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Aristotle's *De Anima*

Aristotle in his work *De Anima* delves into an inquiry of the nature of the soul. He takes an exploratory approach into understanding how the soul animates and predicates existence. According to him, everything that is alive has a soul -- and the soul is the thing that makes something alive. Aristotle's approach to investigating the soul is a methodical one, in which he determines whether or not the soul is "a substance, a quality, a quantity, or something [else]" and "whether it is something potential or is more of an actuality" (281). Similarly, he attempts to examine the soul by determining whether or not it exists as one whole, or as a sum of its parts. He also attempts to differentiate between the different kinds of souls as it relates to other species and the different entities to which these souls pertain. In his endeavor to provide a clear definition of the soul and its properties, he makes clear that a soul must belong to and is predicated by a body. A soul provides something with the ability to move or change on its own accord. Though he acknowledges the arduousness of this undertaking, Aristotle concludes the soul is a form of living things, that different species have differing functions of the soul, and that the living body predicates the existence of a soul.

In Book One of *De Anima*, Aristotle embarks on the task of providing a working definition for the soul. He sets out to understand the activities of the soul in order to understand what it is. Aristotle deduces that because we experience "affections of the soul" -- emotions -- like anger and sadness, then the body must contain a soul, as the physical manifestations and

reactions associated with these emotions are the way in which the soul is moved. He then proceeds to make the claim that “affections are forms that involve matter” (282), thereby pointing to their inseparability from the natural matter of animals. One can infer that he is making the distinction between matter and forms. The former refers to the physical composition of materials to make up a thing, but the latter refers to the essence, function, and organization of the thing itself. In Aristotelian metaphysics, both of these things constitute a substance. The soul is moved because feeling and thinking is a type of motion and a change of state takes place (most notably through the presence of physical experiences). In his view, perception arises from the external world and reaches the soul and then “recollection” is transferred to the senses. Thus, this idea of change seems to pertain to the soul, and Aristotle explores this idea further in his discussion of potentiality and actuality in Book Two.

After making the distinction between matter, form, and substance (which is a compound of the two), Aristotle relates matter to the concept of potentiality, and form to actuality. Actuality is the “[the state of] knowing or [the activity of] attending to [what one knows]” (283). Bodies -- not souls -- are substance. Bodies are capable of self-nourishment, growth and decay -- this idea of motion is represented by this notion of bodily processes. There is a distinction to be made between living and nonliving bodies, however, because only living bodies are capable of undergoing these processes. Once a body becomes nonliving, it becomes something essentially different and absent of a soul altogether, presumably because the existence of a soul implies the changing of states -- a process that can only exist in a living body. Nevertheless, the soul is asserted to be part of the first actuality (the actuality of “knowing”) because of the omnipresence of the soul in all activities and inactivities of knowing (except the latter comes before the former). The soul implies the potential to be alive. Plants, animals, and humans are all alive and

in possession of souls. It is needless to ask whether or not the body and soul are one, because they are. Thus, soul is not a substance, but rather a form of the body which actualizes matter into a composite. The soul pertains to the first actuality, which involves the facilities of the senses and perceptions. In his provision of a definition for the soul, Aristotle reiterates the fact that living things have souls, and nonliving things do not. Thus, actions that pertain to life and the sustainment of it include understanding, perception, locomotion, rest, growth, decay, and nourishment. He makes the argument that plants have a soul, because they have the potential for growth, nourishment, and decay. Animals have this potentiality as well, along with the ability to sense and perceive. These potentialities are referred to as the nutritive and the sensitive potentialities, respectively. On the question of whether a soul has parts or is whole, Aristotle is unsure, because when things seem to be cut (such as insects and plants), they are able to continue growing or to regenerate. The qualities of the soul may not be localized by their parts then, because each part has all the qualities pertaining to the soul. The parts of the soul are not separable, and different species contain different parts of the soul.

Since plants have the capacity for nutrition, it follows that animals have both the capacity for nutrition and sensation. Humans, however, have these qualities along with the rational part; the intellect, or *nous*. It makes sense that these species require these abilities in this order, because to have intellect, one must be able to move, perceive, and to nourish oneself. The soul is the cause of the body, and it is the “natural end” of living things -- all life exists for the purpose of the maintenance of the soul (286). Every facet of the soul (nourishment, locomotion, understanding, etc.) depends on it to be facilitated. In Aristotle’s discussion of the rational soul in Book Three, he makes the distinction between appearance (which is only present in rational animals) and perception (which is present in all animals). He argues that perceptiveness requires

the invocation of a potentiality and an actuality, such as the capacity to see and the act of seeing -- unlike in dreams, where things merely appear to us despite the absence of physical stimuli. Perhaps this point can also relate to altered states of consciousness in general, such as through delusional and hallucinatory breaks. He argues that some animals are incapable of experiencing appearance, such as small insects, though one would be compelled to investigate the validity of this claim in modern scientific research and possibly even confirm it. Moreover, because appearance implies belief, and belief implies conviction, which implies being persuaded and the existence of reason, some animals can not have appearances, and all animals certainly can not rationalize. Because appearance requires at least some sort of perception, beliefs are thought by Aristotle to be set in motion and actualized. This makes sense, because sometimes we may act on our beliefs. Finally, Aristotle inquires about the separability of the soul from the intellect. The intellect cannot be mixed or enmeshed with other things such as the body, because of its nature -- "any foreign thing would hinder and obstruct it" (289). The intellect is therefore separable from the body and other things. The intellect is rooted also in potentiality, since understanding is a potentiality, but this understanding may be actualized when knowledge about something is acquired. The second potentiality and the first actuality are thereby enmeshed. Aristotle compares the potentiality of the intellect to a blank slate, insisting that we do not have innate understanding about the world until we gain knowledge. Aristotle concludes this section by saying that we are moved by both intellect and desire.

Aristotle's view of the soul invokes the interplay of forms, matter and substance. The soul is theorized to be a form, and it is the thing that endows a being with life. The soul is contained to a body and exists because of a body. It is intimately related to a body. The soul is not immaterial, because it relies on the body to carry out its "affections" or emotions, which are

physical manifestations by which the soul is moved. The soul is not a substance, but a form which organizes matter into a composite -- the body and soul. Characteristics of the soul which are essential to its existence in the human being include nutrition, rest, growth, decay, perception, locomotion, understanding and rationality. The soul is the principle behind movement and change. All existence moves from potentiality to actuality, and the soul is the first actuality of the body -- the second is action. Human beings are endowed with *nous*, or the intellect, which is potential (but capable of being actualized through knowledge) and separable from the body. Aristotle's approach towards conceptualizing the soul is opposed to those of other thinkers, but his methodology renders it all the more precise and thorough.

Works Cited

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