Lecture 5

Aristotle’s Concept of Soul

About the Lecture: The concept of soul is central to the study of the principle of life in Aristotle. In fact soul itself is the principle of life. The concept of life is conceptualized looking at different functions of the living organisms. For Aristotle, soul is the essence of life and is coextensive with life. It signifies the activities of living beings correspond to life of plants, insects, beasts and human beings. In this lecture we discuss how all these organisms embody soul.

Keywords: Potency, Actualization, Life, Reflective Awareness, Content, Movement, Material Cause, Efficient Cause, Formal Cause and Final Cause.

Soul is the principle of life. The concept of life is conceptualized looking at different functions of the living organisms. For Aristotle, soul is the essence of life and is coextensive with life. It signifies the activities of living beings correspond to life of plants, insects, beasts and human beings. All these organisms embody soul. That is, soul bears a set of capacities – power through which the organic and the inorganic activities are performed. In the case of plants, the capacity could be understood in terms of the power of nutrition. The plants have soul but not sensation. In the case of insects and animals we find not only nutritional abilities but also the sense-perception. Whereas, the capacity of thinking, willing, experiencing, performing voluntary action, and imagination are the additional capacities of the soul of human beings along with the power of nutrition and sense perception. The soul of the human beings thus has the capacity to grow, perceive and think. In this connection, one can find how there are different ways in which the life has been actualized.1

‘Aristotle emphasizes that the actualization of life to be understood in terms of its continuity, rather than differences, between processes in plants than the processes in human beings.’ Life itself is an actualization. It is the internal cause of change. Actualization itself is a disposition. In other words, the actualization of life in different forms presupposes that life exists potentially in the very nature of things. Thus, Aristotle draws a distinction between potency and actualization. The actualized resides in the state of potential. Life represents movement from the potential to the

actual. For Aristotle, there is a causal process involved in showing the transition from the potential existence of life to its actualization. This causal process is explained with reference to four kinds of causation. They are: the material cause, formal cause, efficient cause and the final cause.

The Material cause refers to matter in its pure state of existence, e.g. wood, clay, etc. Matter, for Aristotle, is necessarily or in itself not something (this). It is basically conceived as stuff, out of which a thing is produced. When something is produced then it gets an individual identity – this is a pot. The shape or the form gives identity to an object. Aristotle denies the division between form and content, which is advocated by Plato. For Plato, forms are independent of particulars (a particular object). Nevertheless the forms only participate in the particulars. They have two different kinds of ontological status, as they exist in two separate realms. However, Aristotle argues that life as a substance is a combination of both matter and form. The matter is potentiality and form is actualization. The conceptualization of the potential structure of the matter, Aristotle introduces the notion of formal cause. That is, the basic structure (pattern)/ form of the matter. Every material body or a particular assumes a structure when it is being made. So the process of making an object or to show that how an object is being made, we need to understand the basic form of the matter. For instance, to make a pot, the potter needs to conceptualize the very form of clay (material cause) out of which a pot can be designed or made. The existing things in the nature have a formal structure. Unlike Plato the primacy to the notion of form is not overemphasized, rather the form is found to be inseparably connected to the material body. However, the change in the material stuff or the body is initiated by an efficient cause. The efficient cause is the source of initiating change. The efficient cause, in the above example of making the pot, is the potter. The potter brings about the thing. According to Aristotle, the role of an efficient cause is significant as it starts the process of bringing change in the very domain of the material body – the stuff. The efficient cause thus intervenes while being engaged in the process of making something. The intervention of the agent persists for a period and then the agent withdraws himself/ herself from the causal process. That is to say the causal process continues to be there till the product is finally being made. Highlighting this aspect of the process of production, Aristotle brings in the notion of final

---

2 Ibid., 67
cause which signifies the very purpose or the end of something. In other words, every object is being made with a purpose. The purpose of making a pot lies in the function of the pot.

The concept of actuality is present in two levels. For instance, we have discussed earlier that human beings are knowledge seeking beings. A human being is therefore a potential knower. Human beings possess the ability to learn and express knowledge in words. Expression of knowledge is different from having the potentiality to acquire knowledge. This could be also illustrated with reference to the notion of language acquisition. The ability to learn language is a first level actuality, whereas ability to correct a grammatically error expressions is a second level actuality. At the first level the thoughts are just expressed, and in the second level, the person is conscious of the fact that how to speak correctly or to correct a sentence.

However, we need to have some clarity on the nature of natural bodies and the conscious mind. For Aristotle, every natural body which shares life is a substance. The natural substance is of two types: Nature in Physics which includes the things that exist in nature, e.g. animals, plants, and simple elements. And, things that exist by other causes include artefact, such as, clock, a bed, etc. – that exists by art. The human beings are living natural bodies. The body and the soul/ the conscious mind stand to each other as matter to form. ‘The soul is not an attribute of the body; rather the soul is substance in the sense of form of a natural body which potentially partakes of life.’\textsuperscript{3} The soul is the first level of actualization of the natural body. The organic body only uses its own parts as means of nutrition – ‘a plant uses its roots like a mouth to take food.’ In the second level actualization if the essence or the substance is separated then the object loses its identity. In the living human body the soul is the substance or essence without which the body loses its identity. Examples: the essence of an axe lies in the function of cutting. Or, the essence of the eye(s) represented in the form of sight. Here, sight and the function of cutting are considered as substance – the soul of things, without which the existence of the object is meaningless.

According to Aristotle, the ensouled things are distinguished by living, and the life is manifested in many forms.

1. Intellect

\textsuperscript{3} Frederick D Miller “Aristotle’s Philosophy of Soul,” \textit{Review of Metaphysics,} Vol. 53, No. 2 1999, p.312
2. Perception
3. Locomotion and rest
4. Nutritive movement, growth and decay. (plants)

Animals lack intellect whereas the plants have only the capacity of nutritive movement. Distinct species have distinct powers. Miller says, “A complete account of soul must include an account of each powers and in addition explain their interlocking relationships.” Aristotle complains that these philosophers (Plato and Pythagoreans) contended that soul could be fitted into a body without explaining the cause or the condition of the body into which it is allegedly entered. Each body has a peculiar form. “… soul is the actuality of the body…the actualization of each thing naturally comes to be in that which has the potentiality (for it) and in the appropriate matter.” However, for Aristotle, the soul is basically material/biological. “The body stands to soul as the matter stands to form.” The leading way is the process of actualization, i.e., the process in which \( x \) becomes \( y \). So, ‘the soul is the actualization of the body as the sailor is the actualization of the ship.’

So far as the intellectual ability of human mind is concerned, Aristotle maintains that consciousness is intrinsic to the mental life and has higher order function. The soul is consciousness. The intrinsic feature of consciousness exhibits the intentional attitude of the mind. Being intentional shows that human beings are not just conscious like other animals are aware of things in the world. Aristotle holds that animals do have the capacity of awareness, i.e., being aware of something, but they ‘are not aware of what they are about.’ In other words, human beings are aware of their own mental states; aware of the content of the thoughts. This awareness is self-reflexive and immediate. The reflexive form of awareness shows that we are conscious of the very content of thought. Hence this form of consciousness is not merely intentional, rather being is conscious of its intentional engagement. For instance, \( x \) is seeing the cloud. The act of seeing is an intentional act, could be performed by any conscious beings. But so far as the human perceptual abilities are concerned, the being perceives the fact that it is seeing/ perceiving things. That is, to be aware of one’s own act of perceiving. “Aristotle always

---

4 Ibid., p.315
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p.316
asserts that we perceive that we see, never that we see that we see.”

Seeing is a sensory activities, could be causally explainable, whereas perception is complex intellectual act. In the case of perceptual awareness, the person knows what is taking place. In other words, perceptual awareness is attached to experience which is shown in the case of change that one undergoes while perceiving something. This awareness is immediate and transparent; higher order function of consciousness. The notion of transparency shows the evidence of direct knowledge. For instance, when ‘I perceive could,’ the perceptible object is same as the activity of perceptible. From this Caston infers ‘Aristotle’s commitment to some form of direct realism.’ Further this notion of transparency also provides clue to understand reflexive awareness. Caston writes, “...reflexive awareness is both intrinsic and immediate, occurring without the intervention of further acts, causal relations, representation or inferences. And, yet there remains a kind of indirectness about it. We are not aware of the act itself in the same way that we are aware of its primary object. Thus, while we can be said to perceive that we see, it will not be exactly like perceiving an object.” The impression of an indirect relationship is shown to highlight that conscious mind has two levels of functions. At the primary level it is directly attached to all kinds of functions of external senses, and at the secondary level the mind reflects upon the primary ones. Thus it appears to have some kind of indirect relations, but in reality it is immediate. The notion of immediate awareness is also explainable with reference to the notion of introspection in the Cartesian tradition. Introspection is the inner sense of the mind; through which one synthesize the various forms of activities. Caston does illustrate on this point that there is an inner sense distinct from the outer function of different activities of the senses. Thus the Aristotle’s notion of mind has a sense of inner which could be expressed in the form of reflexive consciousness.

References:


---

8 Ibid., p.779
9 Ibid., p.757
10 Ibid., p.778
11 Ibid., p.783
12 Ibid., p.787