

Aquinas on the Soul: Whether it is a Body, whether It Is Immortal, and given these Why It Is Fitting For the Body and Why It Is Necessary.

Joseph Nietlong¹, Gideon Kato²

^{1,2}Benue State University Makurdi, Km 1, Gboko Road, PMB 102119, Benue State, Nigeria.

* jnietlong@bsum.edu.ng

Abstract

Aquinas' views on the soul follows closely those of Aristotle, but diverges on some key points. This study examines whether the soul for Aquinas is or is not a body, whether it is or not immortal. It further examines in detail Aquinas' exposition of the fittingness of the soul to the body and why it is necessary. Herein, lies the most significant way Aquinas diverges from Aristotle. Aquinas' re-statement and re-framing of the question in a new way also marks his unique and original contribution to the discourse on the Soul.

Keywords: Body, Soul, Immortality, Man, Knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Aquinas is one of the most important philosophers of the medieval period besides being a great Theologian. He is known for his ability to synthesize. He is also able to combine Aristotelianism with Neoplatonism and blend them within a Christian framework. He is an original and inventive philosopher. He distinguishes between philosophical investigations and theological investigations. He points out that philosophical investigation is inadequate to discover things that can be made known to human beings only through Revelation. He recommends that theologians must philosophize in order to theologize. St. Thomas Aquinas' writing career was not long. However, he brought out enormous number of works, both theological and philosophical commentaries on the areas of doctrinal discussions and several treatises. One is simply amazed at the amount of energy and time devoted for his numerous writings, which historians find it difficult to put down in chronological order.

Aquinas, after his treatment of spiritual and corporeal creatures, turns his attention to humanity. For Aquinas, there is a hierarchy in the order of being (Luscombe 2012). At the top of the ladder is God whose being is existence itself. Lower down are spiritual creatures, the Angels- whose existence are owed to God as the ground of their being. Humanity occupies a lower rung on this ladder. The human person is a composite of soul and body, a corporeal substance linked to a spiritual substance.

2. WHETHER THE SOUL IS A BODY

In the *Summa Theologica*, Book VI on Man, first article, question 75 Aquinas asks: 'whether the soul is a body?' (Thomas 1945). Here three objections are raised. The first: that it would seem that the soul is a body because first, it is the *mover* of the body. It does not move unless moved. And following Aristotle, this objection argues that nothing gives what it has not. For instance, what is not hot does not give heat (Barron 1996). Besides, if anything that moves and is not moved, it must be the cause of eternal movement proved in the eighth chapter of Aristotle's *Physics* (Solmsen 1961). In the movement of an animal this is not the case, so the soul is thus a moved mover and *every moved mover is a body* therefore the soul is a body.

The second objection is based on the tenet that all knowledge is caused by means of a likeness (the mirror model of epistemology). The soul has knowledge of the body, if it were a spiritual thing it would not have knowledge of corporeal things. But since it does have knowledge of corporeal things it stance to reason that it is a corporeal thing, a body. The third objection argues from the perspectives of 'contact'. There must be contact between a mover and a moved. There is in this case no action from a distance. And contact is only between bodies, so since the soul moves the body the soul must be a body.

The *Sed Contra* is from Augustine's treatise on the trinity, Book five, chapter six. Here the soul is said to be

simple in comparison to the body, for it does not occupy space by any bulk. Aquinas then launches his answer to the objection with a definition that comes straight from the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle “the soul is the first principle of life in those things in our world which we live” (Aquinas & Thomas 1999, p. 61). Aristotle had taught that the soul is the *entelecheia*, the first principle, actualization of a living body. Aquinas follows Aristotle (against Democritus and Empedocles) in positing the soul to be not a material thing. He then goes on to provide an exposition of one truth which considers universal and as solving the whole problem.

Aquinas states that “not every principle of vital action is a soul” (Torchia 2007, p. 133), then, the eye for instance would be a soul, as it is the principle of vision. And there would be as many souls as there body parts. To be the principle of life does not belong to the body qua body. No body can be the principle of life. In other words to be a living thing does not belong to a body as body, otherwise stones for instance would be alive, and every entity that is a body would be alive. Therefore a body that is competent to be alive is such a body. And for Aquinas, that it is such a body (that is alive) it owes to some principle-which is its act. Therefore says Aquinas, the soul which is the first principle of a living body is not a body, but an act of the body (Kass 2003). In reply to the first objection, Aquinas says distinguishes three types of moves based on the idea that everything moved must be moved by something and since this process cannot go back to infinity, we must allow that not every mover is moved. Using Aristotle’s notion of actuality and potentiality, Aquinas shows that the mover in causing a thing to be in act gives it what it (the mover) has. Further again citing the *Physics* Aquinas says that there is a mover who is all together immovable either essentially or accidentally; such a mover can cause an eternally uniform movement (Dodds 2008). After which he introduces another kind of mover which though not moved essentially is moved, is moved accidentally, and as such does not cause a uniform movement. Such a mover, Aquinas calls the soul. A different kind of mover, this which is moved essentially Aquinas calls the body. Like Aristotle, advancing ahead of his predecessors, Aquinas points to the faults in the reasoning of this objection as based on the wrong assumption that every mover is moved, the soul is moved essentially and that it is a body.

In replying to objection two Aquinas says it is not necessary for the likeness of the thing known to be actually in the knower. But rather given a being which knows potentially, and afterwards know actually, the likeness of the thing known must be in the nature of the knower, not actually, but only potentially, as color is not in the eye, but only potentially. Hence it is necessary, says Aquinas, not that the likeness of corporeal things be actually in the nature of the soul, but that there be a potentiality. The faults of the ancients as pointed out here by Aquinas in agreement with Aristotle is that they do not, or were not able to distinguish between *potentiality* and *actuality*. And as such, thought that the soul had to be a body in order to have knowledge of

body and that it must thus be composed of the principles of which bodies are formed (Murphy 2006). In the reply to objection three, Aquinas says there are two kinds of contact, the first that of *quantity*, and that of power. By that of quantity, a body can be touched only by a body. By the later a body can be touched by an incorporeal reality, which moves the body. The soul moves the body in such a manner (O’Neill 2016).

3. WHETHER THE SOUL IS IMMORTAL

In the sixth article of question 75 of Book VI of the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas considers three objections (Hankey 1982). The first is that all things that have a beginning also have an end. So the human soul, which has, in generation a beginning like those of animals also should have an end. Objection 2 states that what is out of nothing goes back to nothing. An allusion to the book of wisdom which states that *we are born of nothing* (Hankey 1982). Objection 3 is based on the tenet that nothing is without it’s proper operation, but the operation proper to the soul, which is to understand through a phantasm, cannot be without the body. For the soul understands nothing without a phantasm, and there is no phantasm without the body. Therefore the soul cannot survive the dissolution of the body.

In the *Sed Contra*, Aquinas asserts the immortality of the soul. He says a thing may be corruptible in two ways: first, in itself, and accidentally (Allan 1993). For Aquinas, it is impossible for any subsistent being to be generated or corrupted accidentally that is by corruption or generation, for these belong to a thing the way being belongs to a thing. So that whatever has being cannot be corrupted or generate except in itself (Ambrosini 2020). While those things which do not subsists, for instance accidents and material forms, acquire being or lose it through the generation or corruption of composites. For Thomas, the souls of brutes are not self-subsistent, whereas the human soul is, so that soul of brutes are corrupted, when their bodies are corrupted, while the human soul could not be corrupted unless it were corrupted in itself. This is not impossible not only as regards the human soul, but also as regards anything subsistent that is a form alone. What belongs to a thing by virtue of the thing itself is inseparable from it. And being belongs to the soul of an act, which is itself. And matter acquires actual being according as it acquires form; while it is corrupted as far as the form is separated from it. But since it is impossible for a form to be separated from itself, it is therefore impossible for subsistent form to cease to exist. Even if the soul were a composite of matter and form, it would still be incorruptible, because corruption is found only where there is contrariety for generation and corruption are from contraries. Heavenly bodies on the other hand do not have matter subject to contrariety and so are incorruptible (Baldner 2004). The receiving intellect is a receiving subject according to the manner of its being, and those things it receives are without contrariety. As the notion contraries themselves belong to the same science or discipline, there

are no contraries in themselves. Therefore, it is impossible for the intellectual soul to be corruptible.

Everything in nature aspires to being after its manner. And for things that have knowledge, desires follow from knowledge. The senses do not have knowledge of being, they do not know being except under the conditions of *here* and *now*, the intellect on the other hand grasp being, and apprehends being absolutely, and for all time. So the very thing that has an intellect desires always to exist. And since natural desire cannot be in vain, every intellectual substance therefore is incorruptible.

Aquinas' reply to the objection 1: restates the difference between man and brute beast: man has understanding and brute beasts do not. Death comes to their bodies alike, but not to their souls (Brook 2018).

Reply to objection 2. Just as a thing can be created not by reason of a passive potentiality, but by reason of the active potentiality of the creator, who can create *ex-nihilo*, so the reduction of things to nothing does not imply in the creature a potentiality to no-being, but rather in the creator a power of ceasing to sustain being (Toner 2009).

Reply to objection 3. To understand through a phantasm is the proper operation of the soul by virtue of its union with the body. After separation with the body, it will have another mode of understanding, similar to other substances separated from bodies (Cosgrove 1974).

4. THE FITTINGNESS OF THE SOUL'S UNION WITH THE BODY AND ITS NECESSITY

In question 76, Aquinas in eight articles discussed the union of the body and soul. In the fifth of these articles he discussed the *fittingness* of this union. Aquinas takes up a debate that had hitherto been unresolved in the course of the story of philosophy. Plato had asserted the priority of the soul in his theory of ideas or Forms (Hackforth 1972). He had elevated it to such a position that it is actually above that of the body. The soul when in the human body is entrapped as it were and weighed down. Socrates considered dying a process of liberation (Dekkers 2001). Now he would know the truth unencumbered. Knowledge for Plato was a form of recollection an *anamnesis* painfully carried out when in the body which always constitutes an obstacle to the soul's knowing activity.

Aristotle, on the other hand, the Stagirite student of Plato parted ways with his teacher on this ground. Aristotle dragged down Plato's soul from the misty realms and had it united with the body, matter (Raskolnikov 2009). In his doctrine the soul is nothing but the *entelechea*, the first principle, the first act of an (organized) living body. His doctrine of *hylomorphism* effects that union. Aquinas agrees with Plato that the soul is immortal, immaterial, and a spiritual form. The soul is the principle for knowledge. It is distinct from the body. But Aquinas however follows

Aristotle in thinking that the soul inheres in a body which is a composite of matter and form.

The problem that arises out of this situation in the story of philosophy had been stated as '**why an Incorruptible soul for a corruptible body?**' In this manner, this question does not make sense. It is insoluble. It was Aquinas genius to return the question around in a new and radical way. Aquinas mode of posing this question is **why a corruptible body for an incorruptible soul?** Now, in this way of up-righting the question, the solution easily presents itself. It is the body that is for the soul, not the soul for the body. Objection one delineates the problem '*it would seem that the intellectual soul is not fittingly united to such a body. For Matter must be proportionate to the form but the intellectual soul is an incorruptible form. Therefore it is not fittingly united to a corruptible body*' (Aquinas 1976).

Objection two.

The intellectual soul is a perfectly immaterial form. Proof of this is in its operation in which corporeal matter does not share. But the more subtle the body, the less it has of matter. Therefore, the soul should be united to a terrestrial body (Hutchins 1952, p. 394).

Objection three.

The form is the principle of the species, one form cannot produce a variety of species but the intellectual soul is one form. Therefore, it should not be united to a body which composed of parts belonging to different species (Aquinas & Pegis 1997, p. 710).

Objection four.

A more perfect form should have a more perfect subject. The intellectual soul is the most perfect of souls. Therefore, since the bodies of other animals are naturally provided with coverings, for instance, hairs, hoofs etc. provided with sharp teeth, horns etc. it seems the intellectual soul should not have been united to a body which is imperfect, in being deprived of the means of protection (Aquinas & Pegis 1997, p. 732).

In the *Sed Contra*, Aquinas follows Aristotle in asserting that the soul is the act of a physical organic body having life potentially. His answers set the tone for the solution to come. Now he says 'since the form is not for the matter but rather the matter for the form, we must gather from the form the reason why the matter is such as it is; and not conversely' (Mendoza 2018, 54). Now he had earlier shown that in his hierarchy of being, the intellectual soul ranks the lowest among intellectual substances. God, in the first place, the Angels who are pure spirit in the middle position and the human soul at the bottom of the ladder. God knows all things. He is his own existence. Angels know things instantaneously and are naturally endowed so. But the lowest, human soul has to gather knowledge from individual things by way of the senses. And as such since nature never fails anyone in what is necessary, therefore, the intellectual soul had to be endowed not only with the power of understanding, but also with the power of sensing. Now the action of the senses is not performed without a corporeal

instrument. Therefore the soul had to be united to a body which could as such be fitting organ of sense.

Now all the senses are based on the organs of touch. But the organ of touch requires to be a medium between contraries, such as hot and cold, of which the sense of touch has the perception, and in this way, is in potentiality with regard to the contraries and is able to perceive them. Therefore, the more the organ of touch is reduced to a more equitable proportion, the better the sense of touch. After all, our instruments are only a prolongation of our sense of touch. And for Aquinas, in agreement with Aristotle, *among men, those who are refined in body are well endowed in mind* (Adler & Van Doren 1977, p. 326).

For Aquinas in reply to objection 1. It is not due to sin that the human body is corruptible (Percival 2002). Rather, in choosing matter, two conditions are possible; the first, choice is made for that which is suitable to the form, and the second, that which follows necessarily as a result of the disposition. For example the Iron smith chooses iron for its strength and durability and pliability, to make a knife, but it is part of the characteristics of iron to rust, to wear out. In likewise, the intellectual soul requires a body of suitable complexity, but which however happens to be corruptible by necessity of its matter. God could have done otherwise, but in the course of natural thing it is not what god could have, but rather what befits the natures of things.

In reply to objection 2. For Aquinas, a body is not necessary to the intellectual soul by reason of its intellectual operation considered as such, but because of the sensitive power, which requires an organ of equable temperament (García-Valdecasas 2005). Therefore, the intellectual soul has to be united to such a body, and not to a mixed body, in which fire was excess, because otherwise there could be an equitability of temperament.

Reply to Objection 3. The parts of the animals do not make the species, the whole does. The intellectual soul therefore, though one is in its operations manifold and these various operations requiring different dispositions of the different parts of the body (Aquinas et al., 2010). So we have great variety, complexity of parts in perfect than imperfect animals.

Reply to objection 4. The intellectual soul, as comprehending universals has a power that is open to infinite things therefore; it cannot be limited nature to certain fixed natural judgments or even to fix means like clothing etc. as in animals whose souls are appropriately endowed for fixed things. Instead of all these, man for Aquinas has his by nature his reason and his hands, and, which are the organs of Organs, since by their means, man can make for himself instruments of an infinite variety, and for any number of purposes (Jeffreys 2009).

5. CONCLUSION

Aquinas' account of the metaphysical nature of the human soul is importantly different from that of all other material forms. Yet he consistently applies the criteria for unqualified unity to corporeal substances, incorporeal substances, and the partly corporeal, partly incorporeal human being. The corporeal and incorporeal subsistent parts of the human being subsist in the same act of being provided by the soul as form. He is, therefore, entitled to his claim that the human being is *unum simpliciter* and to his account of the rational soul as incorporeal, subsistent, and incorruptible.

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