

## Aristotle, the soul and life after death

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### 1. Aristotle on the soul

In Aristotle's philosophy generally, every living thing has a soul. It is the 'form' of the living thing. Unlike Plato, Aristotle did not think that forms are separable from that which they are forms of. So the soul is not something separable from the living thing: "if the eye was an animal, then sight would be its soul...the eye is the matter of sight...The waking state is actuality in the same sense that cutting and seeing are, while the soul is actuality in the same sense as sight (the faculty of the eye for seeing) or the potentiality of a tool. The body is that which exists in potentiality; but just as pupil and sight *are* the eye, so, in our case, soul and body *are* the animal." (*De Anima*, 412b-413a).

So what is the role of the soul? To understand this, we need to understand Aristotle's analysis of 'causes' (*Physics* 194b). Today, we might better understand this in terms of types of explanation. The material cause of something is "that out of which a thing comes to be, and which persists; e.g., bronze, silver, and the genus of these are causes of a statue or a bowl". The efficient cause of something is that which brings it about in its present form; it is "the primary source of change or rest". A final cause is "the end (*telos*), that for which a thing is done"; much of our explanation of behaviour is in terms of final causes. Finally, a formal cause provides us with "the account of the essence" of something, an account of why something is in terms of what it is. So we might reply to the question why a heart pumps blood in terms of what it is to be a heart. Now this account itself is likely to refer to the function of a heart – and so the formal and final cause coincide. Furthermore, we might explain the heart actually pumping blood – changing, moving – in these terms – so formal, final and efficient causes coincide.

We are now in a position to understand Aristotle's cryptic remark that "living is the being of living things, and the soul is the cause and principle of this." (415b). What it is to be a living being is to live; and the soul is the form of living creatures, and is the formal, efficient and final cause of a living thing (415b10). Of course, the *potential* to live is part of the matter that comprises the body, as is the potential to be a *body* – if bricks couldn't be placed in certain ways, no art of building could make them into a house. We might say that matter, under certain arrangements can be a body, and a body by definition is something that can, under certain conditions, be alive. The very idea of a body, then, depends on the idea of living. And it is this account – of what it is to live – that the soul provides.

It is very difficult for us, with our materialist philosophy, to really understand what Aristotle means. But here is an attempt. Matter looks like the most enduring substance – it exists through birth and death. And yet matter per se is not a definite, structured item that can be picked out; we always pick out some matter by the form it has at the time. And so matter isn't in fact a good linchpin for explanations of change and activity. This is particularly the case with living things, as that which remains constant is not matter, but the living thing. Trees and people remain constant as their matter changes; living things are forms embodied in ever-changing matter. Even to refer to the living thing is to privilege form over matter; and so explanations of living things must equally identify form over matter. Of course, change only happens to those things which are material, and thus matter must be mentioned, and it must be matter which is suitable for the

change being described. But our understanding of the types of changes living things undergo, and the reasons for these changes, must be primarily in terms of form.

For this reason, a dead body isn't really a body, in Aristotle's terms, as a body necessarily has the potential for life; a dead body is a corpse, which is a different type of thing altogether from a living creature. Bernard Williams suggests that, to accommodate this way of seeing things to our more materialist standpoint, we call the matter of a human body 'Body'; and so, now when this is 'working', then the body will have life - so a working Body constitutes the existence of a living body.

## 2. The human soul

So far the soul is closely identified with biological functions, taken in a broad sense. However, one aspect of living for people is thinking. Aristotle believed that thinking, in particular thinking about ideas, rather than sensory experiences, had no specific organ, like seeing has the eye, hearing the ear. We now believe this isn't right, that the brain is the specific organ of thinking. But he thought that thinking worked more independently of the body than any other aspect of the soul. So he said the intellect "seems to be another kind of soul, and this alone admits of being separated, as that which is eternal from that which is perishable" (428b). But note that Aristotle uses the word 'seems' - he is not certain.

The strongest case for such separation we may devise from Aristotle's conception of God as form existing independently of matter. This is not something we can go into now. Not all forms are forms of material objects, and so some forms can exist independently of matter, e.g. final causes - the good. However, no matter can exist without taking a certain form. And so being a form is a more fundamental way of 'being' than matter. Thinking, specifically a very pure form of contemplation of the good and other first principles, shares in the activity of God, whom Aristotle identified as 'a thinking on thinking'.

## 3. Life after death

If the soul, or rather the intellect, is separable from the body and survives death, it is very unclear how this occurs and what happens next. And it is unclear as to whether this would be any sort of personal survival. There are two barriers here: the first is whether we can identify persons with souls; the second is whether we can identify persons with intellects. Certainly, some descriptions of life after death suggest that it consists in constant contemplation and worship of God. But what would distinguish one such contemplating intellect from another? And what would identify any of them as *me*? Perhaps a plausible interpretation returns our thinking to the thinking that is God, and the loss of any separate intellect.

Aristotle's general theory of the soul would identify me with a living animal, not an intellect. And because souls do not exist independently of living bodies, the natural implication is that I am identical, not with my soul, but with my living body. If we say that I am the soul of this body, or perhaps 'this' soul, we arrive at a type of dualism that Aristotle's theory of the soul (intellect aside) strongly resists. We also end up identifying persons with forms (as souls are forms), with each person a different form, of which there is only one instance! Yet persons are particulars, for one and the same person (unlike forms) cannot be identified in two different things.

One understanding of life after death, and one that long held sway in the Christian tradition, is that of bodily resurrection. If I am a living body, that the living body that is me must exist again for me to exist again. When people talk of resurrection of the body, there are two different theories they could be referring to: *resurrection* strictly understood and *recreation* of a very similar, but not identical, body. Resurrection strictly understood says that this very body will be

resurrected, brought back from the dead. Recreation says that a duplicate of this body, perhaps made of exactly the same kind of matter, perhaps made of something different, will be created. Both claim that I, the person who dies, will be that body that is resurrected.

On the Aristotelian understanding, the soul ceases to exist when the body dies. Although the soul provides the criterion for identity throughout life, even though matter constantly changes, it cannot provide a criterion of identity after death. How then can the living body that is me be created again? We need to turn to what makes a Body/corpse the same Body: God would need to ensure *material continuity* between the Body at the time of death and the one at the time of resurrection. This would mean reassembling the actual atoms that made up my body at the time of death. This is not impossible for an omnipotent being, and certainly not logically incoherent. However, to do it with more than one Body could prove much more difficult, because when I die, some of the atoms in my Body were in the atoms of other people's Bodies when they died! God could not make two Bodies out of the *very same* atoms – this is logically impossible.

Recreation doesn't face these difficulties, since the Body at the time of death is unimportant. But the big question is 'am I the same person if I have a new Body, when there is no soul to ensure continuity between changes in the Bodies?'. If God created two identical Bodies, each identical to the Body at the time of my death, would either of them be me? No – because I am one person, and cannot be two people. It seems that Aristotle's theory of the soul as the form of a living being requires some type of continuity in body or Body to ensure identity.

### **Further reading**

Aristotle, *De Anima* I, II

Williams, B. 'Hylomorphism', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4, 1986: 189-199

Shields, C. 'Aristotle's Psychology', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/>)

Davies, B. *Philosophy of Religion: a guide and anthology*, §VII