

Aristotle – *On the Soul*

Book II, Chapter 3

1 Of the psychic powers above enumerated some kinds of living things, as we have said, 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. Plants have none but the first, the nutritive,
while another order of living things has this plus the sensory. If any order of living things has the
5 sensory, it must also have the appetitive; for appetite is the genus of which desire, passion, and wish
are the species; now all animals have one sense at least, viz. touch, and whatever has a sense has the
capacity for pleasure and pain and therefore has pleasant and painful objects present to it, and
wherever these are present, there is desire, for desire is just appetite of what is pleasant. Further, all
animals have the sense for food ...

10 Certain kinds of animals possess in addition the power of locomotion, and still another order of
animate beings, i.e. man and possibly another order like man or superior to him, the power of
thinking, i.e. mind. It is now evident that a single definition can be given of soul only in the same
sense as one can be given of figure. For, as in that case there is no figure distinguishable and apart
15 from triangle, &c., so here there is no soul apart from the forms of soul just enumerated. It is true
that a highly general definition can be given for figure which will fit all figures without expressing the
peculiar nature of any figure. So here in the case of soul and its specific forms. Hence it is absurd in
this and similar cases to demand an absolutely general definition which will fail to express the
peculiar nature of anything that is, or again, omitting this, to look for separate definitions
20 corresponding to each infima (lowest) species. The cases of figure and soul are exactly parallel; for the
particulars subsumed under the common name in both cases—figures and living beings—constitute a
series, each successive term of which potentially contains its predecessor, e.g. the square the triangle,
the sensory power the self-nutritive. Hence we must ask in the case of each order of living things,
What is its soul, i.e. What is the soul of plant, animal, man? ... the facts are that the power of
25 perception is never found apart from the power of self-nutrition, while-in plants-the latter is found

1 isolated from the former. Again, no sense is found apart from that of touch, while touch is found by
itself; many animals have neither sight, hearing, nor smell. Again, among living things that possess
sense some have the power of locomotion, some not. Lastly, certain living beings-a small minority-
possess calculation and thought, for (among mortal beings) those which possess calculation have all
5 the other powers above mentioned, while the converse does not hold-indeed some live by
imagination alone, while others have not even imagination. The mind that knows with immediate
intuition presents a different problem.

It is evident that the way to give the most adequate definition of soul is to seek in the case of each of
10 its forms for the most appropriate definition.

Chapter 4

15 It is necessary for the student of these forms of soul first to find a definition of each, expressive of
what it is, and then to investigate its derivative properties, etc. But if we are to express what each is,
viz. what the thinking power is, or the perceptive, or the nutritive, we must go farther back and first
give an account of thinking or perceiving, for in the order of investigation the question of what an
20 agent does precedes the question, what enables it to do what it does. If this is correct, we must on the
same ground go yet another step farther back and have some clear view of the objects of each; thus
we must start with these objects, e.g. with food, with what is perceptible, or with what is intelligible.

25 It follows that first of all we must treat of nutrition and reproduction, for the nutritive soul is found
along with all the others and is the most primitive and widely distributed power of soul, being
indeed that one in virtue of which all are said to have life. The acts in which it manifests itself are
reproduction and the use of food-reproduction, I say, because for any living thing that has reached
its normal development and which is un mutilated, and whose mode of generation is not
30 spontaneous, the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an
animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and
divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever
their nature renders possible. The phrase 'for the sake of which' is ambiguous; it may mean either (a)
the end to achieve which, or (b) the being in whose interest, the act is done. [**Alternate Translation:**
that for the sake of which is twofold: that which and that for which.] Since then no living thing is
35 able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance (for nothing perishable

1 can for ever remain one and the same), it tries to achieve that end in the only way possible to it, and success is possible in varying degrees; so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual but continues its existence in something like itself-not numerically but specifically one.

5 The soul is the cause or source of the living body. The terms cause and source have many senses. But the soul is the cause of its body alike in all three senses which we explicitly recognize. It is (a) the source or origin of movement, it is (b) the end, it is (c) the essence of the whole living body.

10 That it is the last, is clear; for in everything the essence is identical with the ground of its being, and here, in the case of living things, their being is to live, and of their being and their living the soul in them is the cause or source. Further, the actuality of whatever is potential is identical with its formulable essence [**Alternate Translation:** Moreover, the actuality of a being in potency is the account.]

15 It is manifest that the soul is also the final cause of its body. For Nature, like mind, always does whatever it does for the sake of something, which something is its end. To that something corresponds in the case of animals the soul and in this it follows the order of nature; all natural bodies are organs of the soul. This is true of those that enter into the constitution of plants as well as of those which enter into that of animals. This shows that that the sake of which they are is soul. We must here recall the two senses of 'that for the sake of which', viz. (a) the end to achieve which, and
20 (b) the being in whose interest, anything is or is done.

We must maintain, further, that the soul is also the cause of the living body as the original source of local movement. The power of locomotion is not found, however, in all living things. But change of
25 quality and change of quantity are also due to the soul. Sensation is held to be a qualitative alteration, and nothing except what has soul in it is capable of sensation. The same holds of the quantitative changes which constitute growth and decay; nothing grows or decays naturally except what feeds itself, and nothing feeds itself except what has a share of soul in it...

30 Nutrition and reproduction are due to one and the same psychic power. It is necessary first to give precision to our account of food, for it is by this function of absorbing food that this psychic power is distinguished from all the others. The current view is that what serves as food to a living thing is what is contrary to it-not that in every pair of contraries each is food to the other: to be food a contrary must not only be transformable into the other and vice versa, it must also in so doing
35 increase the bulk of the other. ...

1 Since nothing except what is alive can be fed, what is fed is the besouled body and just because it has
soul in it. Hence food is essentially related to what has soul in it. Food has a power which is other
than the power to increase the bulk of what is fed by it; so far forth as what has soul in it is a
quantum, food may increase its quantity, but it is only so far as what has soul in it is a 'this-
5 somewhat' or substance that food acts as food; in that case it maintains the being of what is fed, and
that continues to be what it is so long as the process of nutrition continues. Further, it is the agent in
generation, i.e. not the generation of the individual fed but the reproduction of another like it; the
substance of the individual fed is already in existence; the existence of no substance is a self-
generation but only a self-maintenance.

10 Hence the psychic power which we are now studying may be described as that which tends to
maintain whatever has this power in it of continuing such as it was, and food helps it to do its work.
That is why, if deprived of food, it must cease to be.

15 The process of nutrition involves three factors, (a) what is fed, (b) that wherewith it is fed, (c) what
does the feeding; of these (c) is the first soul, (a) the body which has that soul in it, (b) the food. But
since it is right to call things after the ends they realize, and the end of this soul is to generate
another being like that in which it is, the first soul ought to be named the reproductive soul. The
expression (b) 'wherewith it is fed' is ambiguous just as is the expression 'wherewith the ship is
20 steered'; that may mean either (i) the hand or (ii) the rudder, i.e. either (i) what is moved and sets in
movement, or (ii) what is merely moved. We can apply this analogy here if we recall that all food
must be capable of being digested, and that what produces digestion is warmth; that is why
everything that has soul in it possesses warmth.

25 We have now given an outline account of the nature of food; further details must be given in the
appropriate place.

30 Chapter 5

Having made these distinctions let us now speak of sensation in the widest sense. Sensation depends,
as we have said, on a process of movement or affection from without, for it is held to be some sort of
change of quality...

1 '...to be a sentient' means either (a) to have a certain power or (b) to manifest a certain activity. To
begin with, for a time, let us speak as if there were no difference between (i) being moved or affected,
and (ii) being active, for movement is a kind of activity-an imperfect kind, as has elsewhere been
explained. Everything that is acted upon or moved is acted upon by an agent which is actually at
5 work. Hence it is that in one sense, as has already been stated, what acts and what is acted upon are
like, in another unlike, i.e. prior to and during the change the two factors are unlike, after it like.

But we must now distinguish not only between what is potential and what is actual but also different
senses in which things can be said to be potential or actual; up to now we have been speaking as if
10 each of these phrases had only one sense. We can speak of something as 'a knower' either (a) as when
we say that man is a knower, meaning that man falls within the class of beings that know or have
knowledge, or (b) as when we are speaking of a man who possesses a knowledge of grammar; each of
these is so called as having in him a certain potentiality, but there is a difference between their
respective potentialities, the one (a) being a potential knower, because his kind or matter is such and
15 such, the other (b), because he can in the absence of any external counteracting cause realize his
knowledge in actual knowing at will. This implies a third meaning of 'a knower' (c), one who is
already realizing his knowledge-he is a knower in actuality and in the most proper sense is knowing,
e.g. this A. Both the former are potential knowers, who realize their respective potentialities, the one
(a) by change of quality, i.e. repeated transitions from one state to its opposite under instruction, the
20 other (b) by the transition from the inactive possession of sense or grammar to their active exercise.
The two kinds of transition are distinct.

Also the expression 'to be acted upon' has more than one meaning; it may mean either (a) the
extinction of one of two contraries by the other, or (b) the maintenance of what is potential by the
25 agency of what is actual and already like what is acted upon, with such likeness as is compatible with
one's being actual and the other potential. For what possesses knowledge becomes an actual knower
by a transition which is either not an alteration of it at all (being in reality a development into its
true self or actuality) or at least an alteration in a quite different sense from the usual meaning.
[Alternate Translation: Nor is suffering simple, but one sort is a certain destruction due to the
30 contrary, another sort is rather the saving of a being in potency by a being in actuality, and by
something similar in the way that potency is in relation to actuality. For the one having knowledge
comes to be considering, which change is either not altering (for the progress is into itself and into
actuality) or is a different kind of alteration.]

1 Hence it is wrong to speak of a wise man as being 'altered' when he uses his wisdom, just as it would be absurd to speak of a builder as being altered when he is using his skill in building a house.

5 What in the case of knowing or understanding leads from potentiality to actuality ought not to be called teaching but something else. That which starting with the power to know learns or acquires knowledge through the agency of one who actually knows and has the power of teaching either (a) ought not to be said 'to be acted upon' at all or (b) we must recognize two senses of alteration, viz. (i) the substitution of one quality for another, the first being the contrary of the second, or (ii) the development of an existent quality from potentiality in the direction of fixity or nature.

10 ...Actual sensation corresponds to the stage of the exercise of knowledge. But between the two cases compared there is a difference; the objects that excite the sensory powers to activity, the seen, the heard, &c., are outside. The ground of this difference is that what actual sensation apprehends is individuals, while what knowledge apprehends is universals, and these are in a sense within the soul. That is why a man can exercise his knowledge when he wishes, but his sensation does not depend upon himself a sensible object must be there. A similar statement must be made about our knowledge of what is sensible-on the same ground, viz. that the sensible objects are individual and external.

20 A later more appropriate occasion may be found thoroughly to clear up all this. At present it must be enough to recognize the distinctions already drawn; a thing may be said to be potential in either of two senses, (a) in the sense in which we might say of a boy that he may become a general or (b) in the sense in which we might say the same of an adult, and there are two corresponding senses of the term 'a potential sentient'. There are no separate names for the two stages of potentiality; we have pointed out that they are different and how they are different. We cannot help using the incorrect terms 'being acted upon or altered' of the two transitions involved. As we have said, has the power of sensation is potentially like what the perceived object is actually; that is, while at the beginning of the process of its being acted upon the two interacting factors are dissimilar, at the end the one acted upon is assimilated to the other and is identical in quality with it.

Chapter 6

In dealing with each of the senses we shall have first to speak of the objects which are perceptible by each. The term 'object of sense' covers three kinds of objects, two kinds of which are, in our language, directly perceptible, while the remaining one is only incidentally perceptible. Of the first two kinds one (a) consists of what is perceptible by a single sense, the other (b) of what is perceptible by any and all of the senses. I call by the name of special object of this or that sense that which cannot be perceived by any other sense than that one and in respect of which no error is possible; in this sense colour is the special object of sight, sound of hearing, flavour of taste. Touch, indeed, discriminates more than one set of different qualities. Each sense has one kind of object which it discerns, and never errs in reporting that what is before it is colour or sound (though it may err as to what it is that is coloured or where that is, or what it is that is sounding or where that is.) [**Alternate Translation:** But each sense discerns these things, and does not err that this is color nor that it is sound, but about what or where the colored is, or what or where the sounding is.] Such objects are what we propose to call the special objects of this or that sense.

'Common sensibles' are movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude; these are not peculiar to any one sense, but are common to all. There are at any rate certain kinds of movement which are perceptible both by touch and by sight.

We speak of an incidental object of sense where e.g. the white object which we see is the son of Diares; here because 'being the son of Diares' is incidental to the directly visible white patch we speak of the son of Diares as being (incidentally) perceived or seen by us. Because this is only incidentally an object of sense, it in no way as such affects the senses. Of the two former kinds, both of which are in their own nature perceptible by sense, the first kind-that of special objects of the several senses-constitute the objects of sense in the strictest sense of the term and it is to them that in the nature of things the structure of each several sense is adapted.

Chapter 12

The following results applying to any and every sense may now be formulated.

1 By a 'sense' is meant what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter. This must be conceived of as taking place in the way in which a piece of wax takes on the impress of a signet-ring without the iron or gold; we say that what produces the impression is a signet of bronze or gold, but its particular metallic constitution makes no difference. [Alternate
5 **Translation:** Sense is what is receptive of the sensible species without the matter, as the wax receives the sign of the signet ring without the iron or gold. However, it takes the golden and brazen sign, but not as gold or bronze.] In a similar way the sense is affected by what is coloured or flavoured or sounding, but it is indifferent what in each case the substance is; what alone matters is what quality it has, i.e. in what ratio its constituents are combined.

10 By 'an organ of sense' is meant that in which ultimately such a power is seated.

The sense and its organ are the same in fact, but their essence is not the same. What perceives is, of course, a spatial magnitude, but we must not admit that either the having the power to perceive or
15 the sense itself is a magnitude; what they are is a certain ratio or power in a magnitude. This enables us to explain why objects of sense which possess one of two opposite sensible qualities in a degree largely in excess of the other opposite destroy the organs of sense; if the movement set up by an object is too strong for the organ, the equipoise of contrary qualities in the organ, which just is its sensory power, is disturbed; it is precisely as concord and tone are destroyed by too violently
20 twanging the strings of a lyre. This explains also why plants cannot perceive. in spite of their having a portion of soul in them and obviously being affected by tangible objects themselves; for undoubtedly their temperature can be lowered or raised. The explanation is that they have no mean of contrary qualities, and so no principle in them capable of taking on the forms of sensible objects without their matter; in the case of plants the affection is an affection by form-and-matter together. The problem
25 might be raised: Can what cannot smell be said to be affected by smells or what cannot see by colours, and so on? It might be said that a smell is just what can be smelt, and if it produces any effect it can only be so as to make something smell it, and it might be argued that what cannot smell cannot be affected by smells and further that what can smell can be affected by it only in so far as it has in it the power to smell (similarly with the proper objects of all the other senses). Indeed that this
30 is so is made quite evident as follows. Light or darkness, sounds and smells leave bodies quite unaffected; what does affect bodies is not these but the bodies which are their vehicles, e.g. what splits the trunk of a tree is not the sound of the thunder but the air which accompanies thunder. Yes, but, it may be objected, bodies are affected by what is tangible and by flavours. If not, by what are things that are without soul affected, i.e. altered in quality? Must we not, then, admit that the objects
35 of the other senses also may affect them? Is not the true account this, that all bodies are capable of

1 being affected by smells and sounds, but that some on being acted upon, having no boundaries of
their own, disintegrate, as in the instance of air, which does become odorous, showing that some
effect is produced on it by what is odorous? But smelling is more than such an affection by what is
odorous-what more? Is not the answer that, while the air owing to the momentary duration of the
5 action upon it of what is odorous does itself become perceptible to the sense of smell, smelling is an
observing of the result produced?

10 Book III, Chapter 3

Thinking is different from perceiving and is held to be in part imagination, in part judgement: we
must therefore first mark off the sphere of imagination and then speak of judgement. If then
imagination is that in virtue of which an image arises for us, excluding metaphorical uses of the term,
15 is it a single faculty or disposition relative to images, in virtue of which we discriminate and are
either in error or not? The faculties in virtue of which we do this are sense, opinion, science,
intelligence.

That imagination is not sense is clear from the following considerations: Sense is either a faculty or
20 an activity, e.g. sight or seeing: imagination takes place in the absence of both, as e.g. in dreams.
(Again, sense is always present, imagination not. If actual imagination and actual sensation were the
same, imagination would be found in all the brutes: this is held not to be the case; e.g. it is not found
in ants or bees or grubs. (Again, sensations are always true, imaginations are for the most part false.
(Once more, even in ordinary speech, we do not, when sense functions precisely with regard to its
25 object, say that we imagine it to be a man, but rather when there is some failure of accuracy in its
exercise. And as we were saying before, visions appear to us even when our eyes are shut. Neither is
imagination any of the things that are never in error: e.g. knowledge or intelligence; for imagination
may be false.

30 It remains therefore to see if it is opinion, for opinion may be either true or false.

But opinion involves belief (for without belief in what we opine we cannot have an opinion), and in
the brutes though we often find imagination we never find belief. Further, every opinion is
accompanied by belief, belief by conviction, and conviction by discourse of reason: while there are
35 some of the brutes in which we find imagination, without discourse of reason. It is clear then that

1 imagination cannot, again, be (1) opinion plus sensation, or (2) opinion mediated by sensation, or
(3) a blend of opinion and sensation; this is impossible both for these reasons and because the
content of the supposed opinion cannot be different from that of the sensation (I mean that
imagination must be the blending of the perception of white with the opinion that it is white: it
5 could scarcely be a blend of the opinion that it is good with the perception that it is white): to
imagine is therefore (on this view) identical with the thinking of exactly the same as what one in the
strictest sense perceives. But what we imagine is sometimes false though our contemporaneous
judgement about it is true; e.g. we imagine the sun to be a foot in diameter though we are convinced
that it is larger than the inhabited part of the earth, and the following dilemma presents itself. Either
10 (a while the fact has not changed and the (observer has neither forgotten nor lost belief in the true
opinion which he had, that opinion has disappeared, or (b) if he retains it then his opinion is at once
true and false. A true opinion, however, becomes false only when the fact alters without being
noticed.

15 Imagination is therefore neither any one of the states enumerated, nor compounded out of them.

But since when one thing has been set in motion another thing may be moved by it, and
imagination is held to be a movement and to be impossible without sensation, i.e. to occur in beings
that are percipient and to have for its content what can be perceived, and since movement may be
20 produced by actual sensation and that movement is necessarily similar in character to the sensation
itself, this movement must be (1) necessarily (a) incapable of existing apart from sensation, (b)
incapable of existing except when we perceive, (such that in virtue of its possession that in which it is
found may present various phenomena both active and passive, and (such that it may be either true
or false.

25 The reason of the last characteristic is as follows. Perception (1) of the special objects of sense is never
in error or admits the least possible amount of falsehood. (2) That of the concomitance of the objects
concomitant with the sensible qualities comes next [**Alternate Translation:** Second, however, is
sensing those things which are accidents of the sensibles]: in this case certainly we may be deceived;
30 for while the perception that there is white before us cannot be false, the perception that what is
white is this or that may be false. (3) Third comes the perception of the universal attributes which
accompany the concomitant objects to which the special sensibles attach [**Alternate Translation:**
This is sensation of the common sensibles, the things following upon the accidental sensibles in
which the proper are present] (I mean e.g. of movement and magnitude); it is in respect of these
35 that the greatest amount of sense-illusion is possible.

1 The motion which is due to the activity of sense in these three modes of its exercise will differ from
the activity of sense; (1) the first kind of derived motion is free from error while the sensation is
present; (2) and (3) the others may be erroneous whether it is present or absent, especially when the
object of perception is far off. If then imagination presents no other features than those enumerated
5 and is what we have described, then imagination must be a movement resulting from an actual
exercise of a power of sense.

As sight is the most highly developed sense, the name Phantasia (imagination) has been formed from
Phaos (light) because it is not possible to see without light.

10 And because imaginations remain in the organs of sense and resemble sensations, animals in their
actions are largely guided by them, some (i.e. the brutes) because of the non-existence in them of
mind, others (i.e. men) because of the temporary eclipse in them of mind by feeling or disease or
sleep.

15 About imagination, what it is and why it exists, let so much suffice.