

## 24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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### II. Aristotle

#### Lecture 5. Aristotle's *On the Soul*

1. *Introduction.* Aristotle was a student at Plato's Academy, and later was tutor to (among others) Alexander the Great. He started a second university, the Lyceum. Aristotle brought Plato's Forms down to earth. Instead of Plato's division between two vastly different realms, Aristotle distinguishes different aspects of ordinary things—*form* and *matter*. Form only exists when it enforms matter; moreover, matter is just potential to be enformed. Aristotle identifies matter with potentiality, form with actuality. Think of a carved statue: the wood is the matter, the potential statue; the shape is the form, which makes it an actual statue; the matter/form complex is the individual thing, the statue. Unlike Plato, Aristotle was fascinated by the natural world (besides writing a *Logic* and *Metaphysics*, he wrote a *Physics* and many works on biology). In 'On the Soul' we find him applying his wider metaphysical views to the topic of living things.

#### 2. *What is soul?*

Now given that there are bodies of such and such a kind, viz. having life, the soul cannot be a body; for the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence the soul must a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. (412a: 20)

Aristotle takes it for granted that to have a soul is to be alive: and 'by life we mean self-nutrition and growth and decay'. We say that some bodies are not alive (stones), and others are alive (plants, animals, human-beings). In the case of living things, the body is the *matter*, and the soul is the *form*: the soul is the 'form of a natural body having life potentially within it'.

#### 3. *First comparison:* body and soul are like wax and its shape

...we can dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as though we were to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, or generally the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter (412b: 5)

This brings out the idea that soul is form, body is matter, and that you would not have the one without the other—contrary to Plato, they are interdependent.

#### 4. *Second comparison:* body and soul are like an axe and 'the account of an axe'.

Suppose that a tool, e.g. an axe, were a *natural* body, then being an axe would have been its essence and so its soul. (412b: 10)

This comparison brings out the idea that soul might be a certain kind of *ability*: what it is to be an axe (what is involved in the account, or definition, of an axe) is *to be able to cut*

*wood*. The form of an axe is not just a certain shape (unlike the form of a statue), but a certain shape organized to *do something*. If the axe loses that ability, it ceases to be an axe, except in name. But the ability to cut is not some mysterious invisible being, capable of separation from the wood and steel of the axe. Likewise for the soul.

5. *Third comparison*: body and soul are like the eye and sight.

Suppose that the eye were an animal—sight would have been its soul, for sight is the substance of the eye which corresponds to the account, the eye being merely the matter of seeing; when seeing is removed the eye is no longer an eye, except in name—no more than the eye of a statue or of a painted figure. (412b:15)

This comparison brings out more vividly the idea that soul might be a certain kind of ability. The form of an eye is not just a certain shape, but a certain power. Sight is the *ability to see*: and without that ability, there is no eye, strictly speaking. But again, sight is not some mysterious, invisible being, capable of existing without the eye-jelly. Likewise for the soul:

As the pupil [eye-jelly] plus the power of sight constitutes the eye, so the soul plus the body constitutes the animal. From this it is clear that the soul is inseparable from its body, or at any rate that certain parts of it are (if it has parts). (413a: 4)

6. *Soul and life*.

What has soul in it differs from what has not, in that the former displays life. Now this word has more than one sense, and provided any one alone of these is found in a thing we say that thing is living—viz. thinking or perception or local movement and rest, or movement in the sense of nutrition, decay and growth...[The] power of self-nutrition can be separated from the other powers mentioned, but not they from it—in mortal beings at least. The fact is obvious in plants, for this is the only psychic power they possess. (413a: 30)

Soul is what makes something alive—enables it to fulfil the powers or functions of a living thing, whether nutrition, movement, perception or thought. In fact, soul is *identical* to those powers and functions.

7. *Aristotle's account of the soul: neither dualist, nor materialist*. Plato is a dualist: body and soul are two distinct and separable beings. A materialist denies dualism: there is no distinction between soul and body—no soul, conceived of as something distinct from body. Aristotle provides an alternative.

The word 'substance' has three meanings—form, matter, and the complex of both—and of these matter is potentiality, form actuality. Since then the complex here is the living thing, the body cannot be the actuality of the soul; it is the soul which is the actuality of a certain kind of body. Hence the rightness of the view that the soul cannot be without a body, while it cannot be a body; it is not a body but something relative to a body. That is why it is in a body, and a body of a definite kind. (414a: 15)