

PLATO AND ARISTOTLE ON THE SOUL

The project of coming to an intuition and comprehension of the essential nature of Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul and of attempting to render explicit the correct relation between these, is like attempting to explore and describe the aquatic life of two vast seas. In either case, the project is overwhelming if it is not carried out with proper regional delimitation. In order to gain insight into the relation between Plato and Aristotle on the soul; and yet, still avoid being taken under into these two vast seas of thought, we must first consider the idea of delimitation. With a proper awareness of the idea of delimitation, we will be in a position to further delimit the topic of this paper.

Among the various types of delimitation two are of importance for us here: (1) the particular methodological form of the investigation; and (2) the area or region of the investigation. It is important to keep in mind with respect to this type of delimitation that there are no preestablished methods in philosophical thinking which do not take their form from the topic or subject matter itself.

Because of the expanse and depth of the subject of Plato and Aristotle on the soul and hence, because of the diversity of methods possible regarding this topic, a brief statement of the form of exploration, and the particular topic to be explored, is in order.

Method must take its form from the subject matter itself. If it does not, there is, among other things, a danger of engaging in an external mode of analysis of a certain object of thought, instead of entering into an internal insight into the topic. Furthermore, if a philosophical method is preestablished, one inadvertently forms the subject matter to fit the preconceived method; and thereby is able to investigate only that which he has transformed into his own image. In order not to fall into this common error, our investigation must allow the topic itself to determine the form and movement of our investigation.

At first glance, with respect to our topic of Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul and the relation between these, it appears perfectly natural to proceed by way of comparison and contrast. Upon closer examination, however, we come to understand that whenever one attempts



to draw comparisons between two philosophical views, there exists, prior to the comparison, an element of identity between the two views. The word «prior» here means that it is the essential condition for the possibility of the process of comparison. The same line of thinking also holds with regard to the relation of contrast. The process of contrast presupposes not identity but difference. More fundamentally, therefore, we find beneath the process of comparison and contrast the relations of identity and difference. We have learned, moreover, from such thinkers as Heraclitus, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, that, in reality, there is always identity within difference and difference within identity. By virtue of this insight, our thinking will follow a certain mode of comportment toward the topic. This mode is as follows. Instead of the process of compare and contrast, our thinking will attempt to reveal one essential element of identity between Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul, and one essential element of difference within this identity. More specifically, this essay will bring to light one element of difference within the identity of Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul as it is related to life.

1. The most striking identity between Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul is that, for both, the soul is, first and foremost, the primary source of life within a living body. This essential relation between the soul and life is articulated by Aristotle in two sections of *De Anima*¹. It is revealed within Aristotle's first definition of the soul²; and, it is revealed within his first outline of the nature of the soul³. Let us, therefore, consider first Aristotle's first definition of the soul. In his *De Anima*, Aristotle asserts:

«If then one is to find a definition which will apply to every soul, it will be the first actuality of a natural body possessed of organs⁴».

The most important word in this definition is «actuality». The word Aristotle actually uses here is «entelecheia». In Greek, the word means to enact a «telos» or end; to bring about the complete reality of something. Thus, the English words: completion, finishing, termination, ending, consummation and perfecting, convey the sense of the original best. With this understanding of the word «entelecheia» we can rewrite Aristotle's first definition of the soul as: the first enactment of the complete reality of a

1. ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul*, tr. W. S. HETT, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957.

2. *Ibid.*, (412 b 5) p. 69.

3. *Ibid.*, (415 a 9) p. 87.

4. *Ibid.*, (412 b 4) p. 69.

natural body possessed of organs. In this sense, for Aristotle, the soul is the first termination, end, perfection, realization, and consummation of the organic body. The soul is what first allows a body to be the completed reality of an organic body.

The second point to notice with respect to Aristotle's first definition of the soul is that, for Aristotle, the soul is the first actuality of «a natural body possessed of organs»⁵. This means among other things, that not all bodies have soul. Only those bodies which are natural bodies (products of nature) and which possess organs have soul. For Aristotle, a natural body possessed of organs is one which has potential life⁶. Further, not all matter harbors potential life, only natural organic bodies possess potential life. The heavenly bodies, for instance, do not have souls, for Aristotle, for they do not possess organs; and, hence, are not potentially living bodies. With such a restriction as to what kind of beings within which the soul resides (i.e., natural bodies with organs possessing potential life) all forms of «pan-psychism» which hold that all beings, insofar as they all partake in existence, possess soul, are ruled out. There can be no «world soul» for Aristotle, pervading the entire cosmos.

With what has been said thus far we can again rewrite Aristotle's first definition of the soul. The soul is the first complete reality (actuality) of a natural organic body possessed of potential life. In other words, for Aristotle, the soul is the first actuality of life within a body possessed of organs.

In the section of *De Anima* in question (415 b 9), Aristotle expresses the nature of soul as «the cause and first principle of a living body». In a footnote by W. S. Hett, translator of the Loeb edition of *De Anima*, we learn that by «cause» here, Aristotle has in mind cause («aitia») in the three senses of «aitia» distinguished in the *Metaphysics* (983 a 26). That is, as: (1) the essential nature of formal cause, (2) the source of movement or efficient cause, and (3) the final cause⁷. Hett's footnote makes sense, for it explains why Aristotle says right after his first statement concerning the nature of soul as the cause of the living body:

«The words cause and first principle are used in several separate senses. But the soul is equally the cause in each of the three senses which we have distinguished⁸...».

5. *Ibid.*, (412 b 5) p. 69.

6. *Ibid.*, (413 c 3) p. 71.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

8. *Ibid.*, (415 b 10) p. 87.

In this same paragraph Aristotle reasons why the soul is the cause of life in the sense of formal, final, and efficient cause. Soul is not the material cause of life, for it is non-material. In the light of Aristotle articulation of the nature of causality presented in his *Physics*⁹ and *Metaphysics*¹⁰ the following threefold determination of the essential nature of the soul can be established.

First, the soul is the formal cause of life within a potentially living body. This sense of cause means, for Aristotle, the essential form, or, archetype of life. In this sense of cause, soul is the essential definition of life. For Aristotle, the soul is the form of life itself.

Second, the soul is the efficient cause of life within a potentially living organic body. This means that the soul is the primary source which produces the effect of life, it means that the soul is that which first initiates change or motion in living bodies.

Third, the soul is the final cause of life within a potentially living organic body. This means, for Aristotle, that the soul is that «for the sake of which» a potentially living body is actualized. The soul is that for the «purpose» and «benefit» of which a potentially living natural organic body is actualized.

Taking these three determinations of Aristotle's conception of cause together with his first assertion of the nature of the soul and with his first definition of the soul, the following appears: for Aristotle, the soul is the primary source of life. It is that by which there is life in a natural organic living body.

2. As was previously asserted — there is a striking identity between Plato and Aristotle's conceptions of the soul and life. Our task, at this point, therefore, is to substantiate this assertion by showing that, for Plato also, the soul is the primary source of life within a living body. However, as we shall see, Plato's conception of a «living body» is quite different from Aristotle's.

That Plato thought the soul as the source of life can be seen in this passage of his *Phaedo*:

«Now answer, said he [Socrates]. What causes the body in which it is to be alive? — The soul, he [Cebes] replied. — Is this always the case? — Yes, said he [Cebes] of course. — Then if the soul takes possession of anything it always brings life to it [asserts Socrates]¹¹».

9. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, tr. Philip H. WICKSTEED and Francis M. CORNFORD, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980, Vol. I, Book II, Chapters 3 and 7.

10. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, tr. Hugh TREDENNICK, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980, Vol. I, Book I, Chapter 3.

11. PLATO, *Phaedo*, tr. Harold North FOWLER, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, Vol. I, (105 c 8) p. 363.



It is clear from this passage —one which is representative of a myriad of similar passages throughout Plato's work considered as a whole— that, for Plato, the soul is the source of life. This point is in direct accordance with Aristotle's conception of the soul as the formal cause of life. Generally speaking, Plato's *Phaedo* reveals the identity between his own and Aristotle's conception of the soul as the primary source (cause) of the life of a living body.

From this brief reflection upon the *Phaedo* we should not conclude that it is only in this dialogue that the soul is presented as the source of life. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that, in one way or another, all of Plato's dialogues are concerned with the nature of the soul; and, moreover, in each case, the soul is presented as the source of life. However, this is not to say that Plato and Aristotle both conceive of living things in an identical fashion. Within the identity of Plato and Aristotle's conception of the relation of soul to life there is a critical difference. It is this essential difference within the identity of these two philosophies of the soul that we must now examine.

3. For both Plato and Aristotle the soul is the source of life within living bodies. To this extent, with respect to the relation of soul to life, Plato's conception of the primary function is identical to Aristotle's. But this is as far as the identity extends. For Plato, unlike Aristotle, the soul is the source of life of the entire universe. Plato expands the essence of soul to encompass the human soul (in its threefold dimensions of the appetitive, spiritual, and rational capacities), the soul of the «polis» (with its tripartite aspects), and the cosmic or «world soul» as presented within the myth of the *Timaeus*. In order to substantiate our assertion that there is a critical difference between Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul, namely, a difference of the domain that the soul encompasses, we shall turn to book X of Plato's *Laws*.

In his *Laws* Plato presents, through a dialogue between an Athenian and a certain Clinias, ten different kinds of motion. The highest kind is said to be that which moves itself and all that partakes of existence. Here, the «highest source» of motion is spoken of as the «beginning» or «origin» of motion everywhere¹². This highest form of motion which is self-moving and life-engendering is, for Plato, none other than soul. This conception of the soul can be observed if we listen to a critical juncture within the dialogue

12. PLATO, *Laws*, tr. R. G. BUNY, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, Vol. II, Book X, (895 a-b) p. 333.



between the Athenian and Clinias. Let us, therefore, reproduce this juncture of the dialogue in full:

«What you ask me [Clinias] is, whether we are to speak of a thing as “alive” when it moves itself? — Yes [Athenian]. — It is alive, to be sure [says Clinias]. — Well then [says the Athenian], when we see soul in things, must we not equally agree that they are alive? — We must [replies Clinias]¹³».

Here, Plato is clear. The soul is self-moving and the source of life. This self-moving aspect of soul is found throughout Plato's dialogues taken as a whole. In the myth of the *Phaedrus*, for instance, the wings of the winged steeds and charioteer express this self-moving aspect of the soul¹⁴.

At this point, the dialogue proceeds into a consideration of the three most essential points to be noted about anything. These are: (1) the reality of the thing, or what the thing is, (2) the definition of this reality, and (3) its name¹⁵. Thus, there are two questions one can ask about anything which is. One can question the name of something when the definition has been already propounded; or, one can ask about the definition of something when the name is already known. After a brief digression concerning the nature of questioning, Plato has the Athenian ask about the definition of that which soul is the name. Thus, we hear the Athenian ask:

«What is the definition of that object which has for its name “soul?” Can we give it any other definition than that stated just now — “the motion able to move itself?” — [Clinias asks]: Do you assert that “self-movement” is the definition of that very same substance which has “soul” as the name we universally apply to it? — That is what I assert [replies the Athenian]¹⁶».

For Plato, the soul is the self-motion which sets all living things in motion. It is the cause of all generation and change, the source of the reality of life. For Plato, the soul is the universal cause of the life of the entire cosmos and this «pan-psychism» pervades the universe whose motion is akin to the motion, revolution, and calculations of the mind¹⁷. Here, we recall the

13. *Ibid.*, (895 c 3) p. 335.

14. PLATO, *Phaedrus*, tr. Harold North FOWLER, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977, (246 c 6), p. 473.

15. PLATO, *Laws*, tr. R. G. BUNY, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, Vol. II, Book X, (895 d 3), p. 335. See also PLATO'S, *Letters*, 7, 342 a, b.

16. *Ibid.*, (895 e 11 - 896 a 5) p. 337.

17. *Ibid.*, (897 c) p. 341.

earliest of the Occidental philosophical students of nature —Thales, who asserted that «all things are full of gods». This assertion is systematically denied by Aristotle in *De Anima*¹⁸. But if we follow the course of the idea of «pan-psychism» throughout the history of Pre-Socratic Philosophy, we can observe this worldview diminishing progressively, gradually depriving nature of the presence, power, and essence of divinity and of soul. In this regard, we are able to understand Plato's own pan-psychic conception of soul as an attempt to place the gods back into the nature of the cosmos. In his *Laws*, for example, Plato expresses Thales' original dictum in the words of the Athenian saying:

«Concerning all the stars and the moon, and concerning the years and months and all seasons, what other account shall we give than this very same, — namely, that, inasmuch as it has been shown that they are all caused by one or more souls, which are good also with all goodness, we shall declare these souls to be gods, whether it be that they order the whole heaven by residing in bodies, as living creatures, or whatever the move and method? Is there any man that agrees with this view who will stand hearing it denied that “all things are full of gods?”¹⁹».

Plato's conception of the soul, at the level of the «world soul», can be understood as being in accord with one of the central tasks of his life — to reverse the de-spiritualizing trend of Greek philosophy as far as possible, gathering together the human soul, the soul of the «polis», and the cosmic soul into a vision of the highest «Eidos»; and, therefore, respiritualizing the human, politic, and natural orders. Seen in this way, Plato's conception of the soul as the «universal cause» of all life can be understood as an attempt to recollect the lost «age of the gods», the «Golden Age of Chronos», but to recollect this age in a transfigured way. Plato's pan-psychism is an attempt to recast the despiritualizing philosophy of nature of his predecessors with the spirit of Thales' affirmation that «all things are full of gods». For Plato, all things are full of soul. To this the conception of the «world soul» in the *Timaeus* is a most significant testimony.

4. At this point we are in a position to present an essential element of difference within the identity of Plato and Aristotle's conception of the soul,

18. ARISTOTLE, *On The Soul*, tr. W. S. HETT, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, (411 a 7) p. 61.

19. PLATO, *Laws*, tr. R. G. BUNY, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, Vol. II, Book X, (899 b 3-11) p. 349.



and its relation to life. For Aristotle, the soul is the first actuality («entelecheia») of a potentially living organic natural body. It is the cause of life in the threefold sense presented earlier. But his conception of what kind of bodies possess potential life restricts his conception of soul to include only those bodies which are organic — that is, only those bodies which possess instruments for work are among the kind of matter which can embody soul. Herein lies the critical difference between Plato and Aristotle with respect to the soul and life. Plato spoke of the soul as expanding and pervading the entire universe; whereas for Aristotle the soul includes only the vegetative, animal and human orders, and all of the capacities of these orders. For Plato, the name soul meant, among other things, the identity of the natural, human, political, and cosmic orders; and, the tripartite division of each order in harmony with themselves and each other united with the «Eidos» of the highest Good. Aristotle, on the other hand, conceives of soul as the cause of life within organic natural bodies possessing potential life. Plato's conceptual image of the soul is a vision of a life engendering power which pervades the human, natural, cosmic and political spheres, the source of the life of the entire expanse of reality. Aristotle's conception of the soul, however, is restricted to being the cause of life within the vegetative, animal and human orders alone.

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ΠΛΑΤΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΗΣ ΣΧΕΤΙΚΑ ΜΕ ΤΗΝ ΨΥΧΗ

Περίληψη

Ἀναφορικά με τὴν ἔννοια τῆς ψυχῆς στὸν Πλάτωνα καὶ τὸν Ἀριστοτέλη διαπιστώνουμε ὅχι μόνο θεμελιώδεις ὁμοιότητες ἀλλὰ καὶ διαφορές.

(I) Ἡ βασικὴ ὁμοιότητα εἶναι ὅτι ἡ ψυχὴ εἶναι καὶ γιὰ τοὺς δύο φιλοσόφους πηγὴ ζωῆς. Εἰδικότερα, στὸν Ἀριστοτέλη ἡ ψυχὴ εἶναι αἰτία ζωῆς (ὡς *causa formalis*, *causa efficiens* καὶ *causa finalis*) μόνο τοῦ ὀργανικοῦ σώματος. Τὰ σώματα ποὺ δὲν εἶναι ὀργανικά, ὅπως λ.χ. τὰ οὐράνια σώματα, δὲν ἔχουν ψυχὴ. Μὲ τὸν περιορισμὸ αὐτὸ καταρρίπτεται ὁ ἰσχυρισμὸς ὅτι στὸν Ἀριστοτέλη ὅλα τὰ ὄντα ἐφόσον μετέχουν ὑπάρξεως ἔχουν ψυχὴ. Κατὰ συνέπεια δὲν μπορούμε νὰ μιλήσουμε γιὰ κοσμικὴ ψυχὴ στὸν Ἀριστοτέλη. Στὸν Πλάτωνα τὸ γεγονὸς ὅτι ἡ ψυχὴ εἶναι αἰτία ζωῆς



φαίνεται τόσο στὸ *Φαίδωνα* ὅσο και σὲ ἄλλους διαλόγους. Στὸν Πλάτωνα ὁμως ἡ ψυχὴ εἶναι βέβαια αἰτία ζωῆς ἀλλὰ ὄχι μόνο τοῦ ὀργανικοῦ σώματος. (*Τίμαιος*, *Νόμοι*, *Φαίδων*).

(II) Συνεπῶς, ἡ θεμελιώδης διαφορὰ μεταξὺ τῶν δύο φιλοσόφων σὲ ὅ,τι ἀφορᾷ τὴν ψυχὴ εἶναι ὅτι, γιὰ τὸν Ἀριστοτέλη, ἡ ψυχὴ εἶναι ἡ ἐντελέχεια τοῦ ὀργανικοῦ σώματος καὶ ἡ αἰτία ζωῆς μέσα σὲ αὐτό. Γιὰ τὸν Πλάτωνα ἀντίθετα ἡ ψυχὴ ἀποτελεῖ μία ἐννοιολογικὴ εἰκόνα ζωῆς καὶ δυνάμεως ποὺ διαπερνᾷ τὴν ἀνθρώπινη, φυσικὴ, κοσμικὴ καὶ πολιτικὴ σφαῖρα δηλαδὴ εἶναι ἡ πηγὴ ζωῆς ὁλόκληρου τοῦ «κόσμου».

Μετάφραση: Α. ΑΡΑΒΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ

