Day 1 of *On The Soul*
On The Soul

• Like all of Aristotle’s surviving works, this is presumably lecture notes. Some believe Aristotle probably wrote other works in a more clear style; for example, he wrote dialogs, but these are lost.

• This book is most commonly called by a Latin name, “De Anima.”

• The book has three parts. Each covers a lot of ground but the main themes are:
  1. A critical review of other theories of the soul.
  2. Aristotle’s own theory.
  3. An application of his theory to perception and knowledge.

• Your selection is from the third part. We must devote some time, however, to the second part.
Some background: psyche

- The thing we aim to explain is *psyche*. This is where the root for “psychology” comes from.
- It is interesting to note that this word has very different connotations from the usual translation, “soul.” It is less far from the Latin term *Anima*, which has as its origin the idea of an animating principle.
- Aristotle wants to explain whatever it is that living things have in common, and what makes them alive.
- That is: for him soul is the principle [arche] of life.
- Some living things (human beings) have special capabilities, like speech. So psyche would also have to be our explanation of such capabilities.
Comments about part I

• In part I, Aristotle primarily reviews the other theories of psyche.
• He introduces an observation he repeats (with modification) in our reading selection: “There are two qualities in which that which has psyche differs from that which does not have psyche: these are movement and sensation.” (403b)
• “Movement,” throughout the book, including in your selection, might have better been translated “change.” Aristotle means change that is (to some degree) self-generated. In this sense then, plants also have “movement;” the “movement” of plants would be growth and decay.
Comments about part I, cont.

- Aristotle reviews (perhaps unfairly) a number of views of psyche proposed by other philosophers. These include that psyche is:
  - Fire
  - Air
  - Composed of all elements
  - Heat
  - A harmony
  - Other views….

- Aristotle also attacks the view of the Pythagoreans that psyche can move between bodies. The relation between the psyche and the body cannot be accidental.
Part II. Psyche defined.

• In part II, Aristotle begins with a reminder about the nature of matter, form, and their combination.
• “Matter is potentiality, and form is realization or actuality, and ‘actuality’ is used in two senses, as in the possession of knowledge and the exercise of knowledge.” (412a)
• Natural living bodies change (because they self-sustain, grow, and decay), and so they must be substances of a compound type (form and matter). (Presumably you saw this kind of argument in your readings from *The Physics.*)
• First pass definition: “Psyche must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body, which potentially has life. And substance in this sense is actuality.” (412a)
Part II. Two Actualities.

- But there are two sense of “actuality,” corresponding to having knowledge and using knowledge.
- Here actuality must be in the first sense: it is like having knowledge. This we are translating as the “first actuality.” The relevant Greek term is “entelekheia.”
- Aristotle is saying that the soul gives the living thing the capabilities of its life. But of course the organism may not at all times be exercising those capabilities.
- Second pass definition: “…the first actuality [entelekheia] of a natural body potentially possessing life. Any such body will also possess organs.” (412b)
- Here “organs” are functional parts.
- He offers then a shorter definition: “The first actuality of a natural body with organs.”
Part II. Immanent forms.

• For Aristotle, psyche and the body are inseparable. He compares them to the imprint in wax and the wax.
• You have seen his notion of forms as always and only occurring in matter. Here, psyche is the form of a living thing, and it only occurs in matter.
• (Aristotle will say some perplexing things about mind [Nous], later, which suggest it could exist independent of the body. But he appears in those cases to be referring to reason and the products of reason.)
Day 2 of *On The Soul*
We applied Aristotle’s method and looked at some phenomena: a rock, a chair, a plant, a dog, a human.

Key concepts:
- Psyche
- Two sense of “movement”
- First actuality \([\text{entelekheia}]\)
- Natural

Aristotle’s primary definition of psyche: the first actuality \([\text{entelekheia}]\) of a natural body potentially possessing life.
Part II of *On The Soul*, cont.: 
Psyche and Life.

- Aristotle also says that psyche distinguishes living from non-living things
- Features that distinguish the living include
  - Mind [Nous]
  - Sensation
  - Movement in space
  - Movement as growth and decay
- Aristotle also argues that all organisms (except those that are spontaneously generated) seek to reproduce.
Part II, cont.: Features of souls.

• Psyches can be distinguished by some of their faculties.
• Aristotle focuses mostly on three faculties
  – Nutritive
  – Sensible
  – Mind [Nous]
• In addition to stressing these three faculties, he also sometimes offers as faculties: generation, desire, and movement in space.
• Aristotle argues that “the earlier type exists in what follows.” That is: a soul with Nous will include the faculty of sensation; a soul with sensation will include the nutritive faculty.
Overview of Aristotle’s account of faculties

- **Nutritive**: he discusses this faculty in terms of the ability to eat food. But he also says he’s considered this elsewhere in other lectures.
- **Sensation**: in both Parts II and III, Aristotle explains how each sense works by discussing the necessary features of that sense, and what the sense is concerned with. For example, sight is concerned with colors and requires transparency.
- **Intelligence [Nous]**: Aristotle discusses Nous in part III.
Sensation and Forms

• Ultimately, Aristotle offers a theory of sensation in terms of the *sensible forms*.

• “....for each sense, that sense is receptive of the form of sensible objects without the matter, just as the wax receives the impression of the signet ring without the iron or gold, and receives the impression of the bronze or gold without the metal” (424a).

• That is, in sensation, the *sensible form* of the thing is acquired by the sense.

• Sensible form is (1) caused by the form (in the sense of essence) and (2) is an expression of the form.

• When you see a dog, you acquire the visible sensible form that is caused by, and that is a partial expression of, the psyche of the dog.
Sensible Forms

• This is one of the more fruitful but challenging parts of Aristotle’s philosophy.
• The sensible form is an actuality of the thing sensed.
• The sensible form is also a potentiality: it is the potential to cause the sensation of the sensible form.
• So: the sensible form of a dog is an actual feature of the dog. (And, since the dog is a substance--a combination of psyche and matter--it is the psyche of the dog that gives it the actual sensible form.)
• But: the sensible form of a dog is also a potential. It is the potential to cause the sensible form to exist in a sense organ. That is, it is the potential to be perceived.
• It looks like we should take Aristotle literally here: to perceive a thing is to acquire some of the logos, the order, of the thing.
Sensible Forms, continued

• Perception is a change in the organism (recall: “change” here is often translated as “motion,” which we understand by the context to not mean motion in space).
• This change must be in part material, and must be a kind of harmony in material substance.
• We know this because there can be too much sensation. A very loud noise, a very bright light, can cause too much change in the sense organ, and as a result we cannot properly perceive.
• Aristotle will later use this argument to contrast with Nous (mind): there is no thought that is akin to being too bright or loud. Thoughts just exercise and improve the mind; they can’t be too intense. So: mind must not be a kind of harmony in material substance.
Additional observations (from Part III) about sensation

• Aristotle argues we can only have five senses (since only two media convey sensations – water and air – and the senses are concerned with all that water or air can convey).
• Aristotle also argues that no sense is itself the object of another sense (on pain of infinite regress). So each sense is the only source of its kind of sensations.
Nous!

• Psyche allows for **thought** and for **movement**.
• In part III of *On The Soul*, Aristotle addresses both of these.
• Thought is enabled by that faculty of the soul called Nous, often translated as “Mind.”
• To have Nous is to be able to understand a thing – not just its sensible form(s) but also other facts about its form, even those not showing now (either because not perceived or because they are only potential).
• Nous is analogous to perception: just as perception acquires a *sensible* form, Nous acquires (in some sense) the *intelligible* form.
A fun puzzle about Nous

• We can understand things like the water the tadpole swims in, but also our own mind.
• Aristotle thinks this looks problematic. A faculty is defined by what it does. If Nous is defined by its understanding, presumably it understands one kind of thing.
• But then, if Nous can understand Nous and Nous can understand a thing like water, does that mean Nous is material (a substance?) – or does that mean all the world is like Nous?
• Aristotle’s solution to this puzzle makes more clear his commitment to forms.
• When the mind understands objects with no matter, then there is no difference between the understanding of the thing and the thing.
A fun puzzle about Nous, cont.

• When the mind understands objects with matter, then there is a difference between the understanding and the substance; what is thought in understanding is the form, what is potentially present.
• This makes it clear that Aristotle is being literal about the forms grasped by Nous. We really do have in mind (some of) the form of the intelligible thing.
Day 3 of On The Soul
Final exam

• In this room, CC132
• Tuesday December 10 from 10:30 – 12:30
• Three pages, each separate, each with a choice of questions
  – One on *Nicomachean Ethics*
  – One on *Physics and Metaphysics*
  – One on *On the Soul*
• Proctored by at least two of us
• Graded as quickly as we can manage!
What do I want you to know for the final?

- That, for Aristotle, psyche (typically translated “soul”) is the form of a living thing.
- Aristotle’s primary definition of psyche (“the first actuality of a natural body potentially possessing life”), and what each term in this definition means.
- The primary faculties of the soul (nutritive, sensible, Nous).
- How the theory of forms underlies Aristotle’s theory of mind [Nous].
- What causes motion through space, and the two kinds of desire
Review

• We looked at Aristotle’s account of sensation and Nous.
• In sensation, we acquire the sensible form of a thing.
• A substance has its sensible form as a part of its actuality.
• A substance has the potential to cause a perception (of its sensible form).
• Nous is mind, the faculty for intelligence.
• To understand is to grasp the intelligible form of a thing.
• The intelligible form goes beyond the sensible form; it includes many potentialities of a thing.
• Aristotle seems to mean all this literally: some of the form of the thing seen gets into your Nous, your soul.
Motion

• Recall that psyche allows for **thought** and for **movement**. We’ve discussed Nous, the faculty for intelligent thought. What about movement [through space]?
• Movement is caused by desire.
• Aristotle believes desire is part of the sensible faculty of the soul. For pain is a sensation, and pleasure a sensation, and these explain desire.
• There are two kinds of desires
  – Appetitive
  – Rational
Desires

• Appetitive desires aim at what appears to be good.
• Appetitive desires can lead us astray by aiming for short-term pleasure that results in net long term pain (or other disadvantages).
• Rational desires aim at what we understand (through reason) to be good.
• Rational desires are what we should cultivate, since they are not swayed by mere appearances.
An aside: Akrasia

- Aristotle’s notion of desire raises one of the more interesting problems in his psychology, and in the psychology of Plato also.
- We seek the apparent good; and rational desires are desires where reason has (to some degree) sorted the real away from the apparent.
- But can someone knowingly do wrong?
- This is unclear. A person whose rational desires were so weak that they could not overcome the appetitive desires can be called akratic. That person can knowingly do wrong.
- There is a long and inconclusive debate in philosophy about whether it is possible to be like this – that is, philosophers disagree over whether there is such as thing a akrasia (typically translated, weakness of the will).