities. The soul is the first actuality which is actualised as second actuality. Compare the difference between being able to cut and actually cutting. Aristotle suggests the eye and the power of sight as another analogy. If the eye could exist apart from the body, sight would have been its soul.

It seems to follow that the soul is inseparable from the body but Aristotle hesitates and says that some parts of the soul may not be actualities of the body.

Chapter 2

What has a soul is alive but there are different kinds of living things, different ways of being alive. The hierarchy of living things corresponds to a hierarchy of powers, and so a hierarchy of souls. Living things may have some or all of the powers of thinking, perception, local movement and rest, self-nutrition, growth and decay.

Plants have only the power of growth and self-nutrition - which include the power of reproduction.

Animals have in addition various powers of sensation: touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Touch is the most basic sensation and may be present in an animal without the others being present.

There is a puzzle about the location of the soul, that is to say the location of these powers, the fact that plants may continue to live if they are divided shows, according to Aristotle, that their soul is actually one but potentially many.

The power of thinking seems different from the other powers. Aristotle suggests that it might be capable of existing without a body. He may not be thinking of humans here, however, since, as we will see, the unmoved mover, Aristotle's god, thinks but has no body. At the end of the chapter Aristotle returns to the discussion of the soul as substance and insists again that the soul is the form of a body, a particular kind of body, and implies, at least, that a human soul could not exist in a different kind of body than the one in which it is found.

Book 3

Aristotle on the understanding

Sensation involves a transfer of form from the sense object to the sense organ. Example: a sounding (a sound) is a form imposed on the air surrounding bodies striking against one another. Form is transmitted to the air enclosed within the ear where it becomes an act of hearing. The very same form is a hearing and a sounding. Perception / sensation is only of individuals. That is, we hear individual sounds.

Aristotle treats understanding in just the same way as sensation, it is the reception of forms. The difference is that where in sensation the forms are taken up by the same kind of matter as that of the sensed object in the external world and they are the forms of an individual, in understanding all individuating features are stripped away. The individual, Socrates, for example is an object for sense. What-it-is-to-be a human, the essence of humans, *a universal*, is an object of understanding

Important claims in Aristotle's account of understanding:

1. If thinking is like perceiving, then the thinking part of the soul must be capable of receiving the form of its object.
2. That is it must be potentially identical with that object without being that object.
3. So since everything is a possible object of thought, the intellectual soul must be free from any determination.
4. So the intellectual soul cannot be a composite involving any kind of corporeal matter. Otherwise in taking on the form it would become the corresponding object. For example if it were composed of the appropriate matter, in thinking about fish it would become a fish.
5. What we understand, then is not a concrete composite such as flesh but rather the corresponding form - what it is-to-be-flesh.
6. The intellectual soul with respect to forms is thus like a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, upon which anything at all may be written.
7. The intellectual soul can take the forms that are understood themselves as its objects and thus it can think about fish and about the thought of fish. That is it thinks about itself as thinking.

8. In the second case what thinks and what is thought are identical.
9. Within the intellectual soul we have to make a distinction between that which receives the forms [the passive intellect] and that which produces them [the active intellect]
10. The intellect which produces is analogous to a light which makes visible things which are there but are invisible in the dark.
11. Aristotle seems to suggest that the active intellect can exist apart from the body and the other 'parts' of the soul.
12. The passive is destroyed with the death of the body.
13. The active intellect apart from the body has no memory.