

## **Imagination and Inseparability of Soul and Body in Aristotle**

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### **Introduction**

In *De Anima* Aristotle claims that every affection of the soul seems to be an affection of the body as well. The only possible exception is reason which may be a faculty of the soul that does not require the physical body. This would mean that reasoning is independent of the body. But Aristotle also says that if reasoning requires imagination, which is a faculty of the soul that requires the body, then reasoning also requires the body. The most pressing issue, then, in interpreting Aristotle's views about the separability of mind and body is deciding whether or not reasoning requires imagination. Contrary to the impression left by some of his statements, Aristotle has an argument that ties mind and body: rational agency requires the imagination which is in turn necessarily embodied. First I invoke Miller's useful definition of *inseparability* and explain the argument, which one can find in Aristotle, for *inseparability*. The mind's power to sort the content of the imagination may suffice for conceptualization, even Aristotle glimpses this. But I cannot settle the question of how to cope with Aristotle's contending assertions and content myself with outlining a path perhaps not taken.

### **I. Inseparability of Soul and Body**

Given how Aristotle defines the soul, it seems that it would be impossible for the soul, or any of its capacities, to be separable from the body. Aristotle defines the soul as “the first actuality of a body that has life potentially” (*De Anima* 412a 27). In the beginning of Book II of *De Anima*

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(henceforth *DA*), Aristotle explains that there are three modes of being: matter which is a potentiality; then form, which is an actuality; and then the compound of matter and form. The compounds that Aristotle studies are those that are alive, i.e., plants and animals: “Every natural body which has life in it is a substance in the sense of a composite” (*DA* II 412a 9-11). As stated, these compounds are composed of matter and form which in the case of a living thing are the body and the soul. Aristotle explains that “The body cannot be soul; the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But substance is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body as above characterized” (*DA* 412a 17-21). Aristotle claims that the body is a potentiality and the soul is an actuality but specifies that there are two levels of actuality, first and second, and that the soul is in fact a first potentiality rather than a second actuality.

Aristotle explains these different kinds of actuality and potentiality by providing an analogy with the states of knowledge: “The word actuality has two senses corresponding respectively to the possession of knowledge and the actual exercise of knowledge” (*DA* 412a 21-22). One might be called a knower of a language in the sense that one: (a) is a human being, (b) has grammatical knowledge, and (c) is exercising this knowledge. Sense (a) is indicative of a first potentiality: having the *potential* to know something but not *actual* knowledge. Sense (b) is indicative of a second potentiality and also a first actuality: having some actual knowledge but not actually using it right now. Sense (c) is indicative of a second actuality: exercising knowledge actually. By this logic, a person may be a speaker of Greek but is not exercising her knowledge of Greek until she utters a sentence in Greek.

A grasp of the different kinds of potentiality and actuality enables us to understand how Aristotle uses them to describe the soul in *De Anima*. Aristotle

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describes the soul as a capacity to engage in the activity which corresponds to a second actuality. Based on Aristotle's definition of the soul as being the form of a living body and the first actuality of a body that has life potentially, these notions seem to suggest that what it is to be a soul is to be connected to the body. If the soul is the first actuality of a living body, then it follows that the soul can't be separable from the body. Thus the soul is the organization of matter which forms a living organism, and hence the soul cannot be separated from the matter it animates.

Aristotle presents several possible ways of construing the soul's relation to the body, one is by considering the relation between the body and the affections of the soul. In *De Anima* 1.1, Aristotle asks, "Are they all affections of the complex of body and soul, or is there any one among them peculiar to the soul by itself?" (*DA* 403a 1-3). He claims that if there is any way of acting or being acted upon that is unique to the soul, then the soul can be considered to have separate existence, otherwise not. In deciding the relationship between the soul and body, we must keep in mind that if an affection is not peculiar to the soul, this does not mean that it is peculiar to the body. Rather, this would mean that the affection would belong to the whole soul-body complex, i.e., the living thing. That being said, Aristotle provides conditions for the soul being separable or inseparable from the body. He states that in order to be separable from the body, the soul must be capable of acting or being acted upon separately from the body. On the other hand, the soul would be inseparable from the body if all capacities of the mind require the physical body in order to be actualized.

Aristotle begins his considerations of the relationship between the soul and body by acknowledging the possibility of the soul existing entirely without the body. He contends, "We can wholly dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as meaningless as to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one, or generally the matter of a

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thing and that of which it is the matter. Unity has many senses (as many as ‘is’ has), but the most proper and fundamental sense of both is the relation of an actuality to that of which it is the actuality” (*DA* 412b 5-8). Thus, we need not dwell on the question whether the soul and body are one.

Aristotle then moves to consider the possibility that the soul and body are inseparable from one another, but that the soul possesses separate active functions. Aristotle uses the analogy of straightness: a straight object “has many properties arising from the straightness in it, e.g., that of touching a bronze sphere at a point, though straightness divorced from the other constituents of the straight thing cannot touch it in this way; it cannot be so divorced at all, since it is always found in a body” (*DA* 403a13). According to this analogy we are able to study the properties of “the straight itself” despite the fact that they do not exist separately. It is a material straight thing that touches a bronze sphere, although we can also study straightness when a line touches a circle at only one point (non-material). Likewise, we can separately study attributes of the soul although they are not actually separate from the body.

Aristotle then moves to explain the last possible relationship between the soul and body: the affections of the soul are not peculiar to the soul alone but are reliant on the soul-and-body complex as a whole. In this case, the soul can only be affected by the physical body also being affected: “All the affections of the soul involve a body — passion, gentleness, fear, pity, courage, joy, loving, and hating; in all these there is a concurrent affection of the body” (*DA* 403a10-19). It is this possibility that Aristotle appears to be most compelled by, which I will demonstrate as we will delve into his argument further.

Aristotle explains that it seems that all of the capacities of the soul seem to require the body in order to function. The soul of a living thing can be understood as the capacity to engage in the activities necessary to that living being. Aristotle lists some of the capacities required in human beings in *DA* II.1

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and *DA* II.2, such as self-nourishment, growth, decay, movement and rest in respect to location, perception, and intellect. Thus, by enabling the body's ability to nourish itself, to grow, to move from place to place and by enabling the person to perceive and conceive, the soul actualizes the capacities of the body.

Aristotle states that most affections act in concert with the body, and thus the soul cannot be directly moved or affected without its physical living structure. He claims, "If we consider the majority of [the affections], there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e. g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally" (*DA* I 403a5-7). Aristotle provides an array of descriptions of how the affections of the soul require the body in order to be actualized.

Aristotle describes perception in great detail, discussing both the faculty itself and the individual senses. Evidently, his explanation of perception entails it is a faculty that requires the body. This is demonstrated in his claim, "Perception comes about with [an organ's] being changed and affected... for it seems to be a kind of alteration" (*DA* 416b 33-34). Given his description of perception as an alteration, Aristotle treats perceptions as interactions between two components: a suitable object that is capable of acting and the capacity to be affected. This interaction can occur in one of two ways. For example, an odor can affect something. By being placed in its vicinity, a sprig of rosemary might affect a bare piece of chicken breast, the chicken breast may come to take on the odor of the rosemary. Despite this affective interaction, we would not say the chicken breast perceives the odor of the rosemary. On the other hand, a human being affected by the same sprig of rosemary may perceive the odor. Thus, when human beings receive perceptual forms, they are perceiving something from their environment.

Based on this example, we can assert that our sense-perceptions are essentially about something outside ourselves; we can see the color blue, we can

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smell a cake baking, and we can feel the texture of grass. Because our perception requires the senses, i.e. sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, in order to detect stimuli from our surroundings, we can view the affections of perception as being spatio-temporally limited. That is, we can only perceive the kinds of things which our sensory-organs give us access to at a given instance. Based on the description Aristotle provides of perception and its requirement of the body's sensory organs, we can conclude that perception is a faculty of the soul that necessitates the body.

Imagination is another faculty of the soul that requires the body: the formation of images via imagination helps explain perceptual appearances. Aristotle claims that imagination "is not found without sensation" and can be considered to be a sort of weak form of perception (*DA* 427b 15). Imagination is similar to perception in that when the external object of perception recedes, the impressions persist and are themselves the objects of perception. Hence, if imagination is considered to be a weaker form of perception and it results from an alteration similar to perception, then the objects of perception that persist in the mind seem to also be the objects of imagination (Scheiter 257).

The similarities that Aristotle describes between perception and imagination allow us to assume the inseparability of the faculty of imagination from the body for it requires the same sensible forms to be observed from the environment that perceiving requires. The difference between imagination and perception is that to form images in our mind "lies within our power when we wish" (*DA* 427b 18). The imagination enables us to call up certain images when desired such as the image of our parents or our favorite food. Despite this difference, the fact remains that because we require perception, or perceptive forms specifically, in order to imagine, imagination is another faculty of the soul which requires the body.

Based on Aristotle's description of these capacities of the soul, we are

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led to believe that he deems the soul to be inseparable from the body. In fact, Aristotle analogizes the qualities of the soul and their relation to the body to the relation of straightness and a straight thing, “It therefore seems that all the affections of the soul involve a body – passion, gentleness, fear, pity, courage, joy, loving, and hating; in all these there is a concurrent affection of the body” (*DA* 403a 15-18). Such as in the case of anger for which Aristotle offers a physiological account. He defines anger as an emotion that entails a desire, accompanied by pain, for revenge caused by a perceived slight (*DA* 403a 20). This emotion occurs when the body’s sensory organs perceive something which triggers a feeling of aggravation. The desire for revenge occurs in concert with the body’s specific condition, characterized by boiling of the blood. Aristotle states that “It is obvious that the affections of the soul are emmattered formulable essences,” meaning that the soul is affectable through matter, that is, the body (*DA* 403a 24). Aristotle presumably intends to state that because its affections are what define the soul, and consequently the body as well, the affections can be described as being confined in matter as they are actualized.

Despite his many indications of the inseparability of the soul and the body, there are sections in *De Anima* that seem to suggest that there is a possible exception. Aristotle states that not the whole soul but at least the soul’s rational agency may be separable from the body. If this is the case, then we must consider what this would entail for the living being. In regard to the inseparability of the soul, Aristotle states that “thinking seems the most probable exception” (*DA* 403a 8). In order to explain this supposed exception Aristotle examines the distinction between thinking and the other powers. To function the mind’s ability to reason does not require sensory organs, we can think at any moment we please with any perceptible form in front of us. Aristotle distinguishes thought from other characteristics of the soul, or the “distinction between the impassibility of the sensitive and that of the intellective faculty,” by

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describing how living things react to a strong stimulation (*DA* 429a 30). Certain affections of the soul, such as emotions or perceptions, cannot be actualized without the senses whilst the soul's rational agency does not require sensory organs - making it the intellective faculty.

If we hear a loud noise, we are not able to hear very well afterwards; but in the case of the mind (where the soul thinks and judges), "thought about an object that is highly intelligible renders it more and not less able afterwards" (*DA* 429b 4). This is because the faculty of perception is dependent on the body, whereas reason Aristotle seems to claim is independent of it. Thinking is conducted without the spatio-temporal restraints that are imposed upon perception and the other faculties of the mind that utilize the sensory organs. Thus, the intellect is not limited by a bodily organ in the way that other affections of the soul are. We will delve into this specific distinction between reasoning and perception in greater detail later in the paper.

### **II. *Ontological Separability***

In what respect are the soul and its parts alleged to be (or not to be) separate or separable? This question is a pressing issue because Aristotle does not always specify what he means by *separable* which can give rise to confusion in interpretation and difficulty in grasping his stance on the relationship between the mind and body. Fred D. Miller offers four definitions of separability that Aristotle may intend in his writings: *spatial*, *definitional*, *taxonomical* and *ontological separability*. As interesting as his discussions are, our focus is on *ontological separability*.

Substances, including compounds of matter and form, are ontologically separable when X is able to exist without Y, and so, X could exist even if Y were destroyed (Miller 309). Consider *inseparability* first: Miller cites Aristotle's comment on *straightness*: "It will be like what is straight, which has many properties arising from the straightness in it, e.g. that of touching a bronze



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sphere at a point, though straightness divorced from the other constituents of the straight thing cannot touch it in this way; it cannot be so divorced at all, since it is always found in a body” (*DA* 403a 10-15). A concrete straight thing is a matter-form compound; it can touch a bronze sphere at a point but the straightness *in itself* cannot touch in this way. Actual straightness is always found in the body of the thing. Thus, a straight line fails the criterion of ontological separability since its straightness cannot be separated from the matter-form compound.

Now consider Aristotle's claim that the soul is the actualization of the body; he states,

From this it indubitably follows that the soul is inseparable from its body, or at any rate that certain parts of it are (if it has parts) – for the actuality of some of them is nothing but the actualities of their bodily parts. Yet some may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at all. Further, we have no light on the problem whether the soul may not be the actuality of its body in the sense in which the sailor is the actuality of the ship (*DA* 413a 1-9).

Hence, the inseparability of the soul and body can be illustrated by the thought that a boat is not *actually* a sail boat without its sailors, in the same sense that seeing is inseparable from a living eye. Or consider the bugs: In *DA* 413b 14-16 Aristotle says,

Just as in the case of plants some plainly live when divided and separated from each other, since the soul in them is in actuality one in each plant, but they are potentially many, so we also see it happen in other varieties of soul in the case of insects cut in two; for each of the parts has perception and locomotion, and if perception, then also imagination and desire; for where there is perception, there is also pain and pleasure, and where these, necessarily also appetite (*DA* 413b 16-24).

As Miller frames it, “The insect’s faculties of perception, locomotion, imagination, and desire are spatially and ontologically inseparable” (Miller 313).

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Generally, the soul is ontologically inseparable from the body to the extent that certain functions of the soul cannot be actualized without corresponding bodily parts. Thus, if certain components of the body were destroyed, then certain functions of the soul would be destroyed also.

The *soul* is inseparable from the body but what about *reasoning*, the soul's rational agency? I think it is questionable that the notion of ontological separability applies to the faculty of *reasoning*. If imagination is a condition of reasoning, it doesn't seem plausible that reason is ontologically separable given all the places Aristotle says imagination is essential to the ability to *use* concepts. On the other hand consider that we do not grasp the object of reasoning with a particular body part the way we do with perception. To be sure, Aristotle localizes perception in a particular body part, the heart. But *reasoning*, it may seem, doesn't require a *particular* body part.

But Aristotle also maintains that while the intellect enables thinking, “[I]n the soul which is called mind (by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges) is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing” (*DA* 429a 22-23). In *De Anima* iii 5 he says, the mind is “separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality” (*DA* iii 5, 430a17–18)<sup>1</sup>. But much speaks against holding that *reasoning* is separable from the body. It is dependent on the body in so far as it is dependent upon the body's capacities. It seems reasoning cannot exist without the body because it requires perception in order to facilitate imagination. We have to try to disentangle this.

### **III. The Role of Imagination in Thinking**

Soul and body are not ontologically separable; the soul depends on the body. It is true that Aristotle provides compelling reason to hold mind is

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1 A nice summary of this difficult material can be found in Christopher Shields's article in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/active-mind.html>.

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separate from body, but he provides even more convincing evidence that it is not. Let's briefly explore the why not.

Aristotle insinuates that the mind needs the imagination; he writes, “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 the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally.” However he adds, “Thinking seems the most probable exception...” (*DA I 403a 5-8*). But directly following the suggestion that thought is an exception, he states, “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” (*DA 403a 7-10*). This statement in itself provides strong evidence that thought requires the body in some way; exactly why does imagination necessitate this?

Aristotle states that imagination “must be necessarily incapable of existing apart from sensation, incapable of existing except when we perceive” (*DA 428b 15*). Thus, although imagination is not the same faculty as perception, it does require the senses. Imagination does not perform its own discriminating or creating, rather, it utilizes images that result from motions through a medium that reaches the sense-organs. Thus, imagination only offers food for thought that has been provided through sensation (*DA 428b10-14*). Based on this reasoning, we should conclude that thought requires the body in order to act.

We can consider two forms of imagery that enable thinking: imagery that allows us to *acquire* a concept and imagery that allows us to *recall* a concept. The first was described in the previous paragraph, imagination which uses perceptible forms from our surroundings to reflect images in our mind. Aristotle states that “imagination remain in the organs of sense and resemble sensations” (*DA 429a 4*). Thus, the images that allow us to acquire concepts are based on observable inputs from our environment and provide us with material for thought and reasoning.

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The latter kind of imagery, involved in the recollection of a concept, is captured by Aristotle's remark in *De Memoria*, that "without images, thinking is impossible" (*De Memoria* 431a 14-17). Although one may think that arithmetic proofs require nothing other than pure reasoning, Aristotle claims that in thinking of the abstract triangle, "Though we do not make any use of the fact that the triangle is determinate, [we] nevertheless draw it determinate in quantity" (*DA* 450a 2-3). Thus, in visualizing a triangle, we give the image a determinate size and shape despite the fact that the determinate size might not be of any importance to us. One cannot help but imagine something determinate even when considering some abstract matter. Hence, we require a perceptible basis for our thoughts. We refer back to these perceptible forms when we reason about things that are not right in front of us, around us, etc. Thus, we are able to reason at any time, whether it be based on our interpretations of perceptible forms in real time, i.e. the formation of a concept, or based on things we have already perceived and are stored in our memory.

But according to Caleb Cohoe, understanding reflects the ability to fully grasp the essence of something, a universal applies to particular instances, while perception merely reflects having *some* grasp of what something is about without actually grasping its essence (Cohoe 354). Perception is thus limited to cognizing objects of the various senses, such as color, sound, and odor, and the objects common to multiple senses, such as shape or size. The cognitive power of perception utilizes the sense-organs in order to take into our mind a sensible form without matter. However, unlike the power of perception, the intellect does not have a bodily organ through which it operates. Aristotle boldly claims that the intellect can understand all things, that is, we can understand something without ever having perceived it. No physical structure could enable a bodily part or combination of parts to act as an organ of understanding, able to produce or determine the full range of forms that the human intellect can understand

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(Cohoe 348). We can understand things that do not have distinctive material characteristics and thus could not be cognized through a bodily organ; for instance, “the number two, humanity, redness, and belief” are beyond the range of perception because it is restricted to grasping spatio-temporal particulars (Cohoe 349). Intellect does not face this limitation. When we understand something, we are able to grasp the form itself, not just a particular instance of that form.

Cohoe illuminates the difference between perception and understanding further by considering the cognitive capacities of mammals. Aristotle believed that non-human mammals retain their perceptions in memory and even anticipate future encounters through imaginative associations. However, animals are limited by their inability to *understand* what they are perceiving. A sheep can perceive the greenness of grass and associate this visual cue of green grass with a pleasant taste. However, a sheep cannot know what green is or what grass is (Cohoe 356). In sum, Cohoe argues Aristotle believes the mind and body are separate because intellect lacks the bodily restrictions of perception.

Cohoe makes a compelling argument for the mind and body being separable, based on the notion that no bodily structure could enable grasping the full range of forms that the human intellect can conceive. However, I would argue that even if we accept his reconstruction of Aristotle's thought that the human intellect can understand the essence of all things, this does not mean imagination and recollection are not essential to cognition. I think that Aristotle has the resources for an argument that understanding concepts such as “unity, matter, being, humanity, and evil”, which Cohoe claims are beyond the cognitive power of perception (Cohoe 366), requires utilizing images. I say he “has the resources” but not that he consistently makes use of them. Aristotle's views here are very ambiguous and he *does* sometimes speak of understanding the *forms* of things as involving Platonic extrasensory conception, but he doesn't

have to.

Aristotle could argue that understanding can generalize from like beings or like aspects of beings to a type. Remember we quoted him as saying, “Though we do not make any use of the fact that the triangle is determinate, [we] nevertheless draw it determinate in quantity” [DA 450a 2-3]. The *abstract* concept of triangle we have before our “mind's eye” is a determinate *image* of a *determinate* triangle but “we do not make any use of the fact.” We are able to generalize from images *qua* particulars to an image *qua* type where the difference is in our use of the images. Thus even abstract conceptualization involves the imaginary and for creatures such as us there may be no other option. Based on this rationale, it is impossible to access a concept without using imagination. Even abstract ideas, which do not have one objective perceptual image, require the imagination and recollection as the basis of understanding.

But is this the right way to read Aristotle? There are texts that speak against it. In my construal the mind or intellect, to be active, must be embodied but Aristotle says, for instance, “We must inquire whether any [form] survives afterward. For in some cases nothing prevents this, for example if the soul is of this sort – not all soul but mind (*nous*), for perhaps it is impossible for the entire soul to survive” (*Met.* xii 3, 1070a24–6). And what should we say about Aristotle's God who is all intellect and no body? I am satisfied arguing that most consistent with his views about *animals* such as us is the idea that intellect must be embodied and contrary to Cohoe that its embodiment is not incompatible with its intellectual agency.

## **Conclusion**

Aristotle's logic as he describes the attributes of the soul, specifically imagination, and the relation of these faculties to the body imply the soul is inseparable from the body. This is in virtue of the fact that imagination is a

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condition of the soul's faculty of reason which can be understood as emerging from associative imaging processes that enable us to conceive abstract objects. To briefly reflect on the relevance of this discussion, I conclude with Aristotle's view about why we study the relation between the soul and the body,

When we are able to give an account conformable to experience of all or most of the properties of a substance, we shall be in the most favourable position to say something worth saying about the essential nature of that subject; in all demonstration a definition of the essence is required as a starting-point, so that definitions which do not enable us to discover the derived properties, or which fail to facilitate even a conjecture about them, must obviously, one and all, be dialectical and futile (*DA* 402b 21-27).

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