## Aristotle 2: The Soul

Aristotle develops a language for describing how change happens in the natural world. **Matter**, which appears in one of the four elemental forms of earth, air, fire or water, has the **potential** to take on many **forms.** When acted on by an **agent cause** that potential becomes **actualised/realised**. This mixture of earth and water becomes (for instance) bone.

In the natural world everything that moves is goal-directed or purposive. The elements have an impulse to move towards their 'natural place' where they come to rest. Fire and air go upwards, earth and water go downwards. Inanimate objects made of the elements share the same intrinsic motive powers.

Animals and plants also have intrinsic motive powers. Plants absorb air and water and they respire and grow. Simpler animals feed themselves, grow and move of their own accord. As animals increase in size they are also capable of increasing degrees of perception of their world and imagination, culminating in humans, who are also capable of reasoning about the world and having beliefs about it that can be put into words.

### The 'form of the body'

Aristotle is therefore very much aware of how gradual the transition is from inanimate matter through plant life, to sentient beings like dogs and rational beings like humans. His account of the soul acknowledges this. For him 'soul' is what distinguishes a living entity from an inanimate piece of material. But it must clearly be able to work through the actual material of the body, in order to grow, absorb nutrients, touch, taste, smell, hear, see and move. He describes the soul then as 'the form' of the living body. Here is how he gets there (DA II.1 412a6):

> We say that one of the categories of the things that are is 'substance' [ousia]. And within this there is 'ousia' as *matter* which of itself is not any particular thing (a *this*), and there is 'ousia' as shape and form – in terms of which it is said to be a particular thing (a *this*); and thirdly is the 'ousia' which is the combination of the two.
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> And the matter is potential, while the form is actualisation (which can be in two senses (a) like knowledge, passive or (b) like contemplation, active).

> The things which seem most properly to be substances are bodies, and in particular natural bodies, because these are the source of the other bodies. Now some of the physical bodies have life and some do not. What we mean by life is independent nourishment and growth and diminishment. Therefore, every physical body that has a share of life would indeed be a substance, but it would be a composite one. However, since the body – the body which has life – is like this, the body could not be a soul; for the body is not something that is dependent on an underlying substance, rather it *is* the underlying substance and the matter.
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> Therefore, necessarily, the soul is an 'ousia' in the sense that it is the *form* of the sort of physical body which has the potential for life. And this ousia (reality) is a realisation. So [the soul] is the realisation of just this type of body.

Aristotle spells this out a little later on, this time using the language of the four causes. The soul as 'form' is able to explain the behaviour of living, physical beings (DA II.4 415b9).

> The soul is the cause and principle of the living body. "Cause" can mean a number of things. But the soul is equally a cause in all three of the senses already defined. For the soul is a cause as the source of motion [and change], it is cause in the sense of being the natural goal [of its motions and changes], and in the sense of being the essential nature of animate bodies.
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> It is obvious that it is a cause in the sense of "essential nature". For its essential nature is the reason why everything is what it is. What it means for living creatures to be what they are is for them to be alive, and the soul is the cause and principle of those things. Again, when we give an essential account of something that exists potentially, we are describing what it means for it to be realised.
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> It is clear that the soul is a cause in the sense of "natural goal", for just as the mind acts for the sake of something, so too does nature in the same way, and this is its goal. In the case of animals, the soul is something of this sort, and it operates according to nature. For all [living] natural bodies are organs of the soul, and whether in the case of animals or

> plants, they are there 'for the sake of the soul'. (Though 'for the sake' of can mean two things: "for what end", or "for whose benefit".)
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> But the soul is also the primary source of locomotion, though not all living organisms have this power. But there can also be qualitative change and growth due to the soul. For perception seems to be a sort of qualitative change, and there is nothing that perceives which does not have a soul. It is similar in the case of growth and withering: nothing withers or grows in nature unless it is nourished, and nothing nourishes itself which does not have some share in being alive.

**Perception**

Aristotle goes on to consider at length the mechanisms that allow the living organism to perceive through the five senses. In the process he makes an important distinction, one half of which we have seen before (in the *Theaetetus*), between what we perceive infallibly (coloured patches of a certain size and intensity, sounds of a certain pitch, volume and timbre) and the interpretation of what we see, (a brass band marching past). (DA II.6 418a7)

> In the case of each sense, we have first to discuss the objects of perception. There are three things we can mean by 'object of perception'. Two of these we can claim properly to perceive, and one we perceive incidentally. Of the two: (1) 'object of perception' can mean the sort of thing which is exclusive to just that sense, or it can mean (2) the sort of thing which is common to all of them.
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> (1) By exclusive, I mean something that the other senses are unable to perceive, and about which they cannot be deceived, like the visual sensation of a colour, the auditory sensation of a sound, or the taste of a flavour. The sensation of touch has more distinctions, but each of the senses is able to judge about these things. And [the senses] cannot be mistaken that it is a colour or a sound, rather they can be mistaken about what the coloured object is, or where it is, or what is making the noise and where it is. So all those sorts of thing are exclusive to each.
> (2) The things which are common to the senses are change, rest, number, shape, size. These sorts of thing are not exclusive to any

> one sense, but are common to all. Motion for instance can be perceived by the sense of touch and by the sense of sight.
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> What we mean by 'object of perception incidentally', is for instance the case where we say "the pale object is Diares' son". For we are perceiving him incidentally, because its being him is *incidental* to the pale object that we *directly* perceive.

This gap between the infallible basic perception and the fallibly interpreted perception (in this pale object with this shape, we *recognise* Diares' son) provides a continuing headache for philosophy.

Aristotle also tries to explain what happens when a sensation of something takes place. The object of perception acts on a medium of transmission which in turn acts on the sense organ altering it and creating a sensation which in some way has the same *form* (the same information, in modern language) as the thing perceived, even though it does not have any *matter* in common with it. In the act of perception, the organ of perception becomes relevantly "similar" to the ultimate cause of the perception. (DA II.5 418a; 12, 424a17)

> (5) The sense organ is similar in potential to what the object of perception is in actuality. As it undergoes [the transformation in the process of perception] it is not yet similar, but once it has undergone [the process] it has become similar and is like the original object…
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> (12) In general we have to suppose of every sense that the sensation is what is receptive of the perceptible forms without the matter. Similar to the way that wax receives the seal of the ring, without the iron or gold of the ring itself, and that the iron and gold [are moulded into the form of] the seal, but not in virtue of being iron or gold. Similarly, the sense in each organ is affected by the object with a colour or flavour or sound, but not in virtue of being each of those objects, but insofar as the object is 'like this' and has this description.

Notice the relationship between forms in the physical world and forms in the sense organs. We already saw 'impression' theory at work in the Theaetetus. Here it is spelt out – at least with respect to perception, using the more nuanced Aristotelian language of a 'qualitative change' from potential to actualisation.

**But what about immortality? The mind.**

There is a radical difference between Plato's and Aristotle's approach to defining the soul. Plato's approach is entirely based on the human experience of subjectivity and consciousness as a primary reality in the universe. That reality is intrinsically distinct from the physical world. He then has the problem (or would have had, if he had been interested) of explaining how such an entity relates to the material world at all.

Aristotle's approach, as we have seen, is bottom up. For him plants and animals (including humans) are part of a nature that includes different sorts of soul, which produce different sorts of transformation in the ever-changing natural world. But by defining soul as 'the form of the [living] body' he effectively limits the existence of any particular such soul to the lifetime of the animal or the plant. As a biologist this does not bother him. The forms of nature are indeed eternal, but in the lower world not as *particular* entities only as *kinds* – this rose will grow and die, but thanks to reproduction, roses will always exist. The universal 'rose' will always be there.

Is there a part of the soul that does not die? Aristotle's writing here is not very clear, but his later commentators assumed that some form of separate immortality was possible for the mind, the rational, reflective part of the human soul. What he says here is, it has to be said, slightly mind-bending, but it has been extremely influential, and is the foundation for his account of God as unchanged changer. He argues that the mind is analogous to the senses, except whereas the senses are physical, receiving images of physical objects, the mind is non-material and yet able to receive intelligible objects – things that are *thinkable*. That means ideas in our sense, universals. It cannot be affected (in the way the senses are are) but it nevertheless has the potential to become any form in the process of active thought (think of the imprint in the wax). (DA III.4 429a22)

> So what we call the mind (*nous*) of the soul isn't in actuality any of the things that exist until it actually thinks (*noei*) (and I mean by 'mind' that faculty by which the soul thinks things through and makes judgments). Accordingly it would be illogical to think of it as mingled with the body; for then it would turn out to be a sort of quality, like cold or hot, or it would be a bodily organ, like the sense-organs; but as it is, it is neither. And indeed it is well said by some that the soul is the 'space of forms' –

> except that it is not the whole soul, just the mental faculty and it is not the forms in actualisation, but in potential.

For Aristotle, one thing that shows that the senses are physical while the mind is non material, is that the senses are overwhelmed by extremes but the mind is not. A loud sound – something highly audible - drowns out other sounds, but mental attention to something that is highly intelligible makes it *easier* to understand things that are less intelligible. This suggests that the mind is separable from the material body, an entity in its own right – which is a basis for the immortality of this part of the soul. (DA III.4 429b5)

> A sensory organ cannot exist without matter, but the mind is separable from matter. And the mind that is active, whenever it 'becomes' any one of those things [the forms], is called 'knowing' (this comes about when it is able to self-activate). It is also 'knowing' in a sense when it is still in rest-potential (not potential in the sense of the potential before it learned something or found it out). And in that state [of rest-potential] it can still think itself.

The idea that the mind is in some way identical with the objects of thought (the 'intelligibles') is strange to us. The intelligibles are things like mathematical objects and ideas, and the universals that allow us to tell stories and work out problems (A horse goes into a bar and orders a beer -the barman says, 'why the long face?'; when will the next eclipse be?). It seems odd to suggest that our mind 'is' 1+1=2 or the idea of horse, bar, barman, eclipse.

But there are other questions whose answer, according to Aristotle, depends on this definition: is the mind something simple? Can it be affected by other things? This again is important if the mind is to be immortal. And then there's the question of whether the mind can be a direct object of its own thought. A question we can all ask ourselves on the days where we ponder the meaning of life and the nature of consciousness. Let's look at a very important passage not only for the idea of the immortality of the soul, but also for Aristotle's theology, where he suggests that in the non-material realm, the thinker and the object of thought are one. (DA III.1 429b31)

> We have already explained how the mind could be affected in relation to something common: the mind is all of the objects of thought in potential but none of them in actuality until it begins thinking. It should be something like the writing tablet on which there is in actuality nothing

> yet written. This is just what happens in the case of the mind. But the mind itself is an object of thought alongside all the other objects of thought. For in the case of non-material entities what does the thinking and what is being thought are the same. For theoretical knowledge and the object of that knowledge are the same – though we do have to consider why the mind is not always thinking…

Then, going back to the language of form and matter and causality, Aristotle tries to distinguish between the mind as active (thinking) and the mind as passive (object of thought). Again, if you find this all a little strange to get your head round, this is not your fault. The key is to see the analogy between paying mental attention to unnoticed ideas in active thought and actively shining light onto darkened surfaces so that they actively acquire colour (DA III.1 430a10)

> In the rest of nature, there is something which is the material for each kind of thing, ('matter' being what is *potentially* every one of those things) and there is something else which is the agent cause in that it *makes* all those things – the sort of relation we find between a craft and its raw materials. Something like these distinctions must be present in the soul: there must be a mind in the sense that it becomes all things, and a mind in the sense that it makes all things, like some sort of permanent state. Like light. For in a sense, light too makes things which are colours in potential into colours in actuality.
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> This mind is separable from matter and is affected by nothing and mingles with nothing, since it is active in its essence. For the agent is always superior to what is passive, and the principle is always superior to the matter. Now active knowledge is the same as the thing [it is knowledge of]; passive knowledge in an individual is prior in time, though overall it is not prior in time. Yet it is not the case that sometimes the mind thinks and sometimes it doesn't think. When it is isolated it is just this that is its true self, and this alone is immortal and eternal. (Though we cannot remember anything [from past lives] because this [active mind] is not affected by anything, while the passive mind [which can be affected and hold memories] is perishable). Without the active mind, nothing thinks.

So at the end of this story we are left with the picture of the human soul which has an animal part, associated with a particular body, which perishes on death

– in fact its absence is the definition of death. However, there is also a part of the soul, the active mind, which shines a light on the forms already within it (the passive mind), and is identical with those forms. This part of the soul is eternal and immortal, and could potentially be associated with different bodies.

The tortuous arguments here have had an immense influence on later philosophy: both on those who accepted that the mind can think itself (Descartes) and generate the universe from that idea (Plotinus, Ibn Sina, Hegel), and those who denied it (Sextus Empiricus, David Hume, Immanuel Kant). The idea of the separable rational soul was very important in medieval Islamic and Christian theology for harmonising the ideas of life after bodily death and the possibility of bodily resurrection with the scientifically powerful notion of the biological soul. It still leaves its trace on the modern Catechism, which quotes approvingly from the last official statement on philosophical psychology at the Vth Lateran Council in 1512, where the separable, spiritual soul is specially created by God:

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> The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "form" of the body: i.e. it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.
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> The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God – it is not "produced" by the parents – and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection.