

HOW OBSOLETE IS ARISTOTLE'S VIEW ON THE SOUL?

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Abstract

I am interested in placing Aristotle's discussion of the soul in *De Anima* in historical context, arguing that the philosophical terrain within which he developed his own theory is not radically different from that of our own time. As we can gather from historical overview of Book I, Aristotle faces essentially the same challenges and choices in the field of philosophical psychology as the moderns do. As such, he stands firmly within the mainstream philosophical development, and presents a genuine alternative to the dominant theories of mind. I defend this thesis against a misrepresentation of Aristotle's view which suggests that the 'traditional' views on the nature of mind are not even intelligible given Aristotle's peculiar presuppositions and his limited stock of concepts. This, if true, would make Aristotle's psychology fully 'superseded' by later developments, in the same manner as his physics was 'superseded' by the subsequent progress in natural sciences. Against this I argue that the central notions of *De Anima* (e.g., 'matter', 'mental', 'soul'), when properly understood, are quite 'commensurable' with any modern post-Cartesian theory.

I

Few courses or textbooks on philosophy of mind today would as much as mention Aristotle's treatise on the soul and still fewer would seriously consider his solution to the soul/body problem as a genuine alternative to the standard inventory of contemporary doctrines.¹ The reluctance to include *De Anima* on the list of required readings has at least two sources. First, there is the problem of classification. It has become a

¹ E.g., one of the most authoritative recent anthologies in philosophy of mind (*The Nature of Mind*, ed. by D. Rosenthal, 1991) is described as containing "the most important and influential writings about the nature of mental functioning and the relationship of mind to the rest of reality." The collection starts with Descartes' *Meditations*.

commonplace that Aristotle's philosophical psychology does not fit into any of the customary categories in the field. His view on the nature of the soul and mental phenomena in general is clearly not a dualistic theory of the Cartesian type, but neither is it wholly reductionist in its claims. Attempts have recently been made (e.g., Putnam and Nussbaum, 1995) to enlist Aristotle in the functionalist camp – the latest word in the philosophy of mind – but apparently without much success. If none of the convenient labels can be applied to Aristotle's view, it is tempting to exclude him from the discussion altogether.

Secondly, anyone with basic familiarity with the contemporary debates in philosophy of mind and who is reading *De Anima* for the first time cannot escape the impression that the treatise has been given a misleading title. It is not, one feels, a discussion of the soul or mind as these terms are commonly understood today but for the most part, a discussion of something *else* which is hardly relevant to modern philosophical concerns. This impression is only strengthened by Aristotle's unfamiliar terminology and various controversial assumptions that he makes throughout. Moreover, it is sometimes argued that the well-known traditional views on the nature and functioning of mind are not even intelligible given Aristotle's peculiar presuppositions (e.g., about matter, activities of the soul, etc.) and his limited stock of concepts, in the same way as many concepts of modern physics (such as force, inertia or kinetic energy) would not be immediately intelligible to someone brought up in the world of purely Aristotelian science. This claim, if true, would make Aristotle's psychology fully 'superseded' by the later developments in philosophy in the same manner as his physics or biology were superseded by the subsequent progress in natural sciences. Having these concerns in mind M. F. Burnyeat writes: "[A]ll we can do with the Aristotelian philosophy of mind and its theory of perception [...] is what the seventeenth century did: junk it"² (1995, p. 26). On this view then, modern professors are fully justified to start their lectures on philosophy of mind from Descartes.

On the other extreme however, there are philosophers who view Aristotle's original conception of the mental aspects of human nature as the

² The main reason why Burnyeat thinks we should 'junk' Aristotelian psychology is because Aristotle doesn't share out 'modern' view of *matter* - of which I shall talk later. See also Jammer's *Concepts of Mass in Classical and Modern Physics* (1961) for a detailed analysis of the understanding of matter in ancient Greece.

only viable theory in the face of the apparent crisis of all ‘traditional’ Cartesian and post-Cartesian formulations. Thus Charles H. Kahn claims that,

[A]ristotelian philosophy of mind is not only possible but *necessary*, since Aristotle offers us the best alternative to the dualist and anti-dualist theories of mind that have plagued philosophy with persistent and fruitless conflict for more than three centuries (1995, p. 359).

On this view, the subsequent development of philosophical psychology is an example of continuous decline which was unable to improve on the theory articulated in the fourth century B.C. in any significant way except, perhaps, by filling in some physiological details that were not available in Aristotle’s time.

In what follows I shall argue for a more modest thesis. Aristotle developed his original theory of the relation between soul and body in full awareness of the various alternatives, alternatives which we would call today the ‘traditional’ views. It is worth remembering that substance dualism in philosophy of mind did not originate with Descartes, nor materialism with Hobbes. Aristotle was quite familiar with something like substance dualism through the great tradition of the Pythagoreans and Plato, just as he was aware of the materialistic solutions to the mind/body problem provided by the atomists (Leucippus and Democritus), and by the group of ‘natural philosophers’ of which Empedocles is an example. Even some of the central features of modern functionalism were not unknown to the ancient thought. For instance, the doctrine of metempsychosis (the Orphic tradition and later the Pythagoreans) can be described in a way compatible with some versions of functionalism (e.g., Block 1980; Putnam 1980), where mental states are only contingently related to the material substratum they are realized in. Thus Aristotle’s *De Anima* is by no means an obsolete, marginal or ‘superseded’ work and should be taken seriously by all contemporary theorists as an ‘informed voice’ in this debate. I would thus agree with Kahn that the philosophy of mind along Aristotelian (and perhaps Thomistic) lines is indeed *possible*, but I shall stop short of claiming that it is also *necessary*. As the Philosopher himself used to say in similar situations, “the assertion of *necessity* must be left to more powerful thinkers” (*Met.* 1074a16).

II

One distinctive feature of Aristotle's approach to philosophical issues is his acute sense of history. Most of his existent works in fact, begin with introducing the problem as it was handled by earlier thinkers as well as his contemporaries. *De Anima* follows the same pattern. The first book of this treatise is almost completely devoted to the critical evaluation of the various existing opinions about the soul and its proper functions. This descriptive project is undertaken not so much for the sake of showing them as false but also, as Aristotle says,

to call into council the views of those of our predecessors who have declared any opinion on this subject, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors (403b22-23)

The goal here is in part practical – to build on the shoulders of earlier thinkers. The edifice of scientific knowledge, as Aristotle recognizes, always remains the result of a collective effort and he gives credit to those who made his work possible even if, in this case, (as he argues later) they were wrong for the most part. For this reason Book I is more than a record of primitive theories about the soul – its content is central to Aristotle's dialectical method of inquiry, namely, finding truth by transcending the opposing arguments. Aristotle formulates this idea in several places, but perhaps most clearly in the *Metaphysics*: “He who has heard all the contending arguments, as if they were the parties to the case, must be in a better position for judging” (*Met.*, 995b4).

The first book of *De Anima*, then, is invaluable for placing Aristotle's views in the right perspective and understanding the doctrines of the subsequent books. Yet omitting Book I is a frequent practice in reading and teaching this treatise. Its importance is generally recognized as its status as a great source for the views of the Pre-Socratics. It is also usually acknowledged that we can gather from this first part some helpful information on what the soul is *not*, according to Aristotle (e.g., it is *not* itself a moving thing, it is *not* a composite, it is *not* a harmony, etc.). The initial negative exposition however, is later enriched and, it might appear, rendered unnecessary by the positive demonstrations of the last two books.

The opening part of *De Anima* is much more than an introduction to the main text that can harmlessly be skipped at will. The text allows us to have a clear picture of the intellectual environment of the time, that is, the background against which and partly in reaction to which Aristotle was developing his account of the soul. Indeed, *De Anima* is Aristotle's answer to the much debated puzzles involving the soul that were discussed in Plato's Academy and elsewhere. One might be in a better position to understand the answer, if he knows the original question. In the rest of this section I shall explore Aristotle's exposition of some important questions (and answers) regarding the soul posed by two groups of his predecessors who can be described, roughly, as substance dualists and identity theorists.

Dualism, or the view that a person is essentially the composite of the two elements, the visible body and the invisible soul,³ is certainly not a recent invention. According to the Egyptian belief, the intellectual soul (the 'ka') consisted of breath and shadow, and was thus distinct from the tangible body. Similar views can be found in the Babylonian tradition and the religion of the ancient Hindus (Altschule 1965, pp. 315-16). This metaphysical position as developed in Egypt and later in Ancient Greece, was largely motivated by the religious belief that the death of the body is survived by something incorruptible which retains within itself all, or a significant part, of the conscious life of the deceased. But its origin or motivation is less important here – what is important is that during the time Aristotle was writing the notion of the soul as something which is distinct from the body, and which (perhaps) survives the body was well-known. Moreover, the Pythagorean and Platonic versions of dualism (e.g., in *Phaedo*) perhaps come as close to the classic Cartesian kind of dualism as was then possible. Rational soul, for Plato, is not merely a property or an activity of the physical body, nor one of the elements, but rather a separate and separable *substance* in its own right:

Socrates: Is death nothing more or less than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul, and the separate

³ The notion of the 'immaterial' or 'non-physical' soul would not be appropriate here. Many ancient thinkers identified soul or mind with air or ether, which are, after all, material elements. Thus the surviving passage from Anaximenes reads: "Our soul, being air (*pneuma*), holds us together" (Burnett 1969, p.72). Likewise, Heraklitos says: "We draw in Divine Reason by respiration, and thus we become thinking creatures. We become conscious by inhaling through the breath of the Universal Ether, which is Divine Reason" (*Ibid.*, p. 134).

condition by itself of the soul when released from the body? Is death anything else than this?

Simmias: No, just that
(*Phaedo*, 68c 5-8).

The soul according to Plato is ‘located’ within the body, but far from being dependent on the body’s existence, its life within the body is somehow an impediment to the soul’s true disembodied existence. *Psyche* is ‘substantial’ in the sense that it is the locus of one’s personhood, both here on earth and in the life beyond. Socrates in the afterlife (as a disembodied soul) will still be the person with the inquisitive mind and the same annoying habit of constantly questioning and examining the denizens of the place (cf. *Apology 41a*).

Aristotle clearly has these kinds of dualistic views in mind when he critically observes that

they all join the soul to a body, or place it in a body, without adding any specification of the reason of their union or the bodily conditions required for it. Yet such explanation can scarcely be omitted (407b 14-17).

Aristotle’s mentioning here of the “specifications of the bodily conditions” as the prerequisite for any serious account of the soul betrays his own preferences, which will become more apparent later. Eventually he will attempt to show that the various attempts of philosophers to specify these “bodily conditions” for soul-body interaction inevitably lead, as *we* may now call it, to one or another version of the notorious “pineal gland” theory and that these explanations cannot withstand scrutiny, even granting their basic assumptions about the nature of the soul and the body.⁴ Indeed, Aristotle will argue, the full satisfaction of this prerequisite will call for a radically different approach to the soul-body problem.

⁴ The dualistic views that Aristotle considers (e.g., Pythagoreans) presuppose a radical discontinuity between the soul and the body, which makes their *interaction* unintelligible: “Some community of nature is presupposed by the fact that one acts and the other is acted upon, the one moves and the other is moved; interaction always implies a special nature in the two interagents. All, however, that these thinkers do is to describe the specific characteristics of the soul; they do not try to determine anything about the body which is to contain it” (407 b 17-21).

But apparently Aristotle was equally well familiar with the various non-dualistic explanations of the nature of soul. At least two varieties of materialistic theories are mentioned in *De Anima*: the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus and the more complex view of Empedocles. These solutions have an apparent explanatory advantage over the Pythagorean and Platonic forms of dualism in that they do not postulate an extra separate entity, the soul or mind and thus have no special need to give an account of the unity between *psyche* and the body – or, more specifically, the account of their unity is the account of the unity of the homogeneous atoms (varying only in shape) or the four traditional elements (for Empedocles). Furthermore, reducing *psyche* to the material elements presumably allows to explain the two agreed upon functions of the soul: first, the soul as the producer of motion or any other change in the material body and secondly, as the locus of sensation (at least in animals).

The theories of the Atomists and Empedocles however are unequal in their explanatory powers. It seems that atomism fares better in accounting for bodily motion, whereas the view of Empedocles, namely that the soul is the mixture of all the elements, is primarily meant to account for its ability to perceive material objects. To be sure, Aristotle will argue that both of these views are equally unsatisfactory (albeit for different reasons) and fail to address the real issue in this debate. But we should still take note of the leading motivation behind these materialistic theories of mind that gave them shape and thereby set their explanatory limits.⁵

Aristotle gives a brief description of the atomists' view in the following passage:

⁵ Indeed, it is a common fate of so many explanations in contemporary philosophy of mind too – the primary explanandum, chosen according to some particular interest, will determine the view set forth as the explanans, and then the remainder of the relevant phenomena are forced to comply with the leading paradigm, notwithstanding the apparent inconsistencies. Thus, for instance, functionalism (Fodor 1968; Putnam 1967) was offered as a way of coping primarily with the propositional attitudes (beliefs, wants, doubts, etc.), but was later extended to cover sensations (pains, colour perceptions, etc.) as well. A case can be made that functionalism is an overall successful theory as long as its analysis is restricted to the cases of, say, beliefs; but arguably it fares much worse when the same analysis is applied to the second type of mental states, namely sensations (e.g., 'the inverted spectrum' objection by Lycan 1974).

Democritus says that the spherical atoms which according to him constitute soul, owing to their own ceaseless movements draw the whole body after them and so produce its movements (406b 19-22).

For the purposes of this essay there is no need to consider the specific charges that Aristotle brings against this view, nor is it the right place to evaluate atomistic materialism in general, but we must yet try to show that Democritus provides a materialistic explanation of the soul which, *in all relevant respects* bears strong resemblance to the reductionist theories of our days. It does indeed seem that some of the leading contemporary philosophers of mind are the true heirs of ancient materialism; who, to be sure, develop their views with a quite different set of tools at hand (provided by modern science), yet along the same basic lines as did the first Greek atomists. In this sense, the philosophical terrain during Aristotle's time was not that much different from our own.

A central-state identity theorist, Keith Campbell, summarizes his view as follows:

The answer concerning the relation of mind to body is: the mind is part of the body. It is a special part, the part which controls the behavior. That is, it is the part which governs the movement of the limbs under the influence both of its own states and of sensory gained information concerning the body's environment and attitude. The part which does that is the brain (1991, p. 192).

Whereas Democritus identified *psyche* with spherical atoms, contemporary philosophers, benefiting from neurophysiology, identify it with neurons and C-fibers. Democritus would most likely place his spherical atoms in the region of the heart; modern thinkers of materialist persuasion (thanks to advances in general physiology) unanimously locate the mind in the brain (indeed, identify the two). In order to explain bodily movement Democritus had to postulate the unceasing movement of psychic atoms that would mechanically transfer their motion to other parts of the body. In this way the need for an external mover or a miraculous intervention was eliminated. Contemporary materialists are likewise reluctant to admit the uncaused spontaneous start of firing in the neural chain or, *horribile dictu*, the one caused by the non-material agent but, unlike the early atomists, they translate motion into the language of energy and adopt the so-called

Principle of the Conservation of Energy – the central dogma of modern physics.⁶ The movement of limbs is thus explained by tracing the neural signal to the brain and further, to the specific group of neurons in the brain, whose firing was initiated by the transfer of energy from one part of the brain to another (energy, of course, can be stored in many forms, e.g., as heat).

Even this overly sketchy comparison suggests that a version of materialism that Aristotle was arguing against in *De Anima* is still very much with us today in its main features. It is true that modern reductionism is motivated by recent scientific discoveries and is essentially an empirical theory, whereas ancient atomism was ultimately motivated by various metaphysical considerations (e.g., accounting for change without admitting the reality of non-being, etc.), and, for the most part, is a product of arm-chair speculations. But despite this important difference, the content of both views is similar in their central respects, which allows us to affirm at least this much: Aristotle developed his original view on the soul in full awareness and in good understanding of the existing alternative ‘traditional’ solutions namely, substance dualism and reductive materialism; solutions which, in more or less modified forms, still represent active options in the ongoing debate.⁷ Aristotle’s *De Anima* is the third informed voice in this dialogue, a voice that should not be discarded without careful examination on its own terms.

The following discussion of Empedocles’ view, i.e. another version of materialism that Aristotle critically evaluates in Book I, has only an auxiliary purpose here, since the overview of atomism would be sufficient

⁶ In outline, the Principle of the Conservation of Energy states that the total amount of energy in the universe, or any controlled part of it, remains constant. One way to interpret it is to say that for any possible physical process the energy needed to accomplish it must be already present within the system prior to that process.

⁷ A case can be made that another historical view that Aristotle discusses in Book I, namely the view on the soul as ‘harmony’ (407b 28 – 408a 17) is analogous in its main features to a functionalist theory of mind. According to functionalism (e.g. as defined by Block 1980), the mental life of an organism is only contingently related to the underlying material substratum, and the same mental state (i.e., a state with identical functional description) is ‘multiply realizable’ (at least in principle) by a variety of physical states. The view that soul is a product of certain arrangements of the material elements, namely, a harmony resulting from “a blend or compositions of contraries” and “a certain proportion or composition of the constituents blended” (407b 32) likewise implies that the same state of harmony can be realized by different sets of contraries, just like the same sound can be produced by different musical instruments.

to make the above thesis plausible. But the theory that explains the soul's ability to perceive the material world by making animal *psyche* a composite of the four basic elements (I shall refer to it as the 'Composition theory') deserves some attention here in its own right. The Composition theory has in some respects a very strong intuitive appeal that continues to inspire many thinkers in their search for the nature and function of mental phenomena. One feature of this theory that has lasting significance is the underlying assumption that whatever the soul/mind is, it must be a 'thing' of *the same ontological category* as the objects that it perceives and cognizes. The ancients commonly expressed this intuition by the maxim 'like is known by like'.

Aristotle presents this final view (in the order of his discussion) in the following passage:

It remains now to examine the doctrine that soul is composed of the elements. The reason assigned to this doctrine is that the soul may perceive or come to know everything that is... Its upholders assume that like is known only by like, and imagine that by declaring the soul to be composed of the elements they succeed in identifying the soul with all the things it is capable of apprehending (409b 23-17).

He also quotes Empedocles on several occasions as one of the most authoritative supporters of this view (e.g., 404b 12-15; 410a 1-7).

As we have observed before, the ancients universally agreed that the ability to produce movement and the ability to perceive physical objects were the two main functions of the soul. Unlike atomism, the Composition theory specifically targets the latter of the soul's capacities. It starts with the common observation that some creatures with souls, namely animals, are capable of perceiving and cognizing material objects. Material objects however, are the mixtures of the four primary elements: earth, water, air and fire, and hence in effect, what the soul perceives are those four elements, mixed in different proportions.⁸ The problem now is to explain how the perception of the four elements takes place.

⁸ Apparently we are also able to perceive material objects that are not composed of these four elements. The heavenly objects, the stars, are presumably made out of a fifth element (*quinta essentia*), the Ether. But this additional element was introduced into Greek cosmology after the theory took its initial shape.

I take it that the problem the natural philosophers recognized when faced with perception is analogous to the one that puzzled Meno with respect to knowledge. Meno was wondering how it could be possible to inquire into any subject, unless we already have some notion of this subject:

And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of inquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know? (Plato, *Meno*, 80e)

The paradox itself lies in the conclusion that in order to inquire into what x is, we must *already* know what x is. But if we already know x , there is no need to inquire into it; and if we do not know x , we will never be able to know it. Plato believed that this is a genuine epistemological problem, and as a way out he accepts the requirement for pre-existent knowledge. According to his solution, we do have the innate ability to recognize the subject of inquiry once we hit upon it (as the slave boy was able to recognize the correct answer to the geometrical problem, or as Meno was able to recognize the nature of virtue when Socrates pointed to it) and this ability comes from the metaphysical fact that our souls face the truth directly prior to their embodiments. Even though the present bodily conditions impede our cognitive abilities, we can still achieve knowledge, i.e. recollect what we once knew clearly, when stimulated by rigorous dialectical reasoning.

The question that Empedocles asks in this context is not unlike the one that Meno asked in Plato's dialogue: how can we perceive the material elements *unless* we already have these elements within our soul? We might call it "Meno's Paradox" on the level of perception. And just like Plato discovered the way out of the paradox by admitting that the soul had pre-existing knowledge, Empedocles found it natural to identify the perceiving soul with some mixture of earth, water, air and fire. The soul is capable of perceiving the material objects precisely because it is *of the same kind* as the objects of perception.

This reasoning perhaps does not have an exact correlate in contemporary philosophy of mind; but the intuition of the ancients that the perceiving soul must itself be material in order to function in the material world is certainly not foreign to modern thinkers. The discussion is however

shifted from the perception ability to the more general problem of psychophysical causation. It is often argued that the only way we can explain the apparent interaction between the mind and the physical body is by conceiving the mind as a part of this physical body. How can something exercise a causal influence on material objects (e.g., neurons in the brain) unless it is a material object itself? This modern concern mirrors in its main features the question that the ancients asked about perception and thus Aristotle's criticism of Empedocles might also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to a number of proposed materialistic solutions to the mind-body problem of our own days. Whether his criticisms are decisive or whether Aristotle presents a strong case for his own conception of the soul is a separate question, but at the very least, he and the contemporary theorists would not talk past each other had Aristotle been confronted with the more recent formulations of the old identity theory.

III

It remains now to address a somewhat different but closely related question. Perhaps what makes Aristotle's psychology obsolete is not that he was unfamiliar with the 'traditional' *theories* of the mind but rather, that the peculiarity of his conceptual apparatus renders his account of the soul truly 'incommensurable' (in the Kuhnian sense⁹) with any modern post-Cartesian theory, which allegedly operates on a very different set of presuppositions. Among these conceptual divergences between the Aristotelian and contemporary approaches the notion of the 'material' and that of the 'mental' are of central importance. Is Aristotle's conception of matter (roughly) similar to the modern (scientific) one? Or can we make any sense of Aristotle's claim that the domain of the *psychic* covers even the processes of nutrition – something that we would normally identify today as a purely

⁹ Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) applies the term 'incommensurable' to the scientific paradigms that succeed one other as the result of a scientific revolution. Some other ways of expressing the same notion in *The Structure* include stressing the "irreconcilable differences" (p. 103) between successive paradigms (i.e., the impossibility to derive one from another, e.g., classical Newtonian physics from the General Theory of Relativity of Einstein), and pointing to the "incompleteness of logical contact" (p. 110) that always characterizes the paradigm debate. The 'incommensurable' theories or concepts, in other words, cannot be directly compared to each other, since there is no single standard of evaluation that would apply to both.

physical (i.e., physiological) process? Does this not betray a very different understanding of what is properly material and what is mental (psychic)?

A brief note on Aristotle's method in *De Anima* might help approaching these questions. In the very first line of the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle's main work on systematic methodology of scientific investigations, he famously claims that "all teaching and learning of an intellectual kind proceeds from pre-existent knowledge" (71a 1-2). A little further we learn that "the pre-existent knowledge required is of two kinds. In some cases admission of the fact must be assumed, in others comprehension of the meaning of the term used, and sometimes both assumptions are essential" (71a 11-13). He later talks about these two kinds of knowledge as the two "first principles": an *hypothesis* assumes the existence of the subject matter ("admission of the fact") and the *definition* provides the necessary basis, the starting point on which we can start building the system of knowledge (72a 12-23). Thus the first definition expresses some pre-scientific, non-thematic knowledge of the subject, which gives initial direction to the inquiry. For Aristotle to know *what* something is scientifically – that is in relation to causes – we must already know *that* it is. But nor is it possible to say that we know *that* something is, without having some primitive notion of *what* it is (otherwise, how would we know what to look for?). The nominal definition is thus primary, since it determines the outcome of the subsequent existence question.

Aristotle's investigation in *De Anima* closely follows the order sketched above. In the beginning paragraph he introduces the first very general, tentative definition of the soul: "[S]oul is in some sense the principle of animal life" (402a 6). This still is not a scientific formula, of course; that is, it is not the formula which would state the *complete* essence of soul (this presumably is to be determined by the end of the treatise) – but it is the required 'pre-existent knowledge' with which every inquiry must commence. It is one of the two 'first principles' which must be assumed from the start. Aristotle repeats the same point a little further in *De Anima*: "[In] all demonstration a definition of essence is required as a starting point" (402b 25). As for the second principle, the *hypothesis* i.e., the admission of the fact *that* the soul exists rather than stating *what* it is, Aristotle gives us no special demonstration. Nor indeed does he feel that he is required to do so given his initial definition of the soul – demonstrating

that the soul exists would amount to proving that there are *living things*, which he takes as obviously true.¹⁰

Nonetheless some philosophers would argue that Aristotle's extravagant construal of a number of basic terms in the philosophy of mind disqualifies him from the contemporary dialogue in the field. Not because it has been shown that Aristotle's view on the soul is false or contradictory, but because in *De Anima* he is not playing 'by the same rules' as the moderns do. Thus M. Burnyeat argues that

Aristotle's conception of the material or physical side of the soul-body relation is one which no modern philosopher, whatever his persuasions, could share (Burnyeat 1995, p. 16).

In effect, Burnyeat believes that Aristotle's notion of the material (and by extension, his whole 'solution' to the soul/body problem) is unacceptable for at least two reasons. First, Aristotle uses 'raw-feel-talk' when he speaks of the matter and describes it in terms of 'secondary qualities'. The physical object is *essentially* how it appears to the senses – wet, soft, blue, sweet, and so on. There is no additional underlying reality that gives rise to these qualities; the 'secondary qualities' or the 'proper sensibles' are ontologically basic. This, Burnyeat suggests, is contrary to the accepted view that matter is essentially defined in terms of primary qualities (e.g., extension) and all other qualities (color, odor, etc.) supervene on this *quantifiable* substratum. Secondly, just as Aristotle does not suppose that 'proper sensibles' need to be explained by something else – they just *are*, neither do the psychic functions of the living organism require explanation in terms of the underlying physical constitution of a body. A living organism has nutrition and is capable of perception and other psychic powers precisely because it is '*besouled*'.¹¹ For Burnyeat, this characteristically Aristotelian 'explanation' amounts to a tautology – a living organism has nutrition because it is a living organism. Thus he concludes: "[T]o be truly Aristotelian, we would have to stop believing that

¹⁰ We can compare this with Plato's approach. For Plato, as we have seen, the soul is a separate and separable substance which is only contingently tied to a physical body. Once the soul is thus defined, proof is needed that a substance with these qualities indeed exists, since it is by no means an obvious matter. Plato provides such proofs in *Phaedo*.

¹¹ Cf. one of Aristotle's more formal definitions: "Soul is an actuality or formulable essence of something that possesses a potentiality of being besouled" (*De Anima*, 414a 27-29).

the emergence of life or mind requires explanation. We owe it to Descartes that that option is no longer open to us” (*Ibid.*, p. 26).

Burnyeat thinks that the conclusion which follows from Aristotle’s starting premises, namely that life does not require an explanation by reference to the underlying physical structure of an organism, is a clear case of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Now I admit, it is clearly a hopeless task trying to show that Aristotle’s understanding of these central concepts is similar to modern scientific approach. But this fact of conceptual diversity between Aristotle and the modern philosophers enlightened by the scientific revolution does not in itself constitute a sufficient reason for ignoring the Aristotelian approach. In rejecting Burnyeat’s reasoning I shall rely on the reply to his article given by M. Nussbaum and H. Putnam (1995, pp. 27-57). The main strategy here is to accept Burnyeat’s premises, his interpretation of Aristotle in *De Anima*, but to question his background assumption that any serious psychological theory *should* provide an explanation of the mental phenomena and (preferably) an explanation in terms of the underlying extended matter. In other words, we can question whether Burnyeat is in his right to impose upon Aristotle the ‘rules’ that he accepted from Descartes, and whether it is a self-evident fact that the Cartesian picture of the world is the only accurate one. To be sure, one can proclaim himself a Cartesian (e.g., in his understanding of matter) and argue against Aristotle dogmatically from the Cartesian point of view. There seems to be nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach. However, this is not what Burnyeat does. He assumes that the Cartesian notion of matter (of which the modern scientific outlook is a natural offspring) and all that comes with it is the only accurate one that *all* theories of mind should accept as basic and which, among other things, gives us a reliable criterion for evaluating past theories of mind as well. Nussbaum and Putnam nicely reduce Burnyeat’s position to the following conditional: “If the ‘emergence of mind’ has to be ‘explained’, [...] *then* [Aristotle is out of the picture and] we are ‘stuck’ with the mind-body problem”, and they ask immediately afterwards: “[B]ut why should one believe the antecedent of this conditional?” (*Ibid.*, p. 51). It does not seem that Burnyeat gives us any independent reasons that would support this antecedent, except for his appeal to our alleged Cartesian intuitions.

The above reasoning suggests that Aristotle’s qualitative conception of matter and his lack of sympathy for the ‘Cartesian’ problematic in the

field of philosophical psychology does not yet constitute grounds adequate for the dismissal of his theory, any more than it does for the dismissal of the whole phenomenological tradition. But what about Aristotle's conception of the 'mental'? Is there a way to formulate his notion of the 'psychic powers' in terms acceptable to modern philosophers? Was Aristotle even aware of the special sphere of the mental as distinct from the physical?

For a large part, what gives rise to these doubts is Aristotle's peculiar way of expressing himself.¹² In Book II Aristotle names several functions that he thinks belong to the sphere of the soul:

[O]f the psychic powers above enumerated some kinds of living things possess all, some less than all, others one only. Those we have mentioned are the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking (414a 28-31).

Moreover, having at least one of these five powers is sufficient for being classified as a *besouled* organism.¹³ What initially strikes a modern reader in passages like this is Aristotle's insistence that even the thoroughly physiological processes (from our point of view) such as nutrition are somehow the 'properties' of the soul. One would be happy to delegate thinking to the domain of the soul, but speaking of nutrition or appetite as *psychic* powers seems to be an overly idiosyncratic way of expressing one's thoughts.

Two points are worth mentioning here with respect to our intuitive uneasiness to take Aristotle at his word. First, we must free ourselves from the deep-seated spell of the Cartesian identification of the soul and the mind. For instance, in the "Synopsis of the Six Following Meditations" Descartes writes: "[F]rom this it follows that the human body may indeed easily enough perish, but the mind or soul of man (*I make no distinction between them*) is owing to its nature immortal" (1997, p. 3 [my emphasis]). If mind and soul *are* interchangeable terms as Descartes insists, it is little wonder that any talk of, say, nutrition as being the power of the *mind*

¹² Or, more likely, a very unfortunate choice of rendering the Greek '*psyche*' by our loaded term '*soul*'. For other problems and confusions that arise from the difficulties of accurately rendering Aristotle's terminology in English (e.g., the problematic translation of *aesthesis* as 'sense') and thus affect the understanding of the textual material see Matson 1966.

¹³ This criterion, for instance, suggests that heavenly objects, for Aristotle, have souls too, since they possess at least the power of locomotion.

offends the ear. But clearly *nous* (mind, intellect) and *psyche* (soul) are *not* identical for Aristotle, and we should keep this in mind as we read and interpret the text of *De Anima*. Secondly, what does the term ‘soul’ mean for Aristotle if it is not identical with ‘mind’? This, of course, is a major question, the satisfactory answer to which would require going in detail into Aristotle’s hylomorphism and his notion of the soul as the *form* or actualization of the body, where the power of intellect (mind) is just one aspect of psychic activity. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Aristotle’s doctrine of the soul as it appears in Books II and III here. It should be sufficient for our purposes to recall that ‘soul’ for Aristotle is “in some sense” identical to the principle of life (402a 6). In other words as we have seen, a being with a soul (a besouled being) is just a *living* being with all the functions that it has *in virtue of* having life. Nutrition then, is a *psychic* power in the sense of being a power of a *living* organism; it is simply a function of *life*. On this reading, Aristotle is not saying anything that would appear in the least controversial to a reader of any philosophical persuasion.

Aristotle insists in several passages that the psychic powers and all the affections of the soul are impossible without a physical body. In the first chapter of Book I he says: “[I]t therefore seems that all the affections of the soul involve a body” (403a 16). This thought is further developed to include even the power of thinking – the main candidate for a purely psychic capacity. What is important though, is that Aristotle seriously considers the ‘Cartesian’ possibility that thinking belongs exclusively to the soul and that body plays no interesting part in this uniquely human ability:

If we consider the majority of [affections], there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving body. Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence (403a 5-10).

In what follows he argues, however, that “the soul never thinks without an image” (431a 15-16) and therefore even thinking is an essentially embodied activity. The complex of body and soul is the fundamental subject of all psychic experiences, where ‘soul’ is not an additional part in some compound, but an actualization of the living potential of a given body. Aristotle’s view is that the mental does not exist without the material,

because *life* does not exist without a body. This, indeed, is *not* a Cartesian view of the mental – but so much the worse for the Cartesians.¹⁴

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