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978-0-521-04443-1 - Aristotle on Mind and the Senses: Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Aristotelicum

Edited by G. E. R. Lloyd and G. E. L. Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)1: SOUL AND LIFE IN THE *DE ANIMA*

S.Mansion

As the title of the treatise¹ and the content of the first chapter indicate, the problem which Aristotle proposes to examine in the *De anima* is: What is the soul? Other formulas such as What is man? What is a living being? What is life?, which would perhaps better correspond to the real content of the work, are not even alluded to. No doubt it is the *human* soul that is primarily envisaged in such a question; but Aristotle soon (in the form of a reproach addressed to other philosophers) expresses his intention of not restricting his investigation to that kind of soul (402b1-2). He is well aware of the fact that he is not the first to have asked what the soul is and, though he is not quite satisfied with the ancients' approach to the question,² neither is he prepared to reject their general problem. For him too, the first thing is to know what the essence of the soul is and to this he devotes his main endeavour.

The important first chapter enumerates the various requirements of a study of this kind, from which the following may be selected. Apart from the fact that it is always difficult to look for the essence of something, because for that there is no common method (402a12-22), in the case of the soul the further question will also have to be asked whether there exists a single *logos* for all the types of soul (402b1-9). The danger here would be to posit a 'dialectical and empty' definition from which no account conformable to experience could be given of the properties of our subject (402b26-403a2; 402b16-26).

The knowledge of the soul is of great value, both because of its dignity (402a1-4) and because this knowledge greatly contributes to the advance of truth in general and particularly to our understanding of *nature*, 'for the soul is in some sense the principle of animal life' (402a4-7). The contrast between the soul itself and the soul in its function as principle for the living being will immediately give rise to another distinction bearing on the subject of investigation - namely the essence and nature of the

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soul and everything connected with it - for a difference should be marked here between what affects the soul itself and what belongs to animals (living beings) on account of their soul (402a7-10, 403a3-5). And Aristotle specifies the meaning and the implications of this distinction: what seems proper to the soul is the activity of thinking; now, if the latter can be exercised without the body, and in this case only, the consequence will be that the soul will be capable of a separate existence (403a7-12).

Thus from this simple reading of a part of chapter 1, it appears that, for Aristotle just as for Plato and the Pythagoreans, the (human) soul is at the same time the principle of life and something which, in so far as it is the seat of consciousness, is distinct from the body to such an extent that one might wonder whether it could not subsist after death. It is clear then that Aristotle starts thinking about the soul on the basis of ancient conceptions about it. For it is a well known fact that the word $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ originally meant the principle which distinguishes the living from the non-living or the dead, something that was first thought of as what leaves a man when he dies. But upon this first sense a second one was soon grafted, which appears for the first time with the Orphics and the Pythagoreans. These thinkers conceive of man as being in his true nature an eternal and rational being to whom belongs the task of governing a body. The soul then is in itself 'spiritual'. Its more or less forced union with a body ceases at death. If it succeeds in avoiding reincarnation, it maintains its existence as a spirit.³ Although these two ideas of $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ (principle of life and principle of consciousness) do not coincide, they are far from being opposed to one another. For it is self-evident that, even conceived as a spirit, the soul is what animates, and gives life to, the body. Conversely mental activities are regarded as proper to living beings. Still it is not clear at first sight how these two 'functions' are joined together, and one of the tasks of a philosophical reflection about the soul will be to show how they are related to one another.

Correlatively the term 'body' is seen to have two meanings also. If the soul is what animates, the body is that upon which this activity is exerted. The distinction is necessary. There are two 'principles' in a living being since life can disappear without the thing that was living being completely annihilated: the existence of

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the corpse testifies that the body is something other than the soul.⁴ But there is a much more familiar distinction between soul and body, which does not coincide with the former one: the soul being taken as the seat of consciousness, of the inner life, the body will be what is seen, what is perceived by other people, the external face of my being - in a word, all that can be investigated by someone else. In this sense, the physiological functioning *qua* event in the physical world belongs to the body, not to the soul. Of course, we know that it is in virtue of being animated by the soul that the body functions, and we know also that the body plays a part in producing the impressions the soul is aware of (the body is affected in such and such a way); it remains nevertheless possible to distinguish the external from the internal side of the events of our life and quite naturally we link the first to the body and the second to the soul, thus narrowing more or less deliberately the meaning of the latter word. Taking things in that way, Aristotle can talk about activities *common* to body and soul and of activities *proper* to the soul.

Since this manner of opposing the body to the soul is rooted in our everyday experience, it is no wonder that it survives philosophical theories and in particular the hylomorphic conception of the body-soul relationship expounded in the *De anima*. Indeed it is a fact that in at least one passage of the latter work and in several places in the *Parva naturalia*, for example, the soul is identified with the seat of consciousness and the body with the non-conscious part of our being.⁵

So the perception of an opposition between consciousness and body could very well have been for Aristotle, as for many others, the phenomenological starting point of the problem. But what exactly is this problem and what is Aristotle's exact purpose - which, he thinks, has not been achieved by his predecessors? The methodological chapter which opens the *De anima* with its critical review of the opinions of the ancient philosophers (I 2-5) might enlighten us about this. To put it quite schematically, what the philosopher regards as essential, and blames earlier thinkers for not having achieved, is to propose a conception of the soul applicable to all living beings, accounting both for their various powers (in the first place movement and perception) and at the same time for their unity - by explaining how the body and its principle of life are adapted to one another -

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in short, a conception in which both aspects of the soul designated above are harmoniously united.

In a former paper, I expressed the opinion that Aristotle did not reach the conception of life he advances in the *De anima* directly.⁶ My hypothesis was as follows. Aristotle, a systematic thinker, first thought he could amalgamate the two different ideas generally held about the soul by assimilating life to consciousness. In such an outlook, where things are as it were seen from above, where the essence of life appears, so to speak, in its pure form, in the power of thinking, the difficulty is to understand the more primitive vital activities (nutrition, growth, reproduction). It seems possible only by allowing the most rudimentary living being some measure of consciousness, as Plato had done.⁷ I offered some reasons for conjecturing that Aristotle did the same at the period under consideration, that is when he wrote the *Protrepticus*. But the biologist in him could not for long be satisfied with such a solution, for it does not really account for the various vital functions, which experience reveals as specific and relatively autonomous. Approaching, then, the problem from the other end and giving a fundamental definition of life through these primitive functions themselves, Aristotle tried to grasp all the other vital activities beginning from them. This led him to arrange these activities in a definite order, which manifests the progressive unfolding of the single perfection, called life, in the higher and higher degrees it can achieve. The difficulty that awaits the new theory is easy to foresee. It is the converse of that of the previous theory. It is thinking now which is difficult to conceive of as a vital activity, if the fundamental sense of the latter phrase is biological.

My intention here is neither to call attention to these two concepts of life again, nor to give fresh tokens of their presence in two successive stages of Aristotle's philosophy, but rather to examine, in the context of the *De anima*, how the old approach - that which asks what the soul is - still interferes with the new one - that which decides first to investigate what life is and then to conceive of its principle, the soul, accordingly.

Let me first indicate how such an interference is possible in the second conception of life, whereas it is less apparent in the former.

It we conceive of life as consisting essentially of consciousness,

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it is possible to start, as from a relatively clear definition, from the current idea which makes the soul the seat of mental activities. It is not that we claim to have an intuition of the essence of the soul, but since what is conscious is by definition immediately accessible to us, in conceiving the soul as the source of 'the mental', we put forward an idea of it which is directly meaningful. The soul being thus more or less known in itself, the problem will be to link the various manifestations of consciousness to one another⁸ and to explain how the soul animates the body, i.e. how a non-corporeal principle can show its presence in the body through activities that are usually recognized as characteristic of a living body (the biological functioning). The answer may perhaps be laborious and even unsatisfactory in some measure; but the problem certainly is this: to describe the result of the soul's presence in the body - the soul whose nature we know, or believe we know.

From the point of view proper to the *De anima*, on the contrary, where the soul, the principle of life, is conceived as the form of the living being, it is on the living body that the attention is first focused and the main effort is directed towards defining the peculiar state of the body which distinguishes the living from the dead, a state regarded as so essential that what it affects is thought to change its nature, to be altered down to its very substance, when it dies. When the matter is investigated strictly from this point of view, the old problems - concerning what the soul is in itself - lose much of their interest, if not of their meaning. The unity of the living being is given or presupposed: it is its essence which is being investigated. To say that the soul is its substantial form is simply to state that life is essential to it; it is simply to take in all seriousness the formula according to which the soul is that whereby we live.⁹ But Aristotle, as is well known, scarcely differentiates between form and essence. To say that the soul is the form of the body, then, is more or less equivalent to saying that the essence of the living being is its soul, a statement that Aristotle never quite avers, but that he does not regard as simply unacceptable.¹⁰ Now if this is so, it will be seen that the question 'What is soul?' is equivalent to 'What is the essence of something which is the essence of a living being?' - a question whose meaning is far from clear. So, strictly following the logic of

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Aristotle's second conception and taking account of the identification of form with essence, it is hard to see what question could still be asked about the soul in itself, except in virtue of an abstraction similar to that made when we ask what *whiteness* is or what *justice* is while knowing very well that these are not subjects possessing an essence of their own.¹¹ Unfortunately for the theory, the question 'What is the soul?' continues to have a very clear intuitive meaning, i.e., 'What is the conscious subject?', and above all, 'What is the thinking subject?'. If we have to reply to the latter question that it is not the compound of matter and form which thinks, at least in the sense that thinking is not the act of a bodily organ, we come up against a non-material subject, having an essence of its own, which, as form of the body, can be called the essence of the compound, a very difficult thing to conceive. For when talking about such a subject, we are referring both to what it is in itself and to what the compound is: the soul, then, seems to be the essence of man without matter,¹² something quite close to a Platonic Idea.¹³

In short, when posing the problems from the point of view of soul, it makes sense to ask what the soul is, because it is then regarded as a subject possessing an essence and an activity. Starting from the notion of life, on the other hand, it is the living being which is thought of as the true subject and the soul is only a principle of it, a principle to which apparently one cannot properly attribute an essence or an activity, except fictitiously, in virtue of an abstraction.

If such is the situation, interferences are inevitable because in establishing the second conception we are bound to come across ordinary ways of speaking which will have to be corrected when they are misleading (within the framework of the theory). But these interferences can even become conflicts if it appears that there really exists an activity of man independent of matter.

Let us come back to the first chapter. After explaining that, with the exception of the questionable case of thinking, all the affections of the soul are at the same time affections of the body, and having drawn the conclusion that they are forms embedded in matter (λόγοι ἔνυλοι, 403a25), Aristotle has a long methodological note about the different kinds of definition (403a25-b16), which he himself regards as a digression (403b16). The passage bristles with

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difficulties; the text is not everywhere sure and various minor emendations have been proposed by modern editors. This is not the place to make a detailed analysis of the text and I shall limit myself to pointing out some sufficiently clear features which are of interest to us here.

The general meaning is as follows. Since the affections in question are as described, the only correct definition of them is a formula which takes account both of matter and form. Now, such a definition is what the physicist must offer. Consequently it belongs to the physicist to study the soul, if not all kinds of soul, at least that which is linked in this way to the body. According to the example given (anger), the definition taken as a model differs on the one hand from that of the dialectician,¹⁴ expressed in mental terms (desire for retaliation),¹⁵ and on the other hand from that of the physicist who, wrongly, contents himself with describing bodily modifications accompanying the event (boiling of the blood or of the warm stuff around the heart). Of these two definitions, the first one gives the form only, the second, the matter only (403b1-2), whereas, if we want to give a faithful account of the object to be defined, we should take both principles into consideration and explain how the form demands such and such matter for its realization.¹⁶ That this is truly the task of the physicist and that he cannot leave it to someone else, restricting himself to a study of the qualities of matter¹⁷ only, is strongly asserted afterwards: the $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ must take cognizance of *all* the properties, active and passive, of a body of such a nature and of the matter embedded in it.¹⁸ To the example of anger is added that of a house, according to the usual procedure of Aristotle, who is fond of illustrating an exposé concerning a natural being with a model - clearer for us - taken from art. To define a house either solely by its function as a shelter against bad weather, or solely by the materials out of which it is built is equally unsatisfactory: one must unite the two in a *logos* accounting for the relationship between materials and function (403b3-8).

There is nothing very surprising in all this if we recall *Physics* II 1-2, with which the present section is in complete agreement. Stranger at first sight is the presence of such an explanation at the beginning of a treatise on the soul, as also is the consequent

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attribution of the study of the soul (with slight reservations) to the physicist. Since the two other representatives of the theoretical sciences, namely mathematics and first philosophy, are referred to at the end of the digression in order to distinguish their object and their mode of knowing from those of the physicist (403b14-16), we can be sure that this attribution is important from a theoretical point of view. In so far as the soul is the seat of phenomena inseparable from the body, it is an object of physics. The condition under which the soul (or any other entity) could interest first philosophy is indicated: it is that it should be separable from matter.¹⁹ As for the treatment 'in abstraction' of non-separated 'psychic' phenomena, it is explicitly discarded,²⁰ a fact that is easily understandable after what we have just explained: these phenomena are 'inseparable from the physical matter of the animals'²¹ and an abstraction of the mathematical type is not practicable in their case.²² The entire section is thus logically quite consistent with its own (hylomorphic) approach. But the difficulty is precisely that this approach, which is clearly connected with problems about life, seems ill suited to an enquiry about the soul: it is strange to commit to the physicist a study which, without going so far as to examine our intellectual faculties, will nevertheless have to pronounce on the nature of mental activities such as perception and emotion.

Our puzzlement is all the more justified when we compare with one another the examples of definitions that Aristotle gives. As has been noted,²³ anger and a house are not to be put on a par, because, among other reasons, the former is at least partly a 'psychic' process, whereas the latter is a physical object. In interpreting the relationship between anger as an emotion and anger as a bodily excitation in terms of end and means (i.e. form and matter), we will not have accounted for the specific character of the feeling of anger.²⁴ It is clear then that the two different ways of posing the problems clash, not only at the level of intellect but already at that of sensory consciousness, because the facts belonging to the latter have a meaning peculiar to them, which must be expressed in mental terms if we do not want to reduce them to the inferior order of the physiological.

Faced with such a situation, shall we pronounce the Aristotelian undertaking - which claimed to account for the whole of the soul in

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conceiving it as the (formal) principle of life - a failure? Before we do so, a more thorough examination of the meaning of this undertaking is clearly necessary.

Let us call the 'biological sense' of an activity proper to a living being the way in which such an activity contributes to the carrying out of the primary ends of life: maintenance and development of its own being, production of another like itself. Aristotle's effort tends not only to discover a biological meaning for every vital activity, but also to arrange all these activities in an ascending order according to that meaning. According to this view of things, one activity will be declared higher than another both because it is conditioned by that other, without which it cannot exist, and because it makes it possible for the primary biological functions to be exerted in a more perfect manner. Such is for instance the relationship which exists between the powers of vegetative life and sensibility, or between touch and the other senses.²⁵ Though Aristotle's aim in proposing this order is to establish the soul clearly as the principle of unity for a variety of manifestations of life,²⁶ it is no less evident that he is careful to preserve the originality of each of these and of each type of soul.²⁷ He is quite convinced that he has achieved his purpose, thanks to the flexibility of his principles. If, indeed, what is biological in the Aristotelian theory is a condition for what is 'psychic', if the meaning of the 'psychic' is rooted in the biological, the biological, in its turn, exists only for the 'psychic'.²⁸ The result is that the 'psychic' possesses a meaning proper to itself, which one could not define by its biological role alone. Once we admit that perception is a vital power, that a being equipped with it realizes, thanks to it, a specific type of life, and that consequently the presence together in the same being of the *θεραπευτικόν* and of the *αἰσθητικόν* is not the result of a chance meeting (it is necessary if the animal *must* live), we are prepared to understand that the soul of an animal is to be thought of as its principle of life in the sense of the (one) principle of *this specific type of life*. Under the general description of 'formal essence of the living being',²⁹ we will thus be able to include souls at different levels, corresponding to different degrees of life, these being determined by the hierarchically ordered powers of action which living beings possess. But, since

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these powers are all vital, they do not depend on different souls but are the different faculties of one and the same soul (II 414a29–32). And in order to know the particular nature of these faculties, it is their activities that must be examined, activities whose essences will in their turn be defined by studying their proper object (415a 14–22).

Let us now turn back to the objection we raised above against the Aristotelian undertaking in order to see whether at least a partial answer may not be derived from the point that has just been explained. According to the logic of the theory, the facts of sensibility must be recognized and described in their peculiar modality, which is 'psychic' (mental). But one must not forget that even though mental they are *felt in a body*. The corporeal conditions of that type of consciousness are thus inseparably bound up with its own being. Further, the philosophical interpretation to be given of these facts must not overlook their biological significance, upon which the 'psychic' significance is, so to speak, superimposed: if for instance thirst as felt is neither a simple state of physiological deficiency nor the exact reflection of this state at the level of sensibility,³⁰ if thirst has a 'psychic' finality of its own (it is a striving for pleasure and a flight from pain), one must not forget that such an impulse *helps* to maintain the animal alive. The same thing can be said of the other manifestations of sensory consciousness: they possess a power of a 'psychic' nature, certain physiological conditions and a meaning (to be discerned and determined in each case) for the life of the whole animal. The Aristotelian conception seems thus flexible enough to make room inside one and the same vital principle for activities of various orders, which, however, can all be connected with the vital functions thanks to their mutual concatenation.

Still, we must not turn a blind eye to the fact that the main difficulty remains. At each stage of life a rupture exists between the lower and the higher degree since, precisely because of the kind of relationship they have with one another, the lower one, which is a condition making the higher one possible, in no way helps us to surmise what this will be. It is only afterwards, when considering how an animal lives, that I can perceive how useful sensibility is for the achievement of the biological functions. In itself, though,