

The Definition of the Soul in Defining Humanity: From Ancient Greek Philosophy to Ontological Discussions in Artificial Intelligence Ethics

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Abstract:The foundational secret of Western philosophy lies in the concept of the soul. The intricacy of this notion concerns the intrinsic question of human existence, guiding individuals toward truth and goodness. It occupies the intersection of human nature and divinity, anthropology and theology. Plato's description of the cosmic origin of the soul is, to some extent, imbued with the mythological character inherent in Western philosophy. Plato posits that the soul and body are separate; the soul is an eternal, transcendent, and independent spiritual entity, and the existence of the theory of Forms must be mediated through the soul. Aristotle, on the other hand, offers a theory regarding human cognitive abilities; he rejects the separation of the soul and body, while asserting that the soul holds a superior and fundamental existence in relation to the body. Plato's doctrine (centered on justice) and Aristotle's theory (centered on virtue) present significant divergences, yet both emphasize the essential value of the human soul, asserting that human reason is the essence of the soul. This reason, as the essential attribute of humanity, ultimately aims to establish a rational order among human beings

Keywords: Soul; Body; Human Existence; AI

1. Introduction

Overlooking the entire history of Western philosophy, the primality of the soul has always been one of the issues that philosophers have paid attention to. The Western philosophical system is a combination of the super-perceptual speculative field composed of ontology and knowledge theory and the

practical field composed of political ethics. Either aspect of these two fields is inseparable from the doctrine of the soul. In ancient Greek philosophy, the topic of "soul" was sensitive and critical. From the perspective of human beings, "Seeking truth" and "seeking goodness" have always been the two major themes that Western philosophy has tirelessly explored and studied for more than two thousand years.

The construction of the foundation of the Western philosophical logic system, based on the early ancient Greek natural philosopher Thales first proposed the original theory of water, human beings began to seek the original path of true knowledge; to Anaxagoras in his own mind to seek the order of the universe, human beings began the journey of pursuing good, western philosophy The relationship between ancient Greek soul theory and Plato and Aristotle's soul theory, to a certain extent inherited the ideological theory of the predecessors and reformed it, innovated and further regulated the side of the new theory. Plato predetermined the comprehensive direction of philosophical research from truth to goodness. In the late period, Aristotle's yearning for the body and his speculation on the highest state of life were all further optimization and development of the soul. As the foundation for the soulless theory, philosophical theory has no precise connotation. In short, western philosophical theories are all based on the soul theory, and the soul theory plays a fundamental role.

We understand the origin and formation of Western philosophy, understand the inner laws and strict logic of philosophy, and deeply understand the connotation of Western philosophy for more than two thousand years and reveal the mysteries of the history of

philosophy. Starting from the soul theory of the Greek philosophers, it is the key point of contradiction. Hegel once called "the Greek theory of the soul the birthplace and secret of Western philosophy." [11](P38) Aristotle believed that "we believe that all knowledge is beautiful and valuable. In terms of the accuracy of knowledge, or in terms of the sublimity and exquisiteness of the object of knowledge, some knowledge is more valuable. In terms of these two aspects, WE have reason to put the study of the soul in the first important position.", [2](P3) This article clarifies this view from the soul theory of Plato and Aristotle.

2. What is the Soul?

2.1 The Connotation of the Soul

The term "soul" (Greek: psyche, Latin: anima, English: soul) originally referred to breath or life. The soul has two key attributes: first, it can exist independently of the body, and second, it resides within the body and exerts dominion over it.

Philosophers have each offered their own interpretations when contemplating the nature of the soul. The term "soul" was first used during the time of Thales, who viewed it as the breath unique to life. Later philosophers, such as Anaximander and Anaximenes, also employed the concept. It was during the Pythagorean period that the fusion of religious and philosophical ideas regarding the soul was first achieved. The Pythagoreans believed that the original principle of all things was number, a view known as the "doctrine of the number as the origin." This elevated the religious notion of the soul's immortality to a philosophical level. In brief, throughout Pre-Socratic philosophy, no philosopher ignored the soul as an essential foundation of their theories.

In the time of Plato and Aristotle, the concept of the soul was further systematized and deeply studied. Early in his career, Plato argued that the soul not only belongs to living beings but is also present in all things in the universe. He considered the soul to be "divine-like" and "the longest-lasting" and later interpreted it as an "immortal and indestructible existence," which he viewed as purely conscious. Aristotle, in his treatise *On the Soul*, fully "objectified" and "embodied" the soul, grounding it in his

philosophy. In modern philosophy, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* delves into metaphysical reflections on the soul, while Kant explores "the starry sky above and the moral law within." Hegel advanced these philosophical inquiries by forming a comprehensive system for the "absolute idea." In contemporary philosophy, figures like Carnap have contributed to the logical analysis of scientific language, while Sartre's existentialist philosophy is centered on the profound pursuit of "being," each deepening and expanding the understanding of the soul.

2.2 The View of the Soul in Plato and Aristotle

For Plato, the soul is the essential existence that defines human nature; it is an "entity." The metaphysical significance of the soul is crucial. Plato's theory of the soul provides the foundation for his ontology, epistemology, and even social and political ethics. It is a central part of his first philosophy—his theory of Forms is derived from the concept of the soul. Plato believes that the soul's existence is independent of space and time, and that it is an eternal spiritual entity. The soul possesses life and spontaneity, as well as immortality, reincarnation, and transcendence. The universal soul precedes the individual soul, which is both simple and indivisible by any external force. The world is divided into the material world and the world of Forms, and these two worlds can only be connected through the soul. The soul itself is in a dominant position, imbuing reason with the inherent qualities of the search for truth and the pursuit of goodness, and all living movements that we observe are based on these principles. Plato's view of the soul is primarily reflected in his dialogues, including *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *The Republic*, *Theaetetus*, and *Timaeus*.

Aristotle's view of the soul spans multiple modern disciplines of knowledge, influencing not only speculative philosophy but also practical philosophy, rhetoric, and aesthetics. His work *De Anima* (*On the Soul*) offers a detailed exploration of the soul, with other works touching upon the soul's role as well. Aristotle discusses the interconnectedness of his own soul theory with the ideas of earlier thinkers, particularly those of his teacher Plato, noting several common points. First, earlier thinkers emphasized movement and sensation

as the main attributes of the soul. Aristotle mentions that Plato himself recognized "movement and sensation as the main characteristics of the soul." Additionally, Plato's theory inherited elements of earlier philosophers, such as the view that the soul is immortal, eternally active, and separable from the body—concepts that trace back to the philosophy of Pythagoras.

Second, Plato's theory of the soul serves as both a continuation and a transition. For example, in his influential work *Timaeus*, Plato describes the soul as being composed of elements, a concept derived from Empedocles' theory of the four classical elements. Plato's soul theory not only builds upon earlier ideas but also paves the way for future developments. Later, Aristotle, in the first phase of his *De Anima*, clearly draws upon Plato's *Phaedo*, while in the second and third phases, he adopts a more empirical approach, shifting to a perspective rooted in observation to establish his own view of the soul.

2.3 The Study of the Soul as the Foremost of All Knowledge

All knowledge within the realm of human inquiry is beautiful and meaningful. When considering the precision of knowledge and the nobility and refinement of its objects, the study of the soul stands at the pinnacle of all knowledge. The original, true nature of the soul is the very foundation of any living being's existence. We have every reason to place the study of the soul at the highest level of importance. Contemporary philosophers' research on philosophical concepts predominantly draws from the history of Western philosophy, as outlined in modern publications of philosophical histories. As a result, Western scholars often simplify the soul theories of ancient Greek philosophers, reducing them to a form of "psychology." Such a narrow classification directly impedes the correct understanding of the soul's role as the origin of the entire Western philosophical tradition.

The Greek concept of the soul is not confined to the domain of modern psychology. The soul is the issue of transcendent, senseless reason. It is a form of rationality; it is the essential existence of what it means to be human.

As is well known, this area of study offers unique insights into the study of nature and the

pursuit of all truth. The knowledge of the soul makes a significant contribution to the advancement of our understanding of truth, nature, and the cosmos. It is therefore our responsibility to prioritize the study of what the soul is, recognizing its paramount importance in the broader context of all philosophical and scientific inquiry.

3. The Relationship Between Soul and Body

3.1 The Primary Issue in the Concept of Soul

The doctrine of the soul occupies a central place in Western philosophy, and it is our responsibility to prioritize the study of what constitutes the soul. The primary issue in the philosophy of the soul is the relationship between the soul and the body, which is essentially an ontological question. This issue can be approached from two perspectives: first, whether the soul must depend on the body for its existence; and second, which is more fundamental, the soul or the body, and which holds greater importance. Both Plato and Aristotle present different interpretations of this primary issue concerning the soul.

There are two major theories regarding the relationship between the soul and the body in ancient Greek philosophy. The first theory is found in Plato's *Timaeus*, where he presents a story about the origin of the world soul and proposes an ontology of the soul. According to Plato, the soul is superior to and higher than the body. Humans are not merely a mechanical union of soul and body; rather, the soul operates with purpose, while the body merely serves as a subordinate vehicle for the soul. In other words, the soul is the closest possible replica of the perfect world. Plato divides the soul into two categories: the cosmic soul and the individual human soul. Both are created in the realm of ontology through the mixture of three elements that give rise to the world soul: being, unity, and difference. Plato argued that the human body is not directly created by the gods, but rather is provided by the children of the gods (humankind), who continually strive to obtain eternal laws for limited creations. When the soul falls into the body from the heavens, it becomes tainted, which determines the essential nature of human existence as a state of "disfiguration"—the soul is scattered in six directions, moving aimlessly, irrationally, and purposelessly.

The second theory, based on Aristotle's *De Anima* (On the Soul), became a cornerstone of natural philosophy in medieval universities and serves as a counter to Plato's "spirit-body" dualism. Aristotle does not accept that there is any special relationship between the soul and the body, nor does he believe that the soul is a self-moving entity. Instead, he categorizes the soul as a principle of causality, substance, essence, form, and actuality. Aristotle divides the soul into three parts: the vegetative (or nutritive) part, the sensitive part, and the rational part, corresponding to nutrition, perception, and cognition. He emphasizes the central role of reason within the soul and its agency, asserting that all knowledge originates from sensory experience.

3.2 The Relationship Between Soul and Body

Plato's view of the soul shares a remarkable similarity with his teacher Socrates. In his writings, Plato not only investigates the origin and profound meaning of the soul but also explores the relationship between the soul and the body. Plato believes that the soul and the body are separable, which is central to his concept of the soul and forms the foundation for other related doctrines. The soul has two primary characteristics: immortality and the ability to be reincarnated. Plato's theory of recollection emphasizes that before the soul fell into the body, it was perfect and possessed complete knowledge. However, upon merging with the body, the soul becomes contaminated, forgetting its prior knowledge, and must continually engage in learning and training to recollect the knowledge it originally possessed. In *The Republic*, the establishment of the soul arises from the inner confusion and conflict that one experiences. The soul can be divided into three parts: the rational part, the spirited part, and the appetitive part. Plato views the relationship between the soul and the body as the relationship between reason and desire. He believes that when reason rules over the soul, the soul is superior to the body and governs it. Conversely, when desire takes control of the soul, the body, characterized by sickness and fear, will negatively affect the soul. Therefore, in Plato's view, the soul is perfect, good, wise, and immortal, while the body is deceptive and temporary. The immortal soul originates from reason, while the desire

and spirited parts, which are influenced by the body, are corruptible. Thus, the soul and the body have fundamentally different origins—the body will decay and die as time passes and desires go unchecked, whereas the soul remains eternal and does not die; the only change is the transition of the soul from one body to another.

Aristotle presents a paradoxical view. He argues that part of the soul may be separable, but the soul and the body are essentially inseparable. He states, "If we imagine parts of the soul as separable, we encounter a dilemma: we cannot unify or distinguish any of these parts." According to Aristotle, "A natural body with a soul derives from its own movement and rest" (*De Anima*, P24). From this perspective, the soul cannot exist independently of the body; it exists within the body, and if it is separated from any part of the body, the soul ceases to exist. In the integration of soul and body, the mind, as part of the soul, is immortal and separable. Aristotle claims, "In the relationship between the human body and soul, only the faculty of sensation cannot separate from the body, but the mind is separable." This contradiction highlights an important aspect of Aristotle's philosophy: while he critiques Plato's notion of immortality, he still retains elements of Plato's theory. This incomplete criticism suggests that the soul requires purification, a process that philosophy itself enables by helping one rid themselves of desires and return to reason. Only through complete death can the soul achieve true purification.

4. The Relationship Between Soul and Motion

4.1 Soul and Motion

He defines the soul as an automatic existence, the cause that triggers the continuous movement of all things. The soul mentioned by Plato refers to the principle of "movement." Plato says, "The essence and cause of all things is nothing other than this autonomy. All souls are immortal because everything that is perpetually in motion is immortal." (P245) "A body without a soul moves not by its own will, but through being moved by another; conversely, a body with a soul can initiate movement on its own." (P246) The movement discussed here is not limited to the physical

displacement but rather refers to the energy of the subject.

Plato argues that the immortality and rational supremacy of the soul are precisely demonstrated through the "autonomy" of the soul. He asserts that the essence of the soul is autonomy. If an object is moved by another, its motion ceases, and so does its life. However, an object that moves by itself, relying on its own motion, is the origin and principle of all objects moved by other forces. As long as the self-moving object maintains its inherent nature, it becomes an eternal and indestructible entity, and this entity is the soul. Thus, the soul's autonomy, when combined with the body, forms the highest of all beings—humans. Human actions, driven by the soul, encompass imagination, consciousness, reason, desire, and motion. Under the control of the soul, the body serves as a medium for sensory perception. Plato's notion of the soul not only refers to "human souls" but also includes "divine souls." The soul holds a dominion that also distinguishes between good and evil. The degree of goodness or evil in the soul determines the goodness or evil of the actions performed by the body. Plato values reason, believing that only a rational soul can achieve the highest goodness and beauty. The soul is both immortal and universal, and its influence is the driving force behind all actions of living beings.

4.2 Desire and Motion

Aristotle believes that "the soul is unmoving," and that the motion of the soul is a unique principle of movement, the source of motion for living beings. He states, "Motion generally exists within something that either pursues something or avoids something." "All movements can be divided into the categories of not moving, both moving and being moved. Generally, those that are not moving are trained virtues, while desire is exactly the kind of movement that both moves and is moved. When moving actively, desire is a kind of motion, but from the perspective of being moved, desire makes the moved object move, and the moved object is the animal." Aristotle maintains the view that "the soul is unmoving" and denies Plato's idea that the soul is the cause of motion and that it is autonomous. However, he compromises by suggesting that motion can also be induced by "desire." From a

dialectical standpoint, motion is not caused by a general principle; although there is some contradiction in Aristotle's views, they consistently express that motion arises from the individual aspects within the soul, showing a certain pioneering edge.

5. The Soul Theory and Political Ethics

5.1 Plato's Theory of the Soul and Political Philosophy

Contemporary philosopher Leo Strauss interprets that philosophy, in essence, is political philosophy, and the origin of political philosophy lies in Plato's work. Plato's ontology and epistemology are closely linked to his political and ethical philosophy, emphasizing a life guided by reason. A life in accordance with virtue must rely on reason to attain true "goodness" and happiness. The primary premise of the human soul is reason, and the governance of the city-state, the perfection of its constitution, and the ideal society all depend on reason. However, irrational elements also play a significant role in political ethics and hold equal importance. In the *Phaedrus*, when distinguishing the souls of gods and humans, Plato compares the soul to a chariot driven by two horses, one noble and the other base, with a charioteer. The divine horses and charioteer possess noble qualities, hence they are good, while the other souls present a mixture of noble and base traits. Human souls are driven by two horses: one noble and well-educated, the other lowly and poorly educated. Therefore, guiding the soul's chariot is a difficult and challenging task. The mixture of noble and base elements is the typical state of the human soul. Successfully managing the soul's chariot is a challenging and arduous endeavor. The core of Plato's ethics and politics lies in justice, which aligns with human nature and reason. He divides the human soul into three parts, corresponding to the three classes in his *Republic*: reason, passion, and desire. Reason occupies the head, passion is located in the chest, and desire in the area between the diaphragm and navel. Reason controls passion, just as the philosopher-king uses wisdom to control the warriors and rulers over the citizens. A just person maintains harmony in their soul, with each part doing its own work and remaining in its rightful place. This concept of justice requires the

coordination of rational and irrational functions within the soul, forming the fundamental principle of his ideal state.

Plato's Republic also discusses the perfect and stable political regime, with the ultimate goal being the achievement of "the good" by the soul. Rooted in the nature of the human soul, Plato divides society into three classes: the philosopher-kings and rulers, the soldiers (warriors), and the producers (workers), each performing its own role to ensure the just functioning of the state. Plato suggests that the most effective and advantageous way to realize an ideal regime is through the philosopher-king, which combines the rational philosophy with political power. (P83)

5.2 Aristotle's Theory of the Soul and Ethics

Aristotle's virtue ethics forms the core of his study of human behavior and motion. He classifies knowledge related to human actions and motions into two categories: politics and ethics. Both ethics and politics seek the good and happiness. Aristotle believes that the goodness and happiness of the soul refer to a life of affluence and virtuous actions. He emphasizes a practical activity in life; the difference between inner goodness and virtuous actions lies in the results they produce. A person with noble actions will certainly achieve true happiness, even if inner goodness does not always produce good outcomes. The goodness of the soul does not mean rejecting external goods; on the contrary, happiness must be attained through external goods as a means to reach the ultimate end.

Aristotle's political ethics focus on virtue as goodness, which is the pursuit of human virtue and happiness. He categorizes goodness into three types: external, physical, and spiritual. Goodness is the pursuit of rational activities in reality, and goodness and happiness are the highest goals. Human goodness is based on virtue and is expressed through the practical activities of the soul. To achieve the highest good, a person must pursue virtuous actions throughout their entire life. Happiness requires long-lasting rational activities. "Human virtue lies in the virtues of the soul, not in the virtues of the body. The real activities of the soul are what humanity must pursue for happiness." "The stability and prosperity of our state is due to the virtue of the soul." (P21) In real life, politicians and philosophers must understand

the soul. Political ethics, as discussed, refer to behaviors or characters aligned with reason and humanity. Such behaviors and characters are shaped through upbringing, influenced by environmental factors and voluntary choices, and are closely tied to rationality.

6. Artificial Intelligence and the Soul

6.1 The Contest between Humans and Artificial Intelligence

In Western philosophy, the question of the union between God and man has seen modern innovations and contradictions through the collision, fusion, and dialogue of various disciplines—especially with artificial intelligence (AI). In 2016, AlphaGo, developed by DeepMind, defeated world champion Lee Sedol in Go with a 4:1 score; in 2017, the upgraded AlphaGo Master defeated Ke Jie, who later admitted, "AI revealed the truth of Go." From Plato's perspective, AI's "reason" approaches the mathematical laws of the world of Ideas but lacks an understanding of "beauty" and "intuition." From Aristotle's view, AI's victory is the triumph of tool-based reason, while human players' creative strategies still embody practical wisdom (phronesis). ChatGPT, for example, can generate essays, poems, and even code with rich content and high accuracy, but its output lacks the warmth, depth of logic, and emotional resonance found in human creators, often producing "seemingly reasonable but meaningless philosophical discourse." In medical diagnosis, IBM Watson can analyze 20 million medical papers in 15 seconds to assist in cancer diagnosis, but its suggestions have sometimes conflicted with those of human medical experts (e.g., misdiagnosing rare cases). Based on big data and pattern recognition, AI excels in processing standardized cases but lacks sensitivity to complex individual differences. Human doctors should view AI as a tool for assistance, with final diagnoses incorporating clinical experience and the emotional needs of patients. AI is a product of contemporary society that has revolutionized human lifestyles, guided the future direction of human civilization, and made life more convenient, efficient, and pleasant. However, humanity must fully recognize the core of human nature. Whether it's AlphaGo, ChatGPT, or IBM Watson, all represent important branches of

modern AI. AI has clearly surpassed humans in fields with clear rules and data-driven processes (like Go or diagnosis), but it shows limitations in areas related to creativity, ethics, and purpose. AI expands tool-based reason, but practical reason and theoretical reason remain the prerogative of the human soul. Emotion, morality, and creativity are the “divine sparks” that cannot be encoded, forming the essential difference between humans and machines. AI should serve Aristotle’s “good purpose,” rather than undermine human subjectivity. In the AI era, humans must define technological boundaries with philosophical wisdom—remaining cautious of “uncontrolled desires” like Plato, and pursuing “virtue and technology’s symbiosis” like Aristotle.

6.2 Humans Reexamine Themselves

From a broader philosophical perspective, the immortality of the soul ultimately refers to the immortality of reason. Hegel, in his “Lectures on the History of Philosophy,” stated that “Plato’s concept of the immortality of the soul is not equivalent to the religious notion of an immortal soul; the meaning is significantly different.” Hegel’s groundbreaking insight is thought-provoking, appealing to the power of logic: reason, spirit, and thought are the highest forms of freedom and goodness. Western religious philosophy and theology have further explored the question of “God.” From a modern, multidimensional perspective, “soul theory” represents a reconciliatory focal point. The relationship between God and man runs through Western philosophy, where God is central to man’s legitimate place in philosophy. Today, the relationship between God, man, and AI has entered modern intellectual discourse, becoming a rational and contemporary subject of study. The God-man relationship offers a unique advantage in answering philosophical questions that secular disciplines cannot match, and the relationship between humans and AI will also inevitably seek resources in the realms of society and culture. One cannot argue the weight of human and AI by the validity of their thinking alone, nor can existence be debated through primal meaning. This requires a change in the attitude toward AI’s “addiction” by humans. When controversies arise regarding ultimate matters, humans must use rational thinking and dialogue to address the reality of the human-AI

relationship, deriving decisions from introspection, and ensuring that humans retain their essence at all times, confronting the question: “Has humanity fallen?” Believing that AI exists in a relationship with humanity and plays a prominent role in human history is essential. Without this belief, humanity—the supreme creation of God—would never be able to properly use this product that aligns with the currents of modernization. Therefore, the question and answer “Has humanity fallen into artificial intelligence?” is only to point out the direction we expect AI to evolve through our lived experience, indicating its progress with the times. We must blend universality and specificity, perceiving the connection between humans and AI in the context of modern technology. High-tech advancements will continue to offer innovations that bring both positive and negative impacts. On one hand, they pose certain threats to humanity, but on the other hand, they will continue to yield benefits. The current societal model is a shared economy, where the ultimate model allows people to directly benefit from technological progress. At a business summit, Lee Kai-fu, CEO of Innovation Factory, mentioned that within the next decade, 50% of human labor globally will be gradually replaced by AI, and artificial intelligence will bring an unprecedented disruptive change to human society.

Thus, humans must seriously address the significance of their own responsibilities, focusing on introspection, self-renewal, and spiritual purification. From the perspective of soul theory, both Plato and Aristotle argued that reason should dominate the body and spirit should control material, thereby redefining the relationship between God and man. In the present and future, the challenge of AI to humanity is to replace humans, and humans must begin to realize the issue. Humans possess reason, while AI is material and only exists at the level of intellect, but reason is the first cause that can control material. In other words, when reason appropriately utilizes material, AI can help the soul achieve eternity, thereby adjusting the modern relationship between God, man, and AI, and returning philosophy to its ultimate humanistic care.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, while Aristotle and Plato have

significant differences in various aspects, both consider God as the highest entity, the ultimate purpose, and the absolute good, the metaphysical rational God. Analyzing Western philosophy as a whole, the theory of the soul is the origin of both human nature and divinity, the philosophy of man and theism. God governs humans, and in addressing transcendental issues, humans must approach decisions by contemplating with reverence and confronting God. God exists in the relationship with humans and is highlighted in human history. The philosophical foundations of each period are rooted in humanity and reflect on the "human" species. Each philosophical system emphasizes different aspects of "man," but both Plato and Aristotle, based on their theories of the soul, have profoundly influenced the development of Western philosophy and the study of humanism. From the historical development of human society, the themes of seeking truth and pursuing goodness are not only central to philosophical inquiry but are also the inherent essence of the soul theory. Truth and goodness gradually become standards by which "man" is measured, and they represent the value goals constantly pursued by human progress. These two ideals also serve as the spiritual pillars of human life. The value of human existence within the soul theory, embodying the pursuit of truth and goodness, as well as a spirit of positivity and confidence, will forever inspire individuals to strive forward and reach for their ideal distant

goals.

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