

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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II. Aristotle

Lecture 6. Aristotle's *On the Soul*

1. *Soul as form and function.* Aristotle says the living organism is body plus soul in just the way that an eye is eye-jelly plus sight, and an axe is metal plus the power to cut. Soul is the form, or functional organization, of body. Elsewhere he considers how this analysis to particular affections of the soul, such as anger:

Definitions...of the affections will be of the following kind: 'Anger is a kind of movement of a body of the given kind or of a part or capacity of such a body because of one thing and for the sake of another.' Thus it is already within the province of the natural philosopher to have a theory about the soul, either quite generally or about the given kind of soul. But the natural philosopher and the dialectician would give a different definition of each of the affections, for instance in answer to the question 'What is anger?' For the dialectician will say that it is a desire for revenge or something like that, while the natural philosopher will say that it is a boiling of the blood and hot stuff about the heart. And of these the one will be expounding the matter, the other the form and rationale. For the rationale of the thing is indeed the one given, but it is necessary that this be in matter of the appropriate kind if it is to occur. It is the same as is the case with a house; the rationale will be something like 'A covering preventative of destruction by wind, rain and sun'. But while one philosopher will say that the house is composed of stones, bricks and beams, another will say that it is the form in these things for the given purposes. Who, then, is the natural philosopher among these? Is he the one who defines the house in terms of its matter and knows nothing of its rationale, or the one who defines it only in terms of its rationale? Or is he rather the one who defines it on the basis of both? In which case how should we label each of the other two? Or is it rather that it is the province of no philosopher to treat exclusively either of those affections of the matter in question that are inseparable or of the others *in so far as* they are so, but that the natural philosopher treats of all the functions and affections of the appropriate body and matter, while someone else treats of all things that are not of this kind, in some cases, it may be, a craftsman, such as a carpenter or doctor, but in the case of those things that are inseparable but which are treated as the affections of no particular kind of body, but in abstraction, it is the mathematician, while in that of those treated as actually separated it is the first philosopher? ...the affections of soul [e.g. anger and fear] are in this way inseparable from the natural matter of living things, rather than inseparable only in the way that a line or surface are. (403a 35-403b 32)

2. *Functionalism in Aristotle and the 'harmony theory'*. The house is bricks plus shelter; anger is boiling blood plus desire for revenge. Recall the 'harmony theory' of soul, proposed by Simmias in the *Phaedo*: just as the lyre is the wood and strings, plus the harmony, so the human being is body plus soul. On both of these models, soul seems to be the organization of a body, giving an aptitude to do something: soul is functional organization. In contemporary philosophy, this approach to the mind is known as *functionalism*.

3. *Some advantages of functionalism.* This approach to soul or mind apparently steers a 'middle path' between dualism and materialism, as we saw last time. It changes the question from 'what stuff am I made of?' to 'what can I *do*?'

(i) *Continuity.* There is a continuity between things that have minds or souls, and things that *lack* them: inanimate things may be organized to have certain abilities, but not the abilities distinctive of life.

(ii) *Multiple realizability*. There is the possibility of functional states, or states of the soul, being realized in many different kinds of bodies: things different in their matter may be similar at a functional level, in terms of what they can *do*. Aristotle points out that ‘the roots of animals are analogous to the mouth of animals, both serving for the absorption of food’ (412b1); likewise houses may serve as a shelter, whether they are made of bricks or wood. Applied to the soul, we have the possibility (not considered by Aristotle!) that something could fulfill the functions of soul, including thought, though made of completely different stuff—e.g. a chess-playing computer.

(iii) *Explanatory autonomy*. It allows for a kind of self-contained explanation of our accounts of the soul or mind. In order to understand the mind, we don’t need to understand the matter—any more than the theorist of anger, the ‘dialectician’, needs to know facts about boiling blood in order to tell us what anger is.

4. *Aristotle’s attitude to the harmony theory*. In an early part of ‘On the Soul’, Aristotle mentions the harmony theory, and rejects it. This is puzzling, given the apparent common ground between the harmony theory and his own account. Why does he reject it? Two inconclusive suggestions:

(i) *First try: functionalism takes matter too seriously*. Some scholars (e.g. Burnyeat) say Aristotle would reject functionalism, and the harmony theory, because they give too prominent a role to matter: functionalism is too similar to materialism. Certainly Simmias’s point was that the soul would disappear when the body goes, just as the harmony disappears when the lyre is destroyed. Wouldn’t Aristotle agree with Simmias, though? Perhaps not. In a difficult passage, Aristotle argues that one capacity of soul, that of thought, does not depend on the body: he says ‘while the faculty of sensation is dependent on the body, thought is separable from it’ (429b:1). This difficult thesis depends on his equally difficult view that thought ‘is what it is in virtue of becoming all things’. Since anything is a possible topic for thought, thought involves the ability to somehow take on all forms. (This would seem to suggest that it needs a special ‘universal’ matter, rather than no matter.)

(ii) *Second try: functionalism doesn’t take matter seriously enough*. The passage above gives a clue: the functionalist approach to the mind abstracts too much from matter. The real philosopher is interested in the formal *and* the material aspects of an animal. The theorist or ‘dialectician’ who sticks to the definition of anger, with no thought of the boiling blood, is doing their philosophy of mind as if it were mathematics. It’s fine for the mathematician to study the nature of lines and surfaces in abstraction from material things; but not so for the study of the soul, since the affections of the soul are ‘inseparable from the natural matter of living things’.

Hilary Putnam, ‘Philosophy and our mental life’ (1973), reprinted in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers Vol 2*, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Putnam and Nussbaum, ‘Changing Aristotle’s Mind’ (1992), *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima*, ed. Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, O.U.P.

Miles Burnyeat, ‘Is an Aristotelian philosophy of mind still credible?’, in *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima* (ed. Nussbaum and Rorty).

Reading for next time: *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, especially 1097a:15-1098a:15.