

Got Soul?

Aristotle Democratizes and Demythologizes the *Psuchê*

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Upon first glance, Aristotle's view of the soul may be a bit striking, if not absurd, in contrast to what a modern person is used to hearing. Perhaps a likely reaction would be, "You're telling me that *plants* have souls?" Whereas people today, as well as philosophers in classical Greece, were primarily concerned with the human soul, Aristotle believes that this is perhaps an elitist notion, if not entirely misdirected. Why does everyone spend so much time discussing the corporeality or incorporeality of the human soul, when we have not yet studied something simpler? Perhaps Plato should learn about the soul by discussing the soul of an apple tree rather than his own eternal fate.

The problem with the human soul, it seems, is that in leaping to study the most complex thing first, we have lost the ability to give a thorough account of what the soul is and what it does in an otherwise lifeless body. The problem with Aristotle's approach, in the view of his contemporaries (and perhaps ours), is that it was ridiculous to think that plants and animals have souls! Besides the difficulty of Aristotle's concepts and terminology, we are asked to embrace a fundamentally new idea of what it means to have a soul, and who or what in fact has soul.

As Aristotle begins to explain his view, he gives a general account for all living things that "the soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive" (412a27). This definition is full of concepts, meaning and perhaps qualifications that will help demonstrate what Aristotle means once we explore them. In essence, Aristotle is saying that the soul is the primary reality and substance that allows non-living or even scattered materials to become one living being. The best way to think about 'soul' in the Aristotelian sense involves neither a smoky New Orleans jazz club nor Judeo-Christian overtones of angelic harps and demonic hellfire. Instead, Aristotle views the soul as that which brings life itself into inanimate materials. The Aristotelian soul is what transforms dead matter into living being.

Perhaps Louis Armstrong's fans believe that his jazz accomplishes this same purpose, and perhaps God's 'breath of life' from Genesis is closer to this notion than we might normally conceive. However, non-Aristotelian notions of soul tend to focus only on humans and pertain primarily to the spiritual or posthumous function. Are people only matter, or is there something more? Is there life after death? Is mental activity merely a byproduct of brain activity?

Aristotle's view is exponentially broader than its rivals, including all living things as soulbearers – plants, animals, humans and probably even prokaryotic bacteria. Moreover, it is much less heavenly and more earthly. The vast majority of souls (plants and non-human animals) and their capacities can only exist along with their matter; once the living thing dies, its soul perishes as well. The soul's purpose is not necessarily to attain to heaven, and in most cases is only to help the creature get nutrition, grow, and perceive the outside world. Because we do not normally think of soul as this type of 'life force' in all living things, but restrict it only to humans life and imbue spiritualized connotations, it is probably most helpful to approach Aristotle with a *tabula rasa*. The reader should not ask where Aristotle's view fits within the spectrum of contemporary views of the soul or the question of eternal life. Instead, she should inquire of Aristotle, "what are souls and what things have them?" without a preconceived dialectic framework. Aristotle himself seems to adopt this approach and encourage it for his readers: "Let us for now return and make a *new start*, trying to determine what the soul is and

what account of it best applies to all souls in common” (412a5, emphasis mine). If we approach the text with our preconceived ideas about the soul, we will find ourselves quite confused or even scandalized imagining the absurd picture of a Judeo-Christian soul infused into a plant or a boar.

Before we incorporate Aristotle’s difficult concepts and terminology we must fundamentally revise our understanding of the soul’s function and purpose. Moreover, the challenging terminology, such as *potentiality* and *actuality*, will be more clearly understood in light of a relatively straightforward example.

What is the soul? – Apple Seed *Psuchê*

The Aristotelian soul is a kind of life force that can cause a natural body to move; it is the formal substance; and it is its purposeful end. In his own words, the soul

is the cause and principle of the living body. Now, causes are spoken of in many ways, and the soul is a cause in three of the ways distinguished—as the source of motion, as what something is for, and as the substance of ensouled bodies. (415b8-12)

Since plants are normally furthest from our list of living things with souls, an illustration of Aristotelian soul in a plant may be helpful.

The large apple tree we see today was once a dormant apple seed. When the apple seed begins the movement of sprouting, it is less than a gram and has within it neither the energy nor materials to complete the full-grown apple tree. It does, however, have an internal principle – which is the soul of the apple tree – that foreshadows and makes possible the life, nutrition, and growth of the seed into a sprout, and then into a seedling, and finally into a tree. This tree draws into itself an array of materials and energy in the process of growing from the seed. The scattered materials and the future form of the tree are, in an unconscious and impersonal sense, the desire of the soul within the apple seed. Its purpose and its ability is to put the matter of the seed into motion to draw in the available and necessary resources to produce its goal, which is a fully grown apple tree.

This example of the plant is the simplest to begin with because the faculties and capacities of plants are the least among living things – simply that of nutrition and growth. These functions, as capacities of the soul, show just how much Aristotle’s conception of the soul is radically different from other views. For this reason, it is easier to begin with the apple tree’s soul so that we make no mistakes of thinking the soul to be some supernatural substance like the Cartesian notion. Most contemporary notions of the soul lead to doubt or debate regarding its existence, showing that we tend to view it as something unobservable and unnatural (or supernatural). Scientists and laypeople observe matter constantly and the material world such that the existence of matter is rarely, if ever, challenged. These material observations contrast with our view of the immaterial soul which is something we cannot weigh, observe or count as we can with physical matter. The fact that there is a debate over the soul’s existence shows that under our definition it is not so obviously present as Aristotle believed it to be. But this stems not so much from our lack of perception or Aristotle’s exceptional empirical ability, but from a fundamentally different meaning. The soul, for Aristotle, is basically what our scientists mean when they say “life.” Certainly no one questions the fact that life exists; similarly, Aristotle did not question the soul’s existence. Whereas the narrow modern conception of the supernatural

soul is hardly observable – and many believe entirely absent – the broader Aristotelian conception of the soul as ‘life force’ is indubitable. Although this broader notion of soul bestows the fact of soulfulness upon more natural bodies, it unfortunately continues to elude perspicuous definition.

For Aristotle, the nature of the soul is that essence which separates natural bodies into two categories: living and non-living. Those with life also have soul, and those without life also lack soul. At the hinge between animate and inanimate is a radical shift in the nature of the body’s form. Let us consider our apple tree once again. If a couple comes to sit under the apple tree together on Monday, and the tree is alive, feeding itself and growing, then it is actually a tree. If the couple comes back on Tuesday and the tree has been chopped down, and is therefore dead, we can no longer properly say of the materials that they *are* an apple tree, but merely that it is a chunk of matter in the *shape* or *appearance* of an apple tree. So a tree is only a tree insofar as it participates (or could potentially participate) in the proper functions of tree life (life, nutrition, growth). Without these capacities, it no longer has the proper form of a tree. The proper form of a tree is life, the dead form of what was once a tree is only shape.

Matter’s Potentiality and Form’s Actuality – *Nous About Nomenclature*

The foregoing illustration should provide a clear background of the Aristotelian conception of soul and cure us of the view that souls are only for humans. Upon that foundation of understanding, we can enter into Aristotle’s terminology and understand what he means when he says that “the soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive” (412a27). Once we realize the soul as natural, as essential to all life, it descends from the confounding mythologies that usually surround our notions about it. We can now ask simply and with clarity: What is the soul that it makes inanimate things come to life?

In six words, Aristotle expresses the answer succinctly: “Matter is potentiality, and form is actuality” (412a10). Perhaps this quote illuminates the one prior to it, in that we should associate body with matter and the soul with form. Obviously, however, each of these terms demands its own definition and explanation.

Since the soul is that which brings life to the lifeless, any body of matter is only potentially alive before it has a soul. Within the classification of natural bodies, Aristotle says that only an organic one is potentially alive (412b1). On the other hand, the inanimate organic body is not *strictly* potential. It is only potential with respect to life; it is actual with respect to its status as an organic body. As an actual organic body, its form is in its shape. When a bumblebee picks up pollen on its appendages, the pollen is merely lifeless organic material. Its actuality is realized in its physical and chemical description. When the bee touches down on another flower that is fertilized with the pollen, the pollen is incorporated into and originates a new process of life in which its actuality cannot be expressed merely in physical and chemical description, but has a principle of life propelling it towards nutrition, growth and reproduction.

Whether the form is physical (such as the shape and size of the pollen granules) or it is soulful (such as the movement and purpose of the life cycle), matter must take on some form which is its actuality, and by which we can describe ‘a this.’ With respect to life, the form of an organic body of matter has potential to assume the form and actuality of a living body. Every thing in the natural world has both form and matter; only organic bodies can potentially assume a soul as their form and thereby have life.

Somewhere between the stillness of dead matter and the hum of life’s constant motion, there must be something that sets everything in motion correctly. Further, all life seems to have

a directed purpose, such as growth, reproduction, or even abstract thought, there must be something to imbue this purpose into matter. Finally, it seems that we cannot fully describe a living body with a strictly physical account, there must be some essence which accounts for this difference. These describe the soul's function as efficient, final, and formal causes, respectively.

The precise moment before and after death, the atoms of a body may be numerically the same and in exactly the same position and shape. However, there is something that causes these to move peculiarly while alive, like the cooperative parts of a cell making RNA or the blood coursing through the veins. What is it that sets these incredibly complex systems in motion and keeps them going? Ultimately, it is the soul, and in this example it is seen in its characterization as the efficient cause.

The soul expresses itself also as a final cause, or *telos*, of a living organism. We see this as we can tell that there is a proper end or proper goal of living things. The soul works in the creature towards this goal. It does not work perfectly, but it aims at some goal. We can see this in looking at a healthy dog and a three-legged dog side-by-side. As the two dogs walk around, it is obvious that the essence of doghood is most fully realized – approaches its *telos* – in its healthy, four-legged form. Similarly in humans, plants, and animals, each living thing seems to have a goal or *telos* towards which it tends and, in a sense, innately and unconsciously desires. In this way, the soul provides a final cause by which the internal workings of organisms strive toward realizing some proper form of a human, dog, or daisy.

The soul is also the formal cause of a living thing. As we expressed before, the potentiality of organic matter for life is realized when the actuality of the soul joins closely with it in the act of living. This 'joining' is not in a Platonic or dualistic sense for Aristotle, but is usually inseparable and for the good of the soul, not its detriment, as in Plato's *Timaeus*. Aristotle does not believe that the body is the tomb of the soul, but that the body allows the soul to fully realize itself. Thus the union of soul and body is a much closer and mutually beneficial association. For plants and animals, there is no part of the soul that persists after death – both body and soul are entirely inseparable and mortal. Nonetheless, it is proper to speak of the actuality of 'joining' body and soul, as Aristotle tells us the "animal is soul plus body" (413a3).

Moreover, this actuality must be understood in two tiers. The primary actuality consists in a living thing's existence and potential for carrying out its proper soulful capacities. The secondary actuality consists in participating in those soulful capacities. Aristotle describes this concept using two examples. First he describes an ax *qua* ax with the potential to cut and contrasts this with the act of cutting. Second he describes an eye with the potential to see and contrasts that with the act of seeing. Using these examples to illustrate the tiers of actuality, he says:

Being awake, then, is a second actuality, corresponding to cutting or seeing. The soul is a first actuality, corresponding to the faculty of sight and to the potentiality of the instrument to cut; and the body is potentially this. And as an eye is the pupil plus sight, so an animal is soul plus body. (413a1-3)

Likening this to our example of the apple tree, the soul of an apple tree corresponds to the capacity for nutrition, growth, and apple production. Realizing these by actually absorbing water and nutrients, getting taller, and sprouting apples off the branches is a secondary actuality.

Therefore the soul's actuality does not consist necessarily in doing these things, but is often seen secondarily out of the capacity to do these things. The soul's actuality is the potential for growth, reproduction, perception or thought. When the soul joins with an organic body, it

gives it life by imbuing the capacities for all of life's activities. The body is fully alive, however, before it utilizes or participates in any of these capacities.

Damaging Democritus and Polishing Plato

Aristotle's elaboration of the soul and its functions pulls the speculations of his contemporaries down from the clouds and into the real world of life, attempting to understand what makes life out of otherwise nonliving matter. For Aristotle, neither the Platonists nor the followers of Leucippus and Democritus had engaged the right question. As the sparring groups haggle over their narrow theories that turn on the hinge of corporeality, Aristotle says they have completely missed the boat. He offers instead a robust theory grounded in observable reality and ranging into the speculative world of metaphysics only in the case of explaining *nous*. He fits this complex question into his framework of the four causes, explaining that for living beings, the soul provides all three immaterial causes and must only be added to a material cause.

Aristotle is vulnerable to the charge of simply redefining terms to suit his liking. Since Aristotle attempted to dramatically shift the concept of soul to a much more earthly and biological notion, he could simply be explaining more easily understood phenomena and calling it *psuchê* despite the fact that it is entirely different from what his interlocutors mean by the same term. It seems that this charge does have an element of truth, and Aristotle is certainly much less concerned with the eternal implications of *nous* than with the temporal revelations his theory yields. Yet while the criticism is valid, it is also true that Aristotle's soul actually teaches us much more about life than the speculations of the dualists. Perhaps if they brought the debate over corporeality within the framework of the four causes, the dialogue would become much more fruitful.

In some sense, Aristotle bows out of the heated debate of corporeality and incorporeality and takes up his work elsewhere. He sits on the fence between the materialist and the dualist, arguing for the eternity of the intellect like the dualist but accounting for most soulful functions (such as getting nutrition, growing, perception, emotion) in a much more earthly fashion like the materialist. He chooses not to spill too much ink over this point and to try to make progress on a different front.

The critic might also be concerned with the multiplicity of souls within individuals and among species. If the soul has many parts grounded in its various capacities, does this destroy the unity of the soul? Moreover, some souls seem to be divisible in a way that is not so much troubling as simply in need of further elaboration. When one cuts a rose and puts it in water, are the souls of roses then multiplied, since both the bush and the flower continue to grow and bloom? Similarly, there are some animals, certain worms, that one can cut in half and they regenerate both halves into a full adult. What does this mean for the multiplication of souls? *Psuchê* seems to be itself an incorporeal and elusive essence which comes from nowhere, and disappears into nonexistence at death (except *nous*). While Aristotle provides much more solid ground regarding the soul than his contemporaries, this problem of soul also leaves much explanation. From whence does the soul come? How does it multiply readily in some living things?

A more serious objection to Aristotle's definition of the soul lies in the problem that the soul *is* an essence, and yet only those things *with* essences are definable. According to Aristotle, souls are nothing apart from the potentialities they bring:

“Clearly, then, soul will have one single account in the same way that figure has; for just as figure is nothing apart from the triangle and the figures that follow in order, so equally the soul is nothing apart from those potentialities we have mentioned.” (414b20-22)

If definition applies only to bodies that *have* essences, and yet souls *are* essences in themselves – as a triangle is nothing more than a three-sided figure – then we raise the question of whether souls can be defined. It is possible to give a single account, but this seems to be nothing more than naming the conglomeration of the potentialities a living thing entails. Perhaps this means that the soul is loosely known as the various potentialities life brings to matter.

Conclusion

Aristotle brought his system of philosophy, his ideas and his four causes to bear upon the problem of *psuchê* and ended up with an entirely different focus than philosophers in his day or ours. Of course, the human question of eternal life continually draws our minds back toward our own souls: what will happen to me when I die? Aristotle’s approach, by describing the soul as a shared substance of all living things, brings a much more practical and less egocentric view of life, body and soul. While his writings are often in the cryptic form of lecture notes and he was constrained by the limited language, Aristotle’s writings on the soul remain insightful and original. Indeed, despite his attempt to recast the debate in different terms we see that the debate has made little progress in the two millennia since he wrote. Platonic dualists and Epicurean materialists abound under different names and in a variety of flavors, yet the debate hinges essentially on the same metaphysical question now as it did in 300 B.C. This question of corporeality should not be ignored, but perhaps answers could be better pursued within the Aristotelian four causes framework. Even though I began as quite a skeptic of Aristotle’s view, the more I consider it, it seems quite appealing. Can we describe matter without form? Can we fully explain the world in efficient causes? Does life necessarily entail a final cause? Even as I try to draw myself away from assenting to Aristotle’s conclusions, his argument and even the intuitive appeal of his framework are difficult to avoid. Perhaps we should conclude with Aristotle—as a heuristic if not in concrete—that all life has soul as its primary substance. Despite the common attempts to explain life in the world solely in terms of efficient cause (perhaps with formal and material implied), Aristotle seems correct that life has a purposive teleological end. It seems both practical and plausible to redefine *psuchê* as the essence which is all three formal, efficient and final causes leaving only the material cause, an organic body, to which it is enjoined in forming life.