

## ON CAPACITIES AND PARTS OF SOUL IN ARISTOTLE'S *DE ANIMA*

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**ABSTRACT.** *How to divide the soul is an important topic in Aristotle's *De Anima*. In the existing interpretation, the capacities of soul discussed by Aristotle are often equated with the parts of soul. However, Aristotle himself made a distinction between them. Based on the critics of spatial division, Aristotle described that the soul can be divided only conceptually. According to this, we can get the results as follow: for plant and divine beings, their soul have single capacity, nutrition and rational capacity respectively, so there are no parts but soul itself; For animals and humans with compound capacities, nutrition, sensory and rational capacities can be seen as the “parts” of soul for they are separable in account, while movement, imagination, memory are all inseparable in this way. Clarify Aristotle's distinction between capacities and parts, not only is beneficial for correcting traditional interpretations, but also a special starting point for further exploration on Aristotle's theory of soul.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Aristotle; *De Anima*; soul; capacity; part*

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### **Introduction**

In the opening lines of *De Anima* (*DA*), Aristotle comes up with the issues of methodology of soul's research, among which is a critical question about the division of soul (*ψυχή*), that is, whether it has different parts or not. However, if soul has parts, there will be another two related questions: whether we should begin by investigating soul as a whole or its several parts; and to determine which of these parts are really distinct from one another and whether the several parts, or their

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capacities, should be investigated first [Aristotle. *DA* II.1, 402b9-11, trans. Hicks]. Besides that, we should explain the relationship of the various parts of soul in order to maintain its unity. For these questions, Aristotle takes a cautious attitude towards the division of soul in his following discussion. He not only often interchanges the terms “parts” (μέρη) and “capacities” (δυνάμεις), but also sometimes points out the differences of the two. Based on *DA*, we insist that, although the existing interpretations point to the unique meaning of “part” in Aristotle, it is not appropriate to directly equate “capacities” with “parts”, because it was neither able to resolve the seeming contradiction in terms nor better understand the deep relation among the capacities of soul. Therefore, this paper will begin to differentiate between “capacities” and “parts”, then illustrate the criteria of soul's parts and the types of capacity of soul discussed by Aristotle, and reexamine the parts that can be seen as the capacities of soul at the end.

### 1. “Capacity” ≠ “Part” in *De Anima*

Currently, many interpreters think that Aristotle does not strictly differentiate soul's “parts” from its “capacities”. The reason is that for Aristotle the parts of soul are not like the material parts which can be taken out from the whole, but like the “capacities” there are conceptual or logical distinction. Then, the problem about the unity of soul does not exist. “Aristotle's statement, that the most appropriate account of the soul is the one which picks out these capacities, already suggests the thought that perhaps the soul just is these capacities”, R. Sorabji says, “this thought is confirmed when we notice that Aristotle speaks of the capacities as parts of the soul” [Sorabji 1974, 64]. Similarly, Jonathan Barnes also insists that there is no need to focus so hard on the term, “part”, which can be replaced by “capacity” without any essential change [Barnes 1972, 105]. We may put this interpretation down to Aristotle's ambiguous discourse and then overlook its deep implication for Aristotle's elaboration. Actually, the distinction between “capacities” and “parts” in Aristotle is quite subtle and he appears to be undecided for choosing one of them [467b16-18].

After the general definition of soul in *DA* II.1, Aristotle begins to think that we should rethink the issues of soul from the obvious fact that there is a deep connection between soul and life. In Aristotle's mind generally, every living being has a soul. Soul is the ‘form’ of the living. So the soul is not something separable from the living thing: “just as pupil and sight are the eye, so, in our case, soul and body are the animal” [413a4]; the soul is the cause and first principle (ἀρχή) of living things [415b9]. Next, Aristotle goes deeper to elaborate three different meanings of cause and puts forward that the soul is the formal, efficient and final cause of a living thing [415b10-11]. For this reason, a dead body is just a corpse which is a different type of thing altogether from a living creature. Because soul is life which distinguishes the animate from the inanimate” [413a22]. Then, he lists a few life activities by which we can determine whether something has life: intellect (νοῦς), sensation (αἴσθησις), locomotion, nutrition, decay and growth [413a23-25]. In other words, these activities indicate the capacities of soul in living things.

However, Aristotle also says, “For the present it may suffice to say that the soul is the origin of the functions above enumerated and is determined by them, namely, by capacities of nutrition, sensation, thought, and by locomotion. But whether each one of these is a soul or part of a soul and, if a part, whether it is only logically distinct or separable in space also is a question, the answer to which is in some cases not hard to see: other cases present difficulties” [413b12-17]. In the above lines, at least Aristotle does not equate capacities of soul with its parts and instead proposes the question whether the capacities are the parts of soul. From this doubt we can reasonably infer that Aristotle has the sense to make a distinction between “capacities” and “parts”. In fact, this is mentioned once again in *DA* III, 10, where Aristotle critically analyzes that “those (*Note: including Plato*) who divide the soul into parts, if they divide it according to its powers (*δυνάμεις*) and differentiate these from one another, will find that such parts tend to become very numerous (*πάμπολλα*): nutrition, appetency (*τὸ ὀρεκτικόν*), sensation, locomotion and understanding, and under appetency including desire, anger and wish (*ἐπιθυμία, θυμός, βούλησις*) [414a30-b4]. Here, he points out an apparent paradox: if the capacity of soul is its parts, then there is the same number of “capacities” and “parts”; however, throughout *DA*, the number of capacities is difficult to count in principle because capacities are derived from the potentiality (*δυνάμει*) of living things which is open to possibilities, while the “parts” as constitutive elements of soul should be not uncountable to avoid the infinity.

It is true that Aristotle does not make a clear distinction between “capacity” and “parts”. But this point is very important for Aristotle to deepen his theory of soul. From a positive point of view, “capacities” are functional properties of soul as life principle, while “parts” are composition elements of soul as an entitative being, so they are different; from a negative point of view, if the capacities of soul are equated to its “parts”, then it is difficult to explain Aristotle's hierarchical order of the capacities of soul. In fact, based on the distinction, Aristotle describes two characteristics of soul: substantiality and functionality. This point is also noticed by some scholars, for example, Jennifer Whiting who makes a deep and systematic inquiry into the locomotion of soul in Aristotle [Whiting 2002, 141–200].

## 2. Criteria for the “part” of soul

In what sense Aristotle discusses the “parts” of soul? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand his special concept “separate” (*χωριστός*). In general, he uses this term in two senses: one is spatial or actual, the other is conceptual or theoretical. The former means that cutting something (for example, wood) into different pieces, while the latter refers that something can only be talked in different definition dimensions, such as the soul and body for human being. Accordingly, the parts of soul can also be understood in spatial or conceptual perspectives.

In *DA* I.2, Aristotle clearly says that the parts of soul are not in a spatial division. It clearly aimed at Plato who insists that the three parts of soul (reason, anger and desire) locate in head, chest and stomach respectively [Plato, *Timaeus*,

69d6-71a3, trans. Burnet]. So, based on the observation of the phenomenon of life, Aristotle dismisses Plato's spatial division of soul. For example, he notes that, in the cases of plants some of them are found to live when divided and separated from each other, which implies that the soul in each plant, though actually one, is potentially many; so, too, when insects or annelida are cut up, we see the same thing happen with other varieties of soul [413b14-23]. In other words, each fragment cut from some plant or insect still has an integrated soul which possessed by the living things. Based on the phenomenon of non-sexual reproduction in some plants and animals, Aristotle proves that soul can't be divided in spatial sense [Wang 2015, 27]. Therefore, the “parts” of soul do not mean the spatial separation, otherwise the above-mentioned examples will not happen, that is, for each segment which comes from the same plant or insect is impossible to possess the same capacities [Bos 2007, 102].

Indeed, “parts” of soul only implies a conceptual division based on the potency of soul [Gregoric 2007, 24]. As Aristotle points out, intellect alone is capable of separating from the body, the remaining parts of the soul are not separable in the way that some (Plato, for example) allege them to be, at the same time it is clear that they are logically distinct [413b30]. At a first glance, Aristotle seems to explain the capacities of soul transiting from its parts. But in fact, the problem about in what sense can soul be said have different parts is still not been solved thoroughly. Because when talking about the locomotion of soul in *DA* III.9, Aristotle repeatedly discusses the following question: “whether it is some one part of the soul, which is either locally separable or logically distinct, or whether it is the whole soul: and again if a separate part, whether it is a special part distinct from those usually recognized and from those enumerated above, or whether it coincides with some one of these. A question at once arises in what sense it is proper to speak of parts of the soul and how many there are” [432a19-23]. From here we see that Aristotle does not finally clear that in what sense soul has its “parts” at least before *DA* III.9. However, based on Aristotle's words about the parts of soul which are often related to two means of separation, we basically make sure that Aristotle approves the “parts” in conceptual sense. There is a syllogism as follows:

*Major premise: If soul has different “parts” then they could be conceptually separable or spatially separable;*

*Minor premise: They could not be spatial separability;*

*Conclusion: So, if soul has parts then they must be conceptual separability.*

Conceptual separability means that there are at least two or more conceptual unrelated capacities for the same soul. These parts are not material blocks but just “conceptual” differences. Therefore, in order to define which capacities of soul can be seen as its parts, we must firstly elaborate the types of capacity and determine whether they could be separated conceptually. In other words, if the definition of a capacity of soul is self-sufficient or independent of other capacities, then it is regarded as “part” of soul.

### 3. Types of capacity of soul

With the criteria for the part of soul in mind, what we need to do is to elaborate the types of capacity in Aristotle's theory of soul that provides the basis for determining the parts of soul from its capacities.

As mentioned before, Aristotle's discussion about the capacity of soul bases on the insight of the phenomenon of life. "While some animals possess all these functions, others have only some of them, others only one. It is this which differentiate animal from animal...The case is similar with the several senses: some animals have all of them, others some of them, others again only one, the most indispensable, that is, touch" [413b32-414a3]. Here it is clear that Aristotle believes that all the living beings are ensouled and then further associates the capacity of soul with the order of livings. "The soul is that whereby primarily we live, perceive and have understanding" [414a13-14]. In fact, shortly afterwards Aristotle again refers to three main capacities, namely cognitive, sensitive and nutritive faculties [415a15-20]. In that soul which has many capacities, each higher capacity coexists with all the lower capacities: plants have only nutrition, animals apart of nutrition have sensation, some higher animals apart of nutrition and sensation have locomotion, human beings have all the above capacities and reason, and the highest Divine being has only pure reason.

In addition to the higher above capacities, Aristotle also occasionally talks about other capacities, such as desire (*ὄρεξις*), imagination (*φαντασία*), memory (*μνημονεύει*), dream and opinion and so on. And existential forms of these capacities in living things can be further discussed in detail. Only taking imagination as an example, according to Aristotle's words, there are three forms in living beings [Papachristou 2013, 32]: (a) vague and indeterminate imagination which is possessed by those imperfect animals that have only the sense of touch; (b) imagination of sense is found in the other animals; (c) deliberative imagination in those alone which have reason, for the task of deciding whether to do this or that already implies reasoning. And the pursuit of the greater good necessarily implies some single standard of measurement" [434a1-10]. Therefore, imagination exists in animals and human beings, while (a) & (b) become a benchmark for differentiating lower animals from higher ones, and (c) makes a distinguish between animals and human beings. So imagination has pluralistic forms which can be seen as an adhesive in living things [Huang 2015, 14]. In other words, imagination is intermediate condition in the transition between sense and reason. It not only exists in senior animals and human beings but also some lower animals. In order to better understand imagination, we should raise a question: how does it work? On the one hand, "imagination is thought to be a species of motion and not to arise apart from (*μὴ ἄνευ*) sensation, but only in sentient beings and with the object of sense for its objects" [428b11-13], it is a motion generated by actual perception [429a2], that is, the forming of imagination is dependent on specific senses and common sense which offer objects to form images; on the other hand, to the thinking soul images serve as present sensation, that is, the soul never thinks without an images, just as the air impresses a certain quality on the pupil of the eye and this in turn upon

something [431a16-18], in other words, imagination offers thinking (διανοεῖσθαι) objects, mental images.

So in general, the sequence (plant-animal-human) corresponds to the basic order of capacity (nutrition-sensation-reason), following the principle of gradual ascending, from the most universal capacity to the most unique one [Polansky 2007, 9]. “The earlier form exists potentially in the later” [414b30]. To understand his these words as well as we can, we have to mention the context of Met. IX, 8, where Aristotle demonstrates the priority of act over potency in three precise domains: i.) regarding concept (τῷ λόγῳ; ii.) regarding time (τῷ δὲ χρόνῳ) and, finally, iii.) regarding substance (καὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ) [1049b12-1051a2]. As for capacities of soul, the higher capacities contains and guides the lower ones [Wilkes 1992, 111]. Therefore, Aristotle “not only offers the reason why the livings are different, but also successfully explains how various capacities belongs to the same soul, making all living things having their own capacities and becoming a unified individual” [Li 1996, 48]. Besides that, Aristotle links the soul to life, and then expands the objects possessing soul to animals and even plants, which reflects the difference between Aristotle and others who limit the soul only to human beings [402b3-5].

#### 4. Capacity of soul as its part

In order to determine which capacities of soul can be seen as its parts, we should further examine the all above capacities mentioned by Aristotle.

However, we firstly notice two single capacities, namely intellect and nutrition, which are possessed by the Divine and plants. When talking about the contemplative life in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle elaborates the states of pure intellect. The single capacity identify soul itself and has no so-called parts. The intellect of the Divine would seem to be a distinct species of soul [413b25], which is an ensouled one and also pure and immortal one. The divine being is the God who is conceived according to its activity as thought thinking itself: immovable, indivisible and existing separately from sensible things [*Meta.* 1073a4-7]. Similarly, the lowest capacity, nutrition of plants, is independent of others [413a31], that is, some plants only having this capacity still can live. In a word, both the Divine being and plants have only one unique capacity. From this we should ask a basic question: can the souls of Divine and plants, possessing a unique capacity, be considered to have parts? Unfortunately, we are unable to find words for Aristotle to answer this question in *DA*. For this, Aristotle sheds more light on the capacities of animals and man in *DA*, where discusses the nature of soul and its cognitive roles from the perspective of natural philosophy. Of course, Aristotle lays more emphasis on the intellect of Divine in cosmological or theological works. But here the question is: all the capacities of animal and human beings are the parts of their soul in a conceptual sense? According to Aristotle's exposition, the answer is *NO*, because those capacities can be divided into the two following categories.

Firstly, the capacities, for example, locomotion, imagination and memory, etc., are non-separated in a conceptual sense. At the beginning of talking about locomotion in *DA* III, 9, Aristotle comes up with a question: “whether it is some one

part of the soul, which is either logically separable or logically distinct” [432a20]. Indeed, Aristotle insists that this capacity (locomotion) has no conceptual independence, that is, when defining this capacity, one must refer to other capacities. Just as in *DA* III, 9-10, all attempts to define (ὀρίζεiv) locomotion made by Aristotle are related to sensation, desire, imagination or intellect, and so on. Likewise, in Aristotle's view, “Imagination is thought to be a special of locomotion and not to arise apart from sensation”, so it may be produced by actual sensation” [428b13-429a2]. So, imagination can't live without sensation, only the living things possessing sensation have the activity of imagination, the images formed by the sense are the origin of the objects of imagination. And as for memory, Aristotle says all its forms present the past of time, so memory is only possessed by those animals that have the sense of time [449b27-29]. The function of memory is to reproduce the sense impression formed in past specific senses. In other words, memory depends on sensation and perception. Therefore, these capacities do not have the conceptual separability but refer to other capacities which offer objects or forming impetus, for example, the specific senses provide imagination with images and contribute to the forming of thinking. In a word, they should not be viewed as “parts” of soul.

Secondly, the capacities including nutrition, sensation and intellect are separated in a conceptual sense. The definition of these capacities have their own object and does not cross each other or refers to other capacities: nutrition can't be deprived from live [416b19], its aim is to take in nourishment for live; sensation is that which is receptive of sensible forms apart from their matter [424b20]; intellect or the mind itself is included among the objects which can be thought, for where the objects are immaterial that which thinks and that which is thought are identical [429b30-31]. And apparently here, Aristotle's argument relies on his famous distinction, form/matter (εἶδος/ύλη). Therefore, the definition of these three capacities are independent of one another and does not refer to other capacities of soul. Each of them belongs to the compound or synthetic capacities, and not only coexists with other capacities in the same soul of animal or human, but also has dramatically independence or separability in the conceptual or definitional sense. These capacities can be seen as the parts of soul. This point can be confirmed in the opening lines of *DA* II, 4, where Aristotle points out that it is necessary to make a further explore the capacities and only lists intellect, sensation and nutrition, no referring to more capacities as he did in *DA* II, 3. Therefore, we can reasonably infer in the above mentioned passage Aristotle wants to emphasize these basic capacities of soul.

## Conclusion

For Aristotle, soul has different parts which are not spatially but conceptually inferred. Plants and the Divine have single capacities namely nutrition and intellect separately and have no parts; animals and human beings have compound capacities divided in a conceptual sense, such as nutrition, sensation and intellect, which can be seen as the parts of soul, while movement, imagination and memory etc. Conceptually are dependent on other capacities. In a word, those capacities as the

‘parts’ of soul provide guarantees for the development of other capacities and then avoid the division of soul falling into a vicious circle. Otherwise, it was impossible to make a relatively complete discussion about soul. Based on the perspective of parts, to clear Aristotle's analysis about the capacities of soul is not only beneficial for correcting those traditional misreadings, but also important for us to dig into Aristotle's theory of soul.

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