

Body and soul
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Plato

In his work, the *Phaedo*, Plato argued that death is the separation of the soul from the body. When it is joined to a body, “the soul is only able to view existence through the bars of a prison, and not in her own nature; she is wallowing in the mire of all ignorance”. Death, therefore, is a good thing, at least for people who want to attain true knowledge.

Plato gave two arguments for thinking that the soul could exist separately from the body.

First, he argued that souls cannot be destroyed. All unseen things are unchanging and ‘simple’, i.e. they don’t have parts. If they don’t have parts, they cannot be broken up. To destroy something is to break it into parts. And so something without parts cannot be destroyed. The soul is unchanging and simple. So it cannot be destroyed.

Second, he argued that everything comes about from its opposite. Whenever you change something, you change it from what it is into what it (currently) is not, e.g. if you paint a wall red, you change it from not red to red. Likewise, life changes into its opposite, not life, or death, the separation of soul and body. But to become alive is therefore also a change from not being alive. Life must come from ‘death’, i.e. it must be the *joining* of soul and body. So our souls must exist in another world first and then are born, or reborn, here.

Neither of these arguments are very good. First, perhaps souls can be destroyed, because perhaps there are other types of destruction than breaking into parts. For example, if souls were created out of nothing, then perhaps they could be destroyed by being literally turned into nothing. Or if they were created out of the single soul of God, then individual souls could be destroyed by being absorbed back into God.

Similarly, perhaps there are types of change, such as ‘coming into existence’, which don’t involve change from one opposite to another. If I come into existence, it is wrong to say that I change from not existing to existing. Because if I didn’t exist, then I didn’t have any properties at all, including that of ‘not existing’. If death is the destruction of the soul, rather than the separation of soul from body, birth could be its creation (from nothing) rather than the joining of a soul to a body.

Aristotle

In Aristotle’s philosophy, every living thing has a soul. It is the ‘form’ of the living thing, and the body is the ‘matter’ of the living thing. Form and matter are not separable (here Aristotle disagrees with Plato). So the soul is not something separable from the living thing.

To understand the relationship between soul and body we first need to understand Aristotle’s analysis of ‘causes’ (*Physics* 194b). We can 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 (why? for what reason?). 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.

Aristotle says that “living is the being [the essence] 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 formal, efficient and final cause of a living thing (415b10). It is the final cause because living things live in order to live; parts of our bodies do what they do, and we do what we do as a whole, in order to continue living (well). It is the efficient cause because this activity of living brings about changes and developments within and to our bodies, so they have the structure they do, and to us as persons, so that we have the lives we do. And it is the formal cause, because this activity of living provides an account of what it is to be what we are, a particular kind of living being. 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 (as distinct from a physical object), then, depends on the idea of living. And it is this account – of what it is to live – that the soul provides. The soul exists as the organizing principle of the body.

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.

So far, the soul may seem to be closely identified with biological functions. But this is only true in the broadest sense. Aristotle is interested in the *types of lives* organisms are capable of. Plants are capable of growth and reproduction, animals are also capable of sensation, human beings are further capable of rational activity. And it is a life of rational activity – doing everything we do in accordance with reasons – that Aristotle argues is the distinctive life of a human being, a person (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I). We must therefore have a corresponding, distinctive type of soul. And on this question, Aristotle breaks away from aligning the soul, or part of the soul – the intellect, with something material. 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. It wasn’t simply that Aristotle didn’t know about the role of the brain in thinking. He argued that the intellect must be immaterial, because otherwise it couldn’t receive, experience, think about all the forms. An eye can only see, an ear can only hear. If there was some material organ of the intellect, it would equally be limited to thinking about certain physical objects and properties, not others. But it isn’t. 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” (*De Anima* 428b).

So when it comes to our souls – or rather the intellectual part of our souls – then perhaps these *can* survive, separated from our bodies.

Descartes: two notions of 'person'

St Aquinas developed Aristotle's ideas, and claimed that the soul, the intellect, and the form were the same thing, and were a separate *substance* from the body – the soul can exist without the body. (A substance is something that can exist independently – it doesn't depend on something else to exist.) However, he agreed with Aristotle that a person is body and soul together, but he would have said a person is an embodied soul, rather than an ensouled body.

Descartes followed Aquinas in arguing that the soul is a separate substance from the body and in identifying the soul with the intellect (the thing that thinks). The soul, then, doesn't have the connection with biology and living that Aristotle thought it did. Descartes thought matter could support life without a soul (animals don't have souls, for example). So what were his arguments?

Souls alone

Descartes famously argued that we are, essentially, souls. The question 'what am I?' can be answered by considering the question of what it is for me to exist. Descartes seeks to identify his essence, those properties which, if he lost them, would mean he was no longer what he is. I cannot doubt that I exist, and equally I cannot doubt that I think. In fact, doubting is a kind of thinking, and if I was to doubt that I existed, that would prove I do exist – as something that thinks! I can doubt whether I have a body, whether I have a brain. If I didn't have a body, I wouldn't necessarily cease to exist – perhaps I don't have a body. But I know I still exist. So what I am is something that thinks, and minds can exist without depending on bodies. It is possible for me to exist without a body, he claimed; so having a body is not essential to what I am. If I am a person, then, persons are souls.

Most philosophers don't think that Descartes' argument works. Just because Descartes can imagine his mind existing without his body, this means that his mind *really can* exist without his body. Perhaps, although he doesn't know it, there is some metaphysical connection between his mind and body that would make this impossible. If materialism is correct, then I cannot exist as a mind without also existing as a body. Descartes has used imagination as a test of possibility. But the test is flawed.

Body and soul

But then, if we are just souls, how are our bodies and souls related? Descartes argued that being a soul is not the whole story, because our souls are connected to our bodies in a very complex and integrated way. Descartes is very aware that our experience of ourselves – mind and body – is not an experience of two things, but one:

I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but...I am very closely united with it, and so to speak so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole. For if that were not the case, when my body is hurt, I, who am merely a thinking thing, should not feel pain, for I should perceive this wound by the understanding only... all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc. are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body. (*Meditations VI*)

For now, at least, I am an *embodied* soul, even if I could after death become a disembodied soul. From the point of 'intermingling' (conception) onwards, the soul takes on the body's experiences as its own, i.e. we refer our sensations, emotions, etc. to our *selves*. We 'own' these states just as much as we 'own' our thoughts. Our experience is as of one thing – embodied souls – not just souls.

Is being an embodied soul essentially different from being a soul? Descartes suggests in a private letter that the idea of the union between mind and body is a 'third primitive notion' – it is basic and unanalysable. It is not *essential* to either mind or body, demonstrated by their distinctness; nor is it accidental, 'since the body has all the dispositions necessary to receive the soul, and without which it is not strictly a human body, it could not come about without a miracle, that a soul should not be joined to it' (letter to Regius, December 1641). The comment that, unless united to a soul, a body is not a *human body*, suggests (but not conclusively) that the 'human body', body and soul together, can be considered as a unity, a thing in its own right, a substance created from the union of body and soul. This interpretation begins to return us to Aristotle.