

Matter and Form, Body and Soul, in *De Anima*

- Follow-up on Final argument in Plato's *Phaedo*.
- Introduction to Aristotle (see additional biographical handout).

1. Hylomorphism

Unlike Plato, Aristotle was fascinated by the natural world. Instead of Plato's division between two vastly different realms, Aristotle distinguishes two 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.

In the case of artifacts like statues, we impose form on the matter. But the form/matter in statues is just an analogy to help us understand the basic idea. Aristotle was mainly interested in explaining the characteristic changes in and growth and development of natural things. Why does water boil when heated and freeze when cold? Why do some trees produce apples and others oranges? Why do human embryos develop into adult humans and dog embryos develop into adult dogs? This can't be explained simply by their matter (which is basically the same stuff), but by the form that makes something water, or an apple tree, or a human, i.e., in virtue of which the things are what they are. In 'On the Soul' we find Aristotle applying his wider metaphysical views to the topic of living things.

2. What is soul?

A. Basics

Note that 'soul' translates *psuchē* (cf. 'psyche'). In its most basic sense, the *psuchē* is what gives life to living things. This is the sense Aristotle is working with. 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'. So even plants have a kind of *psuchē*. But humans have a more complex *psuchē*. Broadly speaking, there are three classes of capacities of living things. Aristotle arranges these hierarchically: higher-order living things possess all the capacities of lower-level living things:

- i. Nutrition (and generation): plants and animals
- ii. Perception: all animals
- iii. Thinking (or understanding): humans and "any thinking being that is different from, or superior to, a human being," e.g., God. (414b17).

In order to understand Aristotle's view it helps to consider some rival conceptions of soul: dualism and materialism.

Dualism is the view that souls and bodies are radically different kinds of things, separable from one another, independent from one another. Souls are immaterial, bodies are material. Plato's *Phaedo* seems to offer a version of dualism.

Materialism (properly speaking: reductive materialism) is the view that there are only material bodies of one sort or another. If there are souls, they are to be identified with material bodies.

Aristotle rejects both of these options:

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. (412a19-21)

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'.

B. 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 (412b7-8)

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.

C. *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. (412b14)

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.

D. *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. (412b19-22)

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 indubitably follows that the soul is inseparable from its body, or at any rate that certain parts of it are (if it has parts)... (413a4)

So Aristotle provides an alternative to materialism and dualism.

3. Forms of life

Soul is what makes something alive. But life brings different capacities in different sorts of things. Life in an apple tree, or a dog, or a human, entails different abilities. Soul enables a living thing to fulfill the powers or functions *of that kind of thing*, whether nutrition, movement, perception or thought. In fact, soul is *identical* to those powers and functions. However, this does not mean that one is only alive if one is constantly exercising one’s full capacities! That is because there are two grades or levels of capacities.

Now the word ‘actuality’ has two senses corresponding respectively to the possession of knowledge and the actual exercise of knowledge.” (412a22).

This is all best explained with examples. Consider a human infant. We might say that an infant *can speak* Greek, meaning that they have a capacity to learn the language. Once someone learns a language, they aren’t constantly speaking, however. So we might say of someone sitting quietly that they *can speak* Greek. This capacity is different from the infant’s capacity. Moreover, a person who can speak Greek in the second sense might also be actively speaking Greek. This gives us three levels of potentiality/actuality:

- i. First potentiality (1P): infant *can speak* Greek if they undergo certain significant changes (learning the language)
- ii. Second potentiality (2P)/first actuality (1A): quiet speaker *can speak* Greek if prompted to – the first potentiality has been actualized, even if the speaker isn’t actually speaking.
- iii. Second actuality (2A): person *actually* speaking Greek

Another way to put this: something at the 1P stage has a capacity for a capacity; at the 2P/1A stage is has that capacity; and at the 2A stage it is exercising that capacity. Matter, in a sense, is pure potentiality; form is what realizes that potential, but then brings along further potential.

This gives us the resources to understand the full definition of soul: “soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive. . . 412a27,” and again, “soul is the first actuality of a natural organic body” (412b5). The soul of an apple tree brings apple tree capacities; the soul of a dog, dog capacities; the soul of a human, human capacities. The exercise of these capacities makes us fully alive and fully who we are.

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