

## **Aristotle on the Soul ( as discussed in his book *De Anima*)**

Notes selected and modified from Marc Cohen's course website for PHL 320, U of Washington. <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/psyche.htm>

# Matter (potentiality)

# Form (actuality)

# The compound of matter and form

# Aristotle is interested in compounds that are alive. These - plants and animals - are the things that have souls. Their souls are what make them living things.

# Since form is what makes matter a "this," the soul is the form of a living thing. (Not its shape, but its actuality, that in virtue of which it is the kind of living thing that it is.)

Aristotle uses the notion of first actuality in his definition of the soul (412a27):

The soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive.

# first actuality is a kind of potentiality -a capacity to engage in the activity which is the corresponding second actuality. So soul is a capacity - but a capacity to do what?

# A living thing's soul is its capacity to engage in the activities that are characteristic of living things of its natural kind. What are those activities?

\* Self-nourishment

\* Growth

\* Decay

\* Movement and rest (in respect of place)

- \* Perception
- Intellect

8. So anything that nourishes itself, that grows, decays, moves about (on its own, not just when moved by something else), perceives, or thinks is alive. And the capacities of a thing in virtue of which it does these things constitute its soul. The soul is what is causally responsible for the animate behavior (the life activities) of a living thing.

### Degrees of soul

1. There is a nested hierarchy of soul functions or activities (413a23).

1. Growth, nutrition, (reproduction)
2. Locomotion, perception
3. Intellect (= thought)

2. This gives us three corresponding degrees of soul:

1. Nutritive soul (plants)
2. Sensitive soul (all animals)
3. Rational soul (human beings)

3. These are nested in the sense that anything that has a higher degree of soul also has all of the lower degrees. All living things grow, nourish themselves, and reproduce. Animals not only do that, but move and perceive. Humans do all of the above and reason, as well. (There are further subdivisions within the various levels, which we will ignore.)

### Soul and Body

# A key question for the ancient Greeks (as it still is for many people today) is whether the soul can exist independently of the body.

(Anyone who believes in personal immortality is committed to the independent existence of the soul.) Plato (as we know from the *Phaedo*) certainly thought that the soul could exist separately. Here is what Aristotle has to say on this topic:

. . . the soul does not exist without a body and yet is not itself a kind of body. For it is not a body, but something which belongs to a body, and for this reason exists in a body, and in a body of such-and-such a kind (414a20ff).

So on Aristotle's account, although the soul is not a material object, it is not separable from the body. (When it comes to the intellect, however, Aristotle waffles. See *DA* III.4)

# Aristotle's picture is not like that of Descartes:

1. There is no inner/outer contrast. The soul is not an inner spectator, in direct contact only with its own perceptions and other psychic states, having to infer the existence of a body and an "external" world.

There is thus no notion of the privacy of experience, the incorrigibility of the mental, etc., in Aristotle's picture.

2. The soul is not an independently existing substance. It is linked to the body more directly: it is the form of the body, not a separate substance inside another substance (a body) of a different kind. It is a capacity, not the thing that has the capacity.

It is thus not a separable soul. (It is, at most, pure thought, devoid of personality, that is separable from the body on Aristotle's account.)

3. Soul has little to do with personal identity and individuality. There is no reason to think that one (human) soul is in any important respect different from any other (human) soul. The form of one human being is the same as the form of any other.

There is, in this sense, only soul, and not souls. You and I have different souls because we are different people.