

The Soul in Aristotle's *De Anima*

“when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man.”
—e.e. cummings

You are being lifted away from the ground incrementally, floating light —being lifted away. The monastic purl of the city's engines, its people's gilded thrum. This feels like transcendence, until you remind yourself that it's only a mid-morning flight, not a leaving-your-body. You push the grimed call-button and the coffee is on its way.

Below—outside—down there—deciduous as a sidewalk's chalk-portraits, the city's architecture drops and rises in traces, a deliberate sketch, a sundried rehearsal. Swimming pools are wintry beads of sweat. Mumbling shapes honk and prowl and in jostles spin weaving. Each with an intricate history: a language and a code. Squinting through the oval window, you breathe the hazed opaqueness of clouds and feel at ease above the crowded stage floor, the myriad walkers and movers and noisy callers—unsheltered people—fading across uncountable lives, lives contracted or given, simple with insouciance or hard to understand, given to bouts of life unexplainably touched and real, subjected to profound mystery—scattered, helpless.

Yet, despite this powerlessness, we most of us find Life worth living, we look to the dove and not the serpent, the sky and not the ground, to hope, to faith, and not to hatred. Even the illusion of flight is a gift, the hope for transcendence a remedy.

The nature, purpose, and function of the soul have been scrutinized endlessly, and not only by philosophers or poets, but in the thoughts of any person throughout the course of any day. The difference being that Mr. Philosopher rambles *his* thoughts into code, into an unabandoned nomenclature—he brands them into books.

Aristotle is among the best known at this practice, and his enduring presence says as much. Writer David Foster Wallace goes so far as to refer to Aristotle as “the villain of our whole story” (Wallace 12).

In his treatise titled *De Anima*, Aristotle establishes a hierarchy of Being which examines each level of functionality, beginning with the soul of strictly nutritive beings and concluding with a series of examinations on the human life force. The function of *De*

Anima is to “use the concept of soul to explain the phenomena of [living]” (Tancred 69). More specifically, as Mr. Tancred maintains in the book’s introduction, “the task of the theory of the soul is to explain the life common to all grades” of living beings—from plants, with the fewest faculties, to Man, who’s pretty much in charge (Tancred 71). So then, what is the general form of living things? And why, according to Aristotle, do cacti have souls? Well, to begin with, Aristotle understands the word soul (of the equivocal Gk. *animatus* or *psyche*) to denote “that in virtue of which something is alive” (Tancred 12). Note that, according to Aristotle, if a body displays life, then it necessarily contains a soul.

Cue the most basic fabric of being: Substance. There are three types of Substance: “Substance as Matter, Substance as Form, and Substance as the composite of these” (Aristotle 155).

Natural bodies—e.g. plants, animals, the human body—if imbued with life via self-nourishment, growth, and decay, are substantive. As they are composed of matter, they are objective and so therefore potential. Potentiality, in this case, stands as a strictly empirical concept.

Like natural bodies, the Soul is substantive, but it is not a construct of matter and is, *eo ipso*, the Form to a body but not itself a body. The soul is the subject, the actuality, of *a priori* cognition: archetypal—and as such, “actuality is spoken of as knowledge and contemplation” (Aristotle 157). Considering these characteristics, it’s plausible to from here deduce that, as a Form, the soul, as an immaterial substance, is essentially separate from the body. Well ... not really, says Mr. Aristotle.

Forms are substance; therefore the soul is a substance. Yet, a soul is not *a substance*. Not like the heart or brain—but rather a substance of its own—although it does serve to characterize these and other parts of the body, to provoke their function. In other words, the soul does not *make* the body, nor is it made *by* the body, but rather serves as the force which propels, authenticates, and enlivens it. The body is an appearance; the soul is its essence.

More precisely, the soul is the first actuality (or *entelecheia*) of a natural body endowed with organs, and “in virtue of the second actualization that it *actually* performs

them” (Aristotle 70). Therefore, the soul, our cognitive relation to the world, is “the first actuality of a natural body which potentially has life” (Aristotle 156).

Another way to approach the soul-body agreement (better known as the Form-Matter dichotomy) is to examine the move from *being capable of* life to *actually having* life. It’s the difference between only being capable of functions and actually able to perform functions, “functions” here denoting any process characteristic of that physical body. Matter is particular, Form is universal. The soul builds the bicycle, the body hops on, the soul and the body, together, goes for a ride.

The following univocal analogy evinces this relationship yet more clearly: “For if the eye was an animal, then sight would be its soul . . .,” in this example the eye plays the role of body and sight the role of soul (Aristotle 158). Not, however, that Aristotle is not referring to the “activity of seeing,” but the *ability* to see (Robinson 46). Further, the soul is the essence of any living thing, viz.: “[I]f some tool, say an axe, were a natural body, its substance would be being an axe, and this then would be its soul. And if this were separated from it, it would not continue to be an axe except homonymously, whereas as it is it is an axe” (Aristotle 157).

(FYI, Aristotle uses this kind of subject-object-reliance idea elsewhere, even to describe Infinity, which he considered “a special type of thing that exists potentially but not actually” (Wallace 65). As Kant might put it, the world of understanding contains the ground of the world of sense. Sensation against perception (Kant 34).)

Now that we’ve established that a soul belongs to a living body, and now that we understand that “living body” can denote a plant, an animal, or a human, Aristotle demarcates levels of Being among those bodies according to faculties. A soul, it follows, is potentially composed of five faculties (i.e. inherent powers or abilities): nutritive, perceptive, desiderative, locomotive, and intellective (Aristotle 162).

Most of these are pretty straight forward. It’s really only Aristotle’s method that seems to produce nose-rattling groans; namely, his “purely physiological account of sense-perception” (Tancred 83). Which is a tricky booger. If I understand it correctly, the disagreement comes in Socrates’ statement as regards sense-perception being an external process (rather than internal, e.g. thought), which would make it purely physical? Anyway. So each thing (plant, animal, Man) has a particular set of purposes which is

“determined by that body’s capability with regard to faculties,” i.e. level of awareness or involvement—their functionality (Aristotle 71).

There are three levels of Being. Level One contains plants, which are only capable of the nutritive faculty; Level Two contains plain-old animals, who as well as the nutritive faculty embody those of perception and motivation; Level Three, of course, is occupied solely by Man, who is, on a good day, capable of all of the above.

Now, certainly the most logical next step for Aristotle to take would be the highest faculty: the rational soul. It is rationality that separates Man from plants and animals—to have rationality, after all, one must be capable of thought; and to think is to meaningfully exist—it is rationality through which we are able not only to experience the perceptive and nutritive and reproductive faculties but are able to fully *understand* what each of them means, to capture their significance; we are able to comprehend, for instance, what it means to sustain a life, to perceive, and to, furthermore, gain a knowledge and a history because of our unique interpretation of our unique act of living.

Unfortunately, this awareness brings also a teleological difficulty: We know that it ends. Assuming that both an immaterial form exists within the body insofar as it is living and that it neither perishes with nor remains because of that body’s expiration, what is left of that life (essence) when a soul leaves a person’s body? And will any aspect of that previous life continue into the next life, physically cultivated or otherwise? It seems reasonable to assume that the soul is capable of leading its own separate existence beyond its material counterpart; and, obviously, we can just as reasonably claim that this agreement is not bi-conditional.

A further twist and small controversy regards the conflict between the abovementioned entelechist theory (cf. hylomorphism) and various religious communities’ beliefs in the personal survival of the human soul after death relative to Aristotle’s texts: “Evidently the view that the soul is but the Form of the body, if not flatly compatible with any notion of disembodied survival, yet certainty militates strongly against it” (Aristotle 93), although at heart it seems more about the equivocal relationship Aristotle’s philosophy shares with what people *want* of his philosophy.

Alas, both cases are rendered voiceless by Aristotle’s examination being not “a quest for what distinguishes the human form from all other forms of existence, but an attempt

to identify the living from the nonliving,” and as such, contrary to Mr. Tancred’s claim, the focus is in fact on the *animatus*, and not the *psyche* (Robinson 43).

What, then, is a better concept of soul? In the introduction to *De Anima*, Mr. Tancred states that “to know a thing’s function is to know its Form” (Tancred 15). So, what is the function of a soul? What is the “general doctrine of the soul?” What is its Form?

In an attempt to further dismantle the soul, Aristotle offers a series of scattershot specifics relative to our cognitive abilities. Those detailing Imagination are the most tenuous, but let’s focus first on the book’s absence of instruction. At this point, it’s important to mention that the following criticisms regard not what the book eschews but instead what it *needs*. *De Anima*, as Tangred proffers in the book’s introduction, is oftentimes philosophy qua science, “Meta-biology,” and the resulting inductiveness leaves the work tumid and patchy, highlighting what David Foster Wallace refers to as Aristotle’s prederiliction for “dividing and classifying—he literally put the ‘analytic’ in analytic philosophy” (Wallace 63). This steadfastness to biological analysis renders the presence of a Will nearly impossible.

We tend to think of the soul as our moral compass. Arguably, it is more important than our physical self in this way, in its power to guide us both autonomically and ethically. A belief that reflects our tendency to see consider ourselves predominantly moral; to attribute a certain reverence to that focused centrality we often foolishly discount and rakishly turn silent. How, then, does a book with such notable emphasis on the stages of Life neglect to include an ethics? It isn’t that Aristotle is incapable of examining an ethics (q.v. “The Nicomachean Ethics), or that he falters in his medical examinations of our life-force, but that he considers the two to be divisible.

The Form-Matter dichotomy seems unable to address any such ideals, let alone formulate an imperative; it is just too structural to apply a moralistic tone. Aristotle is not offering a practical philosophy here, it’s pure theoretical, and, consequently, his argument lacks any moralistic/humanistic/ethical substrata. This wouldn’t be a problem if he weren’t writing about the soul or the mind or the imagination, if he weren’t marking our differences from animals. Aristotle achieves a demystification of the soul, but does so in the same dolorous manner a veterinarian clips a bird’s wings.

It seems obvious, but each of us exists in tandem with ourselves, daily—constantly—always within ourselves, so remarkably adept at understanding the flourish of images flooding our minds that it can be easily forgotten that our very existence is an act of imagination. Creation must be first imagined; testament to the fact that we all live in two distinct worlds: the one *inside* our head, and the one *outside* our head.

The trick to cultivating a soul, therefore, appears to involve meaningfully connecting the two. This requires above all others the imaginative faculty. To be aware of one's imagination is to feel. It is to be enamored of a consciousness necessarily human. Imagination forms the human essence like no other noetic process.

Aristotle's dubious attempt at a manifest examination of the imagination leaves too many mirrors turned inward, an easy trick considering the subject. He begins by name-calling his predecessors for their 1) erroneously considering Thinking to be "something bodily," and 2) in their making "both perceiving and understanding to of like by like" (Aristotle 197). He likens the state of enthrallment associated with Belief v. Imagination to something akin to a then-nonexistent Paradox of Fiction. The entire examination succumbs to a deluge of irrelevant conditions, rarely approaching the subject.

Supplanting this attempt is the obverse difficulty, made especially irksome considering the complexity of describing the thing/place/presence that contrives the ability to create, which creation leads to thought, which thought leads to understanding, which understanding leads to the ability to describe a thing, in this case the thing that birthed it. In other words, can a mind create a mind that creates thoughts alight with thought?

Aristotle eventually defines Imagination as that in virtue of which an image (*phantasma*) occurs in us, although much of his energy is spent separating imagination from both perception/understanding and perception *and* understanding. Unfortunately, the above definition is as lucid as it gets. Throughout most of his calculation, he resorts to enumerative negations. For example, we know that Imagination is not perception, not understanding, not belief, "not belief with perception or belief though perception or a combination of belief and perception," not above the intellective, not below the sense of taste, "not one of those faculties that are always correct..." (Aristotle 198). The closest he

gets is the statement that Imagination is a product of the universal mixing with the perceived particular. But this is far too vague. He doesn't state whether you move from the universal to the particular or from the particular to the universal, not to mention that he's using the same terminology found in the definition for "syllogism"—the implication alone, that imagination is a form of methodical deduction, brings a cringe.

So then, what the hell *is* Imagination to Aristotle? No idea. Something to do with sense-perception. Which is more analogous to plain-old thinking than to the definition befitting it, in which we understand imagination as a force of creativity; an unconscious deeper than we, in whom it is housed, are aware of, can be aware of; a palace of artistic activity and wit-given words, celebrated onslaughts of talent yet recited; a graveyard to banality, a birdhouse for regressions; cradle to madness and joy, both alike there; an adept of disassembling and synthesis; a propellant essential to learning and to communicating. The source of creation. The source of intuition. As Einstein so aptly put it, reason is a tool, imagination and intuition are gifts; and we've traded our gifts for a mere tool. In truth, the imagination is the only faculty which engages everything, at all times, unlike Aristotle's claim that "perception is, but imagination is not, always present" (Aristotle 198). The reality is diametrically opposed to that statement; the Imagination serves to mediate without stop, it is the force that unites the Self to the world.

Were we brought into a recursive caprice of expansive existence? Or will that ephemerality we all sometimes-secretly shake-because-of be the unbidden end? Is there hope in finding either question's meaning? Every putative answer has its own set of putative answers, *to apeiron*. And this is precisely the problem: we can understand the complexity of the ideas we're not capable of understanding. A stage-fright onslaught of numbers neverending—well, can't *we* be the numbers?! And if there are numbers then there must be Expanse (right?), all in those occasional tufts of existential rumination. You are the uncaused causality of your cause, etc. And, so surely, because it makes clear sense that at least one type of infinity exists, it ought to be an infinity we're allowed into...

Metempsychosis, Joyce's darling word, is one answer to these questions that rings fluid and boundless and stinking of happiness. The kind of happiness that carries you, carries anyone, through a fated day, a rush of emotion, the sting of Love during the breath of first kisses.

We migrate while on this earth, seeking, most of us, a presence that *explains*, that embodies an answer like the answer we too contain but are unable to decode. Carrying always within us an Infinite whorl of depthless Being, we launch ourselves toward a solution, a way through the reality that this Infinite spirit within us is made temporal by our Finite, time-held casing. We look in mirrors and see trailing across our eyes the thoughts that we gather settled—the feelings of each lingered memory—and our pulse, riveted, demands a serious and true answer; our body, it's ours for this instant, responds to the huge spirit within, unsure, unsure. Time berates our presence, despite the joys of living. So we travel earth, mind, sense, and body searching for the labyrinth's exit sign.

But more accurately, what we're scouring each movement for is a cure. And wherever it is, there must be, by dint of univocality, a harmony of lithesome wholeness, that rotating ideal, the spur of a perfect form, which leads us to that new realm, holding our hand—feeling only its presence—carrying us through the blanched assault of a blizzard, riven by the white impact, blinded by the whiteness, fast-sinking, the windrows of snow blasting us backwards, an indurate shadowfold of gleaming cloudfall, viperous yet pluvial because the struggle to Eden is fraught with bitter cold, kept right and kept alongside ourselves, holding but with what, until then, at the edge of transcendence, balancing and balanced, clear as the many whitecaps of noise, we enter the air and the air has been waiting: Resplendent and mercurial, those visions of from above are illuminations of the hope given them, a prismatic alignment, so that we become caught in the Sheppard Tone's ascent, where the worlds are pried apart

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