

Aristotle and the Soul

(Please note: These are rough notes for a lecture, mostly taken from the relevant sections of *Philosophy and Ethics* and other publications and should not be reproduced or otherwise used verbatim.)

Aristotle (384-322BCE) studied under Plato in the Academy in Athens for 20 years, before going to act as tutor to the young ruler Alexander the Great. Later he returned to Athens and set up the Lyceum, teaching there for 12 years – during which time his lecture notes and other pieces were gathered into the body of work that is now ascribed to him.

Remember – at that time there was no real distinction between science and philosophy. Aristotle is mainly a scientist – concerned with understanding what makes everything what it is – he goes in for analysis – sorting out living things into different species and so on, categorising them. He applied logic and demanded that evidence be used in putting forward theories. It is almost impossible to imagine philosophy or science without Aristotle – the very word 'physics' comes from his work, and he laid the groundwork for much biology.

Like Socrates before him, he fell foul of the authorities in Athens, but instead of choosing to take poison, like Socrates, he took the other course and left Athens at the age of 62, dying not long afterwards.

The impact of his thought has been immense – when Christianity banned the teach of secular philosophy, his work was lost to the West during what is now known as the Dark Ages, but it was translated into Arabic and preserved in the Muslim world, being made available in Latin in the 13th century – a magnificent time in Europe, with flourishing universities. There his work was explored again in a Christian context by such great thinkers as Thomas Aquinas – and it is through him that Aristotle has had such a great impact on modern philosophy of religion.

We are concerned now with his ideas about the relationship between body and soul, but first I want to highlight two major features of his work, that impact on the Philosophy of Religion.

1. At some point soon, if you have not already come across it, you will be studying the Cosmological Argument. The argument that everything in this life is caused by something else, and that by something else again. And that eventually you must come to an uncaused cause, something which explains the whole of the universe. The original idea of the 'uncaused cause' comes from Aristotle. For him it was the principle that lay behind and beyond his rational analysis of the world – the ultimate explanation. – a necessary thing.
2. The other key thing is the idea of the four causes – and this again is important for the arguments for the existence of God. It is also relevant for our present topic – the soul. He argued that everything has not one cause, but 4. a) the material cause – what it is made of b) the efficient cause – what brought it about c) the formal cause – the shape and nature it has d) the final cause – the aim and purpose of that thing. Aristotle argued that, in order to understand anything, you had to take all four of these into account.

So let's turn to the 'soul' in Aristotle...

He said: 'To attain any assured knowledge about the soul is one of the most difficult things in the world.' from '*On the Soul*' (*De Anima* – in the Latin translation)

Aristotle thought that all living things had souls, and a creature's *psyche* was its 'principle of life' – that which distinguished it from a corpse or other inanimate thing.

The distinctive thing about humans however was that, as well as having a psyche, they were also capable of rational thought. He saw the thinking aspect as only part of the whole 'self' or *psyche*, but as that which distinguished humankind from other species.

Aristotle then goes on (in 'On the Soul') to give his definition of a soul as:

'It is substance in the sense which corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing's essence.'

And this is clarified by his examples:

'suppose that the eye were an animal - sight would have been its soul, for sight is the substance, or essence, of the eye... the eye being merely the matter of seeing; when seeing is removed the eye is no longer an eye, except in name'

'As the pupil **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) - for the actuality of some of them is nothing but the actualities of their bodily parts.'

The shorthand way of describing Aristotle's view of the soul and its relationship to the body, is to say that the soul of an axe is cutting, the soul of an eye is seeing, and the soul of a man is thinking. In other words, everything has a form or an essence, which is shown in its primary activity. **The soul is what makes a thing what it is.**

Ask – Who am I?

Material – my physical body

Efficient – my birth and all that sustains my life

Formal – my essence; the real me; what I am about

Final – my aim, goal and purpose; the meaning of my life

Aristotle also points out that there are two essential things that constitute the soul – movement and sensation. Without those two, it is difficult to say what it means to be a living soul. But there are other things that the living body does, and that concerns 'affections':

'A further problem presented by the affections of soul is this: are they all affections of the complex of body and soul, or is there any one among them peculiar to the soul by itself? To determine this is indispensable but difficult. If we consider the majority of them, there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally. Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence. If there is any

way of acting or being acted upon proper to soul, soul will be capable of separate existence; if there is none, its separate existence is impossible.' (from 'On the Soul')

Notice that Aristotle goes about his work like a more modern scientist. He observes – and sees that nutrition, for example, is essential to animal life. It is the soul that determines what we eat, how we move and so on. How does it do it? The soul seems to initiate movement. It is, for the body, an unmoved mover? Reproduction is also a key feature of living things. In other words, he notes that the soul is what enables a living thing to maintain itself in life – organising it to get what it needs.

Sometimes translations can be rather misleading. The word 'smell' in English can refer both to the action of using the senses, and to the giving off of what afflicts the senses of others. One translation of Aristotle, deep in the analysis of human sense characteristics, says: 'All animals smell in the same way, but man smells only when he inhales' -- sadly, I have to inform Aristotle, that some smell mainly when they exhale!

But let me make the point. What Aristotle is mainly doing in 'On the Soul' is biology. He is looking at the characteristics of living things, as opposed to inanimate things. What he is describing when he describes the soul is what it is that makes us live.

Thus we find that, for Aristotle, the self or mind is the essence or form of a human being, an essence that is distinct from but also inseparable from the material body.

Naturally, however, there then needs to be a distinction between the 'soul' in the sense of being an independent, living thing (as seen in animals) and being a distinctively 'thinking' animal, as in humankind.

Here is Aristotle distinguishing thinking from perceiving:

'That perceiving and practical thinking are not identical is therefore obvious; for the former is universal in the animal world, the latter is found in only a small division of it. Further, speculative thinking is also distinct from perceiving-I mean that in which we find rightness and wrongness-rightness in prudence, knowledge, true opinion, wrongness in their opposites; for perception of the special objects of sense is always free from error, and is found in all animals, while it is possible to think falsely as well as truly, and thought is found only where there is discourse of reason as well as sensibility.'

This distinction between thinking and the other features of the 'psyche' is important because much modern debate concerns consciousness, along with sensations, emotions, responses and the like. These are features of life that humans share with animals. On the other hand, the principle form of dualism, stemming from Descartes and against which so much subsequent debate has been pitched, is a dualism of extended body and thinking mind -- with thought as the sole function and criterion that separates mind and body.

The Greek term for the thinking mind is *nous* as opposed to the more general term *psyche*. It is debatable whether one should consider the rational mind in isolation from the broader questions of psychology. For the Greeks, however, *nous* held a special place as intellect, the highest and most distinctive of human functions.

But notice that the rational 'mind' is part of, but not identical with the *psyche* – We need to keep this in mind because many of the later debates that you come across in the Philosophy of Mind come from a time after Descartes – who introduced the idea of a dualism of physical body and an inner thinking self. That is NOT what Aristotle was on about.

Aristotle rejected Plato's idea (dualist) of the *psyche* as an immaterial substance, but also rejected the Atomists view (materialist) of it as a fine and extended physical thing, and the Pythagorean approach of seeing it as the agent of balance within the body.

In *On the Soul* (book 2), Aristotle makes the point that a body can be divided up into its component parts, but those are parts of its matter, not parts of its 'form' or 'essence'. Now this suggests that, when we are dealing with the mind, we should not assume that it might in some way be shown as existing among the various parts into which the body can be divided. Just because it cannot be found located in parts of the brain or other physical system, does not make it any less part of the 'essence' of a person.

Aristotle sees the *psyche* as the form that organises the material body into what it essentially is. Notice that this makes the psyche distinct from the material body, but not separate from it. You do not have the body in one place and the soul somewhere else - they are locked together, the former being given its shape and characteristics by the latter. The soul is thus the actuality of the body, and the body as an organized thing. Aristotle is therefore able to dismiss the question whether the soul and the body are one.

Using his own analogy, it is as meaningless ask this as to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one. You cannot separate matter from that of which it is the matter. There are two different approaches to understanding anything: reductionist and holistic. The reductionist approach analyses into parts to find what something is made of; the holistic looks at the way in which the thing itself operates as a whole.

Example:

A statue remains a piece of marble. You cannot separate out the marble from the statue. You cannot point to that which is statue but not marble; and to think that 'statue' must refer to something other than that which the marble forms, is nonsense. However, as we shall see later, such nonsense was still being railed against by Gilbert Ryle in the 20th century, in what he termed a 'category mistake', even though Aristotle had dealt with it quite adequately more than two millennia earlier. Ryle used the example of someone who sees various colleges etc, but then asks 'Where is the university?' as though that would be separate from its various components. Ryle – to use our own example here - concluded that 'statue' was simply a way of describing marble, which is also nonsense.

Form and change

It is worth taking Aristotle's argument into account when considering the process of change and personal identity. When particular material parts of oneself change - whether through amputation or ageing - there remains an overall form that realises the capacities of the body, and gives it an overall coherence. That is the soul, or substance, or form; it gives motion and life. It is what is distinctive about each living thing. To change the form of something, it would be necessary to change the whole meaning and essence of the thing - form isn't located, but is a principle of definition and of recognition. As was said above, it is what makes a thing what it is.

Imagine a transplant surgeon removing bits of your body and replacing them by others. You would find yourself composed of bits of material that were not part of the original you. But you still have an identity. Your 'form' is the overall shape given to that material (and not physical shape - but sense of identity), and this cannot be considered on the same level as the bits and pieces that are removed and replaced. Form is holistic; it is what the whole of you is, no matter which bits of you may be expressing it at any particular time. It is something you have before the surgery began, and which does not depend upon the various parts of which you are composed.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an example of the problem of failing to distinguish between the bits and pieces that are assembled, and the whole end product.

Is Michael Jackson the same person he was?

Body and soul

If the soul is what gives the body its form, bringing it forth as a living individual, then we need to recognise just how close the relationship between body and soul becomes. We do not have a body, with its own form and performing its own actions, to which a secondary, invisible thing called a 'soul' is added. The term 'soul' describes that which shapes and gives life to the body. Consider the analogy of the actor on stage. The performer transforms himself or herself into the character being portrayed. That character is displayed in terms of words, actions, gestures and responses. The illusion is created that the performer is lost within the part. **Now, the Aristotelian approach is to see the soul as the character being displayed, not as some hidden actor behind that character.** This contrasts with the Platonic approach, where the eternal soul is more like the actor, with an eternal and therefore ongoing life quite apart from this particular incarnation.

In other words – you are yourself. You are what you do, and what you say and what you feel, and the whole of the self that others recognise as you, as well as the more personal aspects of the self that only you are aware of, because you are giving it expression. There is no hidden, secret you, distinct from all that you actually think and say and do. In other words, for Aristotle, you have a living, feeling, thinking machine – your body has a soul, it is alive. There is no separate, detached soul.

The relevance of all this?

Well, there are some big issues in this area today:

Computers.

Is it possible that computers will take on characteristics of human beings, think and feel like them. Will such computers have 'souls'? Clearly, for Aristotle, a computer already has a self, or soul, it is what makes it a computer. The issue then is, can the soul of a computer become indistinguishable from the soul of a human being?

My hunch is that the answer is that, for that to be the case, you'd need to equip that computer with a body, with hormones and emotions, with a history too --- you'd need to put the computer through experiences that it could remember, and programme it through those experiences to seek out certain goals for itself in the future.

And what would you have at the end of all that? Why, you'd have a clone of a human being. The computer would have to become effectively 'human' in order to be said to have a human soul.

Thus there is no magic bridge to cross, beyond which computers have 'souls' – they just are as they are.

Heaven and Hell?

Here's a problem. If you take a Platonic view of a separate soul that lived before the body and will live on in another realm, or with another body, afterwards, then it is always possible for that soul to have some compensation after death – based on the idea that the universe (or God) is rational and fair, and wants everything to get its fair share of happiness and sorrow.

With Aristotle, however, it is far more difficult to see how the natural 'self' that made a living thing what it was, could effectively live on after the death of that thing.

The big distinction between Plato and Aristotle over the soul, relates to their philosophy in general.

For Plato, the 'real' world is out there – it is the world of the Forms, the real world, far removed from what we can see here and now. All that we see here is a pale shadow of the real.

For Aristotle, there is no need for an external world of forms. Qualities and values are embodied – they arise because of our way of describing the real physical world as we encounter

it. Aristotle is the closer to a 'modern' scientific approach, in that he does not need to posit a separate independent world.

So also with the body/soul issue. For Aristotle, the self is what animates you – you are body and soul together, a living, breathing, thinking being. You live and think – that is what makes you a human being. For Plato, we have a separate body, conjoined with a soul that has lived before and will go on to live again. It's real home, if you like, is the world of the Forms, not this mundane world – it is trapped in a physical body.

I guess you'll recognise just how influential both of those views have been. The Platonic one seems to have dominated traditional western religion. The Aristotelian one is closer to the medical aspect, where we seek a more integrated view of the person. Both seem to fit our experience – some people, looking at a corpse, for example, feel that the 'soul' has gone, and that only a shell remains. (they might tend to a more Platonic view). Others sense that the body has lost its animating principle, that a human soul is the principle that gives it life (a more Aristotelian view).

But if there is one thing I'd like to remind you about – it is the degree of sophistication in Aristotle and the other Ancient Greek thinkers.

Pick up Aristotle 'On the soul', and then pick up a basic biology textbook, and you are dealing with much the same ideas, explored in much the same way. The examination of the basic features of life, of what it takes to allow a living thing to live. He was above all, analytic – he examined sensations and what part they play in life.

Many people, thinking about ancient philosophers, assume, I think, that they strolled around thinking profound, unworldly and probably religious thoughts. Not so. Aristotle was a great scientist – not the first, that honour goes to Thales – but he made a huge contribution. The pre-socratics examined the nature of the universe – already coming to the conclusion that it is composed of atoms, for example.

Plato analysed language, and challenged people to define and explain meaning – and dealt (I think wrongly, but that's another matter) with how we deal with abstract ideas – like goodness – and where they can be said to exist.

And soon after them came the Stoics and Epicureans – who about all were the 'self-help', 'mind, body, spirit' writers of their day – trying to understand how we can feel 'at home' in our world.

And that is the context of Aristotle's examination of the nature of the body and soul. He was the first serious biologist, the first to examine what enables us to live, what distinguishes us from inanimate things, and what distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal world.

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