6

Aquinas on the Human Soul

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The biggest obstacle to understanding Aquinas's account of the soul may be the word "soul." On hearing it, many people are prone to think of ghosts, ectoplasm, or Descartes's notion of *res cogitans*. Of course, none of these has anything to do with the soul as Aquinas understands it. But even the standard one-line Aristotelian-Thomistic characterization of the soul as the form of the living body can too easily mislead. When those unfamiliar with Aristotelian metaphysics hear the word "form," they are probably tempted to think in terms of shape or a configuration of parts, which is totally wrong. Or perhaps they think of it in Platonic terms, as an abstract universal that the individual human being participates in – also totally wrong. Or they suppose that if the soul is the form of the living body then it is terribly mysterious, and perhaps even incoherent, to say (as Aquinas does) that the soul can persist beyond the death of the body. Totally wrong again. Whether or not one agrees with Aquinas's account of the soul, when rightly understood it is not really all *that* mysterious how the soul can both be the form of the body and nevertheless survive the death of the body. Or so I will argue.

So, what I propose to do in what follows is to avoid using the word "soul" as long as possible, and at first talk instead about what it is, on Aquinas's view, to be a human being. The first thing to say about that is that a human being is a kind of substance. Part of what this entails is that a human being is not *more* than a substance. In particular, a human being is not a composite of *two* substances, as Descartes thought. Part of what it entails is that a human being is not *less* than a substance. In particular, a human being is not a mere collection of psychological attributes, as contemporary theorists of personal identity inspired by John Locke's "continuity of consciousness" account might suggest. And part of what it entails is that a human being is a composite of substantial form and prime matter, as Aquinas, being a good Aristotelian, held all material substances are.

The second thing to address is what *kind* of substance a human being is, and Aquinas's answer, like Aristotle's, is that a human being is a rational animal. What that entails is, among other things, that a human being is neither an angel nor an ape but something in between. That is to say, it entails the falsity both of Platonic and Cartesian accounts of

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human nature on the one hand, and materialist accounts on the other. Human beings are at the same time both far more closely tied to matter than Platonists and Cartesians suppose, and far less closely tied to matter than materialists suppose.

Once all of this is set out we can return to the question of what the soul is and understand how it can be that the soul is the form of the body and yet survives the death of the body. It is sometimes suggested that Aquinas's account of the soul is very strange compared to its allegedly more straightforward Cartesian and materialist rivals. I would suggest that it is not Aquinas's account that is strange but rather human nature that is strange. Aquinas merely captures that strangeness faithfully, whereas Cartesian and materialist views seek to explain it away. Angels and apes are, after all, easier to understand than is something which is a little of both. What Aquinas is telling us is that we are neither angels nor apes, but rather precisely that hybrid of both. The message is odd but true. In any event, we shouldn't blame the messenger.

6.1 What a Substance is

Consider a stone of the sort you might pluck from a river bed. Suppose it is solid, gray in color, round in shape, with a smooth surface and weighing two ounces. The solidity, grayness, roundness, smoothness, and weight are *attributes* of the stone, and the stone itself is the *substance* which bears these attributes. The attributes exist *in* the stone whereas the stone does not exist *in* any other thing in the same sense. Substances, in general, just are the sorts of things which exist in themselves rather than inhering in anything else, and which are the subjects of those attributes which do of their nature inhere in something else. This is true of material substances like stones, and it is true of angels, which as creatures of pure intellect are immaterial substances.

What concerns us here, though, are material substances in particular. One way material substances differ from immaterial substances is that they are *perishable*. An angel would be annihilated if God stopped preserving it in being, but it has no *inherent tendency* toward corruption. Hence nothing in the natural order can destroy it. Material substances, by contrast, can be destroyed by other natural objects because they do have an inherent tendency toward corruption. Another way material substances differ from immaterial substances is that there can be multiple instances of the same species of material substance. By contrast, each angel is in Aquinas's view the unique member of its own species.

What makes it possible for material substances to exhibit these features is that they are composites of *form* and *matter*. Consider once again the stone of our example. Its solidity, grayness, roundness, smoothness, and weight are among the forms it exhibits. (Note that while the round shape is among the forms the stone exhibits, it is not the only one. All shapes are forms, but not all forms are shapes.) Now, a form of itself is universal rather than particular. A form like solidity or roundness can exist not only in the particular stone you've plucked from the riverbed here and now, but in other stones that exist at other times and places, and in things other than stones. A form is also of itself imperishable. If you were to crush the stone into dust, or even if you were to destroy every solid and round thing that exists, you wouldn't thereby destroy solidity and roundness themselves, since they could in principle come to exist in some new object.

Now, matter is the principle by virtue of which a form, which is otherwise universal, is "tied down," as it were, to a specific individual thing, time, and place. And it is the principle

by virtue of which a thing having a certain form, which is of itself imperishable, is susceptible of perishing. For the matter of a thing is essentially its *potential* to receive form, whereas the form of a material thing is what *actualizes* its matter so as to make of it a concrete thing of specific kind. That is to say, the distinction between matter and form is a special case of the more general Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality. It is because matter just is the potentiality to receive form that material things can perish, since a thing's matter is never "locked on" to the form of that thing. It is always ready in principle to take on some other form instead.

If we abstract from our notion of matter *all* form, leaving nothing but the pure potential to receive form, we arrive at the idea of *prime matter*. Matter having some form or other is *secondary matter*. There is a corresponding distinction between kinds of form. A form which makes of prime matter a concrete *substance* of a certain kind is a *substantial form*. A form which merely modifies some secondary matter – matter which already has a substantial form – is an *accidental form*.

Needless to say, much more could be said about all of these concepts, but the one we need to examine in a little more detail for present purposes is the notion of substantial form.[1] The distinction between substantial form and accidental form is illuminated by comparison with the different but related Aristotelian distinction between *nature* and *art* – that is to say, between natural objects on the one hand, and everyday artifacts on the other. Hence, consider a *liana vine* – the kind of vine Tarzan likes to swing on – as an example of a natural object. A *hammock* that Tarzan might construct from living liana vines is a kind of artifact, and not a natural object. The parts of the liana vine have an inherent tendency to function together to allow the vine to exhibit the growth patterns it does, to take in water and nutrients, and so forth. By contrast, the parts of the hammock – the liana vines themselves – have no inherent tendency to function together as a hammock. Rather, they must be arranged by Tarzan to do so, and left to their own devices – that is to say, without pruning, occasional rearrangement, and the like – they will tend to grow the way they otherwise would have had Tarzan not interfered with them, including in ways that will impede their performance as a hammock. Their natural tendency is to be liana-like and not hammock-like; the hammock-like function they perform after Tarzan ties them together is extrinsic or imposed from outside, while the liana-like functions are intrinsic to them.

Now the difference between that which has such an intrinsic principle of operation and that which does not is essentially the difference between something having a substantial form and something having a merely accidental form. Being a liana vine involves having a substantial form, while being a hammock of the sort we're discussing involves instead the imposition of an accidental form on components each of which already has a substantial form, namely the substantial form of a liana vine. A liana vine is, accordingly, a true *substance*, as Aristotelian philosophers understand substance. A hammock is not a true substance, precisely because it does not qua hammock have a substantial form – an *intrinsic* principle by which it operates as it characteristically does – but only an accidental form. In general, true substances are typically natural objects, whereas artifacts are typically not true substances. A dog, a tree, and water would be true substances, because each has a substantial form or intrinsic principle by which it behaves in the characteristic ways it does. A watch, a bed, or a computer would not be true substances, because each behaves in the characteristic ways it does only insofar as certain accidental forms have been imposed on them from outside. The true substances in these cases would be the raw materials (metal, wood, glass, etc.) out of which these artifacts are made.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the correlation between what occurs "in the wild" and what has a substantial form, and the correlation between what is human-made and has only an accidental form, are only rough correlations. For there are objects that occur in nature and apart from any human intervention and yet have only accidental forms rather than substantial forms, such as piles of stones that gradually form at the bottom of a hill, tangles of seaweed that wash up on the beach, and beaver dams. And there are human-made objects that have substantial forms rather than accidental forms, such as babies (which are in an obvious sense made by human beings), water synthesized in a lab, and breeds of dog. Of course, no one would be tempted in the first place to think of these as "artifacts" in the same sense in which watches and computers are artifacts. But even objects that are "artificial" in the sense that they not only never occur "in the wild" but require significant scientific knowledge and technological expertise to produce can count as having substantial forms rather than accidental forms. Eleonore Stump suggests Styrofoam as a possible example (Stump 2003, p. 44).

Stump's rationale is that it seems to be essential to a thing's having a substantial form that it has properties and causal powers that are irreducible to those of its parts (Stump 2006). Hence water has properties and causal powers that hydrogen and oxygen do not have, whereas the properties and causal powers of an ax (to borrow Stump's example) seem to amount to nothing over and above the sum of the properties and powers of the ax's wood and metal parts. When water is synthesized out of hydrogen and oxygen, what happens is that the prime matter underlying the hydrogen and oxygen loses the substantial forms of hydrogen and oxygen and takes on a new substantial form, namely that of water. By contrast, when an ax is made out of wood and metal, the matter underlying the wood and the matter underlying the metal do not lose their substantial forms. Rather, while maintaining their substantial forms, they take on a new accidental form, that of being an ax. The making of Styrofoam, Stump suggests, seems to be more like the synthesis of water out of hydrogen and oxygen than it is like the making of an ax. For Styrofoam has properties and causal powers which are irreducible to those of the materials out of which it is made, and which therefore indicate the presence of a substantial form and thus a true substance.

But there is one further complication to add to the story. On Aquinas's account, a substance's properties "flow" or follow from its having the substantial form it does. Being four-legged, for example, flows or follows from having the substantial form of a dog. But this "flow" can, as it were, be blocked. For instance, a particular dog might, as a result of injury or genetic defect, be missing a leg. It wouldn't follow from its missing that leg that being four-legged is not after all a true property of dogs, nor would it follow that this particular creature was not really a dog after all. Rather, it would be a *damaged or defective instance* of a dog. When determining the characteristic properties and causal powers of some kind of thing, then, we need to consider the *paradigm* case, what that kind of thing is like when it is in its mature and normal state.

So, a thing counts as a true substance when, in its mature and normal state, it exhibits certain properties and causal powers that are irreducible to those of its parts. It is in this sense that a human being is a substance. But what *kind* of substance is that?

6.2 What a Rational Animal is

The answer is that a human being is a rational animal. That is to say, a human being is the kind of substance which, in its mature and normal state, exhibits both the properties and

causal powers characteristic of animality and those characteristic of rationality. Let me elaborate.

An animal is, of course, a kind of living thing. Living things, for the Aristotelian, are to be understood as substances which exhibit *immanent* causal processes as well as *transeunt* (or "transient") causal processes. Immanent causal processes begin and remain within the agent or cause (though they may also have some external effects), and typically they in some way involve the fulfillment or perfection of the cause. Transeunt causal processes, by contrast, are directed entirely outwardly, from the cause to an external effect. An animal's digestion of a meal would be an example of an immanent causal process, since the process begins and remains within the animal and serves to fulfill or perfect it by allowing it to stay alive and grow. One boulder knocking another off the side of a cliff would be an example of a transeunt causal process. Living things can serve as transeunt causes, but what is characteristic of them is that they are also capable of immanent causal processes in a way that nonliving things are not. A living thing can undertake activity that is *perfective* of it, that *fulfills* it or *furthers its own good*, while nonliving things cannot do this.

Aquinas, like other Aristotelians, distinguishes between three basic kinds of living thing. The first is the *vegetative* kind. There are a great many forms vegetative life can take, but what makes them all vegetative is that they carry out three basic sorts of operation. First, they take in nutrients so as to preserve themselves in existence; second, they go through a growth cycle, and third, they reproduce themselves. If, in their mature and normal state, they do all that but do nothing *more* than that, nothing that is not a mere variation on these activities, then they are *merely* vegetative.

The second kind of living thing is the *animal* or *sensory* kind. Animal forms of life incorporate the basic functions of vegetative forms of life – nutrition, growth, and reproduction – but on top of that carry out three further and distinctive sorts of operation. First, they take in information via specialized sense organs, and in many cases can later bring to mind sense images of the things revealed by sensation; second, they exhibit appetites or inner drives, such as an impulse to pursue or avoid something sensation has revealed to them; and third, they have the power of locomotion or self-movement, by which their appetites might be efficacious in actually getting them toward or away from what sensation has revealed. Animals too can come in a very wide variety of forms, but if in its mature and normal state a thing carries out the activities described but does nothing more than that, nothing that is not a mere variation on those activities, then it is *merely* animal.

The third kind of living thing is the *human* kind. Human life incorporates the basic functions of animal or sensory life, and thus of vegetative life – nutrition, growth, reproduction, sensation, appetite, and locomotion – but on top of that carries out two further and distinctive sorts of operation. The first is intellective activity, which essentially involves the capacity to form abstract or universal concepts, the capacity to put these concepts together into complete thoughts or propositions, and the capacity to reason from one proposition to another in accordance with standards of logical inference. The second is volition or will, which is the capacity to pursue what the intellect judges to be good or avoid what the intellect judges to be evil. Now, to be a rational animal just is to have the capacities of intellect and will as well as the capacities characteristic of animality. Anything which, in its mature and normal state, carries out these activities – nutrition, growth, reproduction, sensation, appetite, locomotion, intellection, and volition – is a human being or rational animal.

Now, like other Aristotelians, Aquinas takes each of these forms of life to be irreducibly different. Living things of any sort are irreducible to inorganic phenomena; animal life is

irreducible to merely vegetative life; and rational or human life is irreducible to vegetative or animal life. This idea is, of course, routinely dismissed today as having been refuted by modern science. However, Aristotelians have offered arguments which purport to show that science has done no such thing.[2] Furthermore, there are at least three considerations that should give pause even to those not already convinced by the distinctively Aristotelian arguments. First, that it is by no means obvious that the powers of the rational form of life can be reduced to those of the merely sensory or animal form is evident from the well-known difficulties facing attempts by contemporary philosophers of mind to provide a naturalistic account of the propositional attitudes (i.e., belief, desire, and the like). Second, that it is by no means obvious that the powers of the sensory form of life can be reduced to those of the vegetative form is evident from the intractability of the "qualia problem" (also known as the "hard problem of consciousness"), also much discussed in contemporary philosophy of mind. And that the organic in general cannot be reduced to the inorganic is evident from the difficulties facing attempts to provide a naturalistic analysis of the notion of biological function, as well as the absence of any plausible naturalistic account of the origin of life. These are *exactly* the sorts of problems you'd expect contemporary science and philosophy would face if the Aristotelians had been right all along.

Be that as it may, there is, for Aquinas, more to the uniqueness of human life than its irreducibility. Vegetative life is irreducible to what is inorganic, and merely animal life is irreducible to vegetative life, but merely animal and vegetative forms of life are nevertheless as corporeal as inorganic phenomena are. Human beings are different. Their distinctive activities are irreducible in a special way in that they are *in*corporeal, not essentially tied to any bodily organ. In particular, our intellectual powers are immaterial in a strict sense that entails that they are not the powers of any bodily organ, not even the brain.

There are a variety of arguments that Thomists have given for this conclusion, but for present purposes I'll just mention one of them. The core idea of the argument goes back at least to Plato's "affinity argument," but it has been given an especially powerful expression in recent philosophy by the late James Ross (1992, 2008, ch. 6), and I have defended Ross's version at some length myself (Feser 2013). Simplifying greatly, the argument is this: (1) All formal thinking is determinate, but (2) no corporeal state or process is determinate, so (3) no formal thinking is a corporeal state or process. By "formal thinking" what is meant is thinking that conforms to patterns of the sort familiar from mathematics and logic, such as adding, subtracting, squaring, reasoning via *modus ponens* or *modus tollens*, and so forth. By saying that such thinking is "determinate," what is meant is that there is a fact of the matter about whether one is really employing one of those patterns of reasoning rather than another. For example, when you reason from the premises that *if it is raining then the streets are wet* and *it is in fact raining*, to the conclusion that *the streets are wet*, it is just a fact of the matter that you are using *modus ponens* rather than some other pattern of reasoning. There is no ambiguity or indeterminacy about it.

Ross offers several considerations in support of premise (1), including arguments to the effect that the premise cannot coherently be denied. For one thing, to defend a rejection of premise (1) will require making use of the very patterns of reasoning the rejecter denies we ever really apply. (For instance, you will have to apply forms of reasoning like *modus ponens* in an argument to the effect that we never determinately reason according to *modus ponens*.) For another thing, even to deny premise (1) requires that one determinately grasp precisely the patterns one denies we have a determinate grasp of. (For instance, you have determinately or unambiguously to grasp what *modus ponens* is in the first place and how it

differs from other patterns of reasoning in order to go on to deny that we ever determinately or unambiguously grasp what *modus ponens* is.)

In defense of premise (2), Ross draws on a number of thought experiments from contemporary analytic philosophy, including Kripke's "quus" paradox and Quine's "gavagai" example. The upshot of these thought experiments is that no collection of facts about physiology, behavior, bodily sensations, or mental imagery, and so forth, could in principle by themselves determine that you are having a thought with *this* particular content rather than *that* one. All such facts and collections of facts are inherently indeterminate in the sense of ambiguous between different possible attributions of content. It follows that no such collection of facts could by itself ever determine that it is *modus ponens* (say) rather than some other pattern of reasoning that you are employing in any particular case.

Suppose this or some other argument for the incorporeality of the intellect is correct. Then, given what has already been said, it follows that what a human being is, is the kind of substance which in its mature and normal state carries out both corporeal *and incorporeal* activities. Some of what we do is the sort of thing that nonhuman animals do, and some of what we do is the sort of thing that angels do. That is very unusual in nature. Everything else there is falls on one side or other of the divide between the corporeal and the incorporeal. To be a human being just is to be the kind of substance which straddles that divide, which has a foot in both worlds, as it were. That might seem not only unusual but impossible. How could one thing be both corporeal and incorporeal? Isn't that contradictory? But it is not contradictory, any more than it is contradictory to say that the Great Pyramid is both triangular and square. The Great Pyramid is triangular on its sides and square on its bottom. It can be both triangular and square if it is triangular and square *in different respects*. It is in that way that a human being can be both corporeal and incorporeal.

Now, recall that a substance can fail to manifest some characteristic property or power if it is damaged. Again, though every dog by virtue of its substantial form will tend to have four legs, this tendency is frustrated in a dog which has lost a leg in an injury, or which never developed one of its legs in the first place due to some genetic defect. And this failure of a substance to manifest all its properties or powers can be far more extreme than that. Imagine, for example, a dog which has lost all four of its legs. Or imagine a dog which as a result of some horrific accident has lost not only its legs, but also its eyes, ears, nose, teeth and tongue, most of its skin and many of its internal organs, and in effect has been reduced to its bare vegetative functions, kept alive on a slab in a laboratory somewhere via a feeding tube. It would still be a dog rather than some other kind of substance. It hasn't *literally* become a vegetable, and if you were somehow able to treat it in such a way that it could regenerate its lost organs, the organs it would grow back would all be dog organs. But it would be a severely damaged substance, an incomplete substance. It would be a dog reduced to the stub of a dog, to the bare minimum consistent with there being a dog at all. And if you destroyed *all* of its corporeal functions, including the most rudimentary vegetative functions, there would be no dog left at all.

A human being can, of course, suffer damage of a similar sort. People lose arms, legs, eyes, ears, and other organs. It is also possible for a human being to suffer the sort of horrific damage I imagined the dog of my example suffering, as does the protagonist of Dalton Trumbo's novel *Johnny Got His Gun*. We'd still have a human being in this case. We wouldn't have a different substance, but the very same substance in a radically damaged or incomplete state. Now I noted that when the last of a dog's corporeal functions are destroyed, the dog itself is destroyed. The reason is that there's nothing *more* to a dog than

its corporeal functions. But the same is not true of a human being. If you destroy all of a human being's corporeal functions, it doesn't follow that the human being is gone, because a human being is the kind of substance which has *incorporeal* activities as well as corporeal ones.

Hence when the human *body* is destroyed, it doesn't follow that the human *being* is destroyed, that the *substance* is destroyed. It is *not* destroyed, any more than a dog is destroyed when you reduce it to its vegetative functions. Rather, it continues on as a radically incomplete substance, as the stub of a human being, reduced to the bare minimum consistent with there being a human being at all. The difference with the case of the dog is that whereas the bare minimum consistent with there being a dog is something corporeal, the bare minimum consistent with there being a human being is something *in*corporeal. It is the human substance reduced to its intellective and volitional functions, with all the corporeal functions being prevented from manifesting. This is why, for us unlike dogs, death is not the end. Death is more like an amputation than it is like annihilation. It is a "full body amputation," as it were.

That sounds like a pretty severe amputation, and it is even more severe than you might expect given that at least the intellect survives the death of the body. On Aquinas's view, though concepts are different from sense images and intellect therefore a different faculty than sensation or imagination, our intellects nevertheless require sensation as a source of information and imagery as an aid to abstract thought. This is why, even though the concept *triangularity* differs from a mental image of a triangle or a mental image of the word "triangle," you nevertheless cannot entertain the concept without calling to mind images like those. But sensation and imagination are corporeal activities, requiring a brain. So, since the brain is among the organs "amputated" at death, the intellect cannot do much on its own despite surviving the "amputation."

The following analogy might help. In the movie *Guardians of the Galaxy*, there is a character named Groot who is a sentient, thinking, walking and talking tree able to regenerate any organs he might lose in battle. At one point in the movie he is blown to bits and reduced to a single twig. He is not thereby destroyed, however. The twig is planted in a flower pot and he very slowly begins to grow back his arms, legs, eyes, mouth, and other body parts. Presumably, while still a mere twig and before these organs have grown back, he not only lacks locomotion but also sentience and thought. These powers are all dormant, as it were – ready to "flow" from Groot's substantial form but prevented from doing so by the severe damage he has suffered. What is left of a human being after death is like the twig. The differences are, first, that unlike the twig, what is left of a human being after death is incorporeal; and second, that unlike the twig, what is left of a human being after death lacks the power to regenerate the lost, corporeal organs on its own. Their restoration would require divine intervention.

So, death is far from the liberation Plato implies that it is. Since we are rational *animals*, the absence of our animal, corporeal powers cannot fail to be an extremely grave diminution. All the same, since we are *rational* animals and rationality is essentially incorporeal, even death is not the end of the human being, contrary to what the materialist supposes.

As I have said, this is very strange. Indeed, human beings, as hybrids of the corporeal and the incorporeal, are arguably the strangest things in all creation. We are, metaphysically speaking, real weirdos. And this is the source of many of our persistent moral difficulties. For example, where sex is concerned, we tend constantly either to overstate or to understate

its importance, and toward either licentiousness or prudery. The reason we are so prone to these extremes, I would say, has precisely to do with our highly unusual place in the order of things. Angels are incorporeal and asexual, creatures of pure intellect. Nonhuman animals are entirely bodily, never rising above sensation and appetite, and our closest animal relatives reproduce sexually. Human beings, as rational animals, straddle this divide, having, as I have said, one foot in the angelic realm and the other in the animal realm. Metaphysically, this is just barely a stable position to be in, and sex makes it especially difficult to maintain. The unique intensity of sexual pleasure and desire, and our bodily incompleteness qua men and women, continually remind us of our corporeal and animal nature, pulling us "downward" as it were. Meanwhile our rationality continually seeks to assert its control and pull us back "upward," and naturally resents the unruliness of such intense desire. This conflict is so exhausting that we tend to try to get out of it by jumping either to one side of the divide or the other. But this is an impossible task and the result is that we are continually frustrated. And the supernatural divine assistance that would have remedied this weakness in our nature and allowed us to maintain an easy harmony between rationality and animality was lost in original sin.

So, behaviorally, we have a tendency to fall either into prudery or into sexual excess. And intellectually, we have a tendency to fall either into the error of Platonism – treating man as essentially incorporeal, trapped in the prison of the body – or into the opposite error of materialism, treating human nature as entirely reducible to the corporeal. The dominance of Platonism in early Christian thought is perhaps the main reason for its sometimes excessively negative attitude toward sex, and the dominance of materialism in modern times is one reason for its excessive laxity in matters of sex. The right balance is the Aristotelian-Thomistic position – specifically, Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophical anthropology, which affirms that man is a single substance with both corporeal and incorporeal activities; and Aristotelian-Thomistic natural law theory, which upholds traditional sexual morality while affirming the essential goodness of the body.

Other aspects of our moral condition can also be illuminated by this uneasy metaphysical straddle entailed by being a rational animal, but I'll leave that as homework.

6.3 What the Soul is

Now, I have written over eight pages discussing Aquinas's philosophical anthropology, immortality, and even the war of the flesh and the spirit, without once using the word "soul." But really I have been talking about the soul the whole time, and now it is time to make it explicit where it fits in. To some extent this is easy. As is well known, the word "soul" is in Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy essentially a technical term for the substantial form of a living thing. This is why plants and animals have souls just as human beings do. There's nothing terribly remarkable about that because plants and animals, like everything else, have substantial forms, and the soul is just a kind of substantial form. So, you could just plug in the word "soul" wherever I've talked about the substantial form of a human being or other living thing, and there you'll have the Thomistic account of the soul. At one level it is no more complicated than that.

That makes it sound like the question of where the soul fits in is a matter of semantics, and I think that's essentially correct. However, the semantics of the term are complicated, even as Aquinas uses it, so more needs to be said. In particular, the Aristotelian-Thomistic position is often expressed as the view that the human soul is the substantial form of the

living human *body*. And that is perfectly true. But it is also potentially misleading. Indeed, I think it has misled many readers, who find it terribly mysterious how the soul could be the form of the body and yet survive the death of the body. They suspect that Aquinas is trying to "pull a fast one" here, trying to have his cake and eat it too, trying to marry two irreconcilable positions, trying to be an Aristotelian philosopher and a Christian theologian at the same time and not succeeding. In fact, none of that is correct, and I think what I've already said so far shows why.

But let's try to understand why people find the formulation in question puzzling, before making it explicit why they shouldn't. What happens when they hear the sentence "The human soul is the substantial form of the living human body" is, I think, this. They know that, on the Aristotelian analysis, when a material substance like a stone loses its substantial form, nothing of that individual stone survives. The form of the stone carries on only in the sense that some other thing could always come to have the form of a stone. But that particular stone is gone for good, and there is no sense in which its form, considered as a particular thing, carries on or subsists. So far so good. Then the listener recalls that for the Aristotelian, a soul is just the substantial form of a living thing, and that the souls – that is to say, the substantial forms – of plants and nonhuman animals don't subsist or carry on after their deaths any more than the substantial form of a stone carries on after its destruction. Again, so far so good.

But now the listener makes a mistake. He supposes that when Aquinas, following Aristotle, says that:

1 The human soul is the substantial form of the body.

then he is saying something that entails:

2 The human soul is the substantial form of a substance which is entirely bodily or corporeal.

As a result the listener is puzzled when Aquinas goes on to say that the soul persists beyond the death of the body. After all, stones, trees, and nonhuman animals are all entirely bodily or corporeal, and their substantial forms don't carry on when the substances in question perish. And the human body is by definition bodily or corporeal. So why should *its* substantial form carry on after it perishes any more than these other substantial forms do? Hence the listener concludes that if Aquinas were consistent, then he ought to think *either* that the soul survives the death of the body but therefore is not really the form of the body but rather a substance in its own right; or that the soul is the form of the body but therefore does not persist beyond the death of the body. But to think both that it is the form of the body and that it survives the death of the body is (the listener judges) not consistent.

But in fact there is no inconsistency, because *proposition (1) simply does not entail proposition (2),* and Aquinas would reject (2). For in Aquinas's view, the human soul is the form of a *substance*, that substance is *a human being*, and a human being has both corporeal *and incorporeal* operations. Hence the soul is not the form of a substance which is *entirely* bodily or corporeal. Rather, it is the form of a substance which is corporeal *in some respects* and *incorporeal in others*. Now, those corporeal respects are the ones summed up in the phrase "the body." Hence the soul is, naturally, the form of the body. But it simply doesn't follow that the soul is the form of a substance which is *exhausted* by its body, that is, by its bodily operations.

This is why there is nothing terribly mysterious about why the soul, as Aquinas understands it, can persist beyond the death of the body. For the *substance* of which the soul is the form does not go out of existence with the death of the body. Rather, the *corporeal or bodily* properties and powers of that substance are no longer manifest, while *the incorporeal properties and powers continue*. To be sure, the substance in question has been severely reduced or damaged. That is why Aquinas thinks of the disembodied soul as an "incomplete substance." But an incomplete substance is not a nonsubstance. Thus, to say that the soul persists beyond the death of the body is *not* to say that the form of a substance persists after the substance has gone out of existence (which certainly *would* be a very mysterious thing for an Aristotelian like Aquinas to say!)

I would suggest that these considerations shed light on a dispute that has arisen among Thomists in recent years over how to understand the relationship between the postmortem soul and the human being whose soul it is. There are two main views. One of them has come to be called *corruptionism*, and it holds that at death the human being ceases to exist until the resurrection, even though the soul carries on. The other view is called *survivalism*, and it holds that the human being persists in existence after death and even before the resurrection, though only as constituted by his soul. Among the many philosophers who have contributed to this debate are Patrick Toner (2009) on the corruptionist side, and David Oderberg (2012) on the survivalist side.[3] There are two main questions where these views are concerned. First, which of them is the most plausible view to take in light of Thomistic metaphysical principles? Second, which of them did Aquinas himself actually hold? I will focus on the first question rather than say much by way of exegesis of Aquinas's texts. It is worth noting, however, that the two questions are not unrelated. If one of the two views is in fact more plausible in light of Aquinas's own principles, then that is at least some evidence favoring the attribution of that view to him, and reconsidering our interpretation of those passages that seem at odds with it.

It will no doubt be obvious from what I've said so far that the position I favor is the survivalist one. For I have said that after death the human being persists, albeit in a severely reduced or incomplete state. Now, the survivalist view is characterized as the view that after death but before resurrection, the *soul* constitutes the human being. The way I would suggest interpreting this claim is as follows. Consider first that the soul, being a kind of form, cannot *by itself and without qualification* either subsist or constitute anything, because a form *qua form* exists only together with the substance of which it is the form. However, since the substance of which the human soul is the form is not entirely corporeal, that substance subsists and continues beyond the death of the body because the death of the body involves the cessation of only the corporeal aspect of said substance, not the incorporeal aspect. Hence, because the substance that the human soul is the form of persists beyond the death of the body, the *soul* persists beyond the death of the body.

Consider next that the substance in question (i.e., the human being) persists only in a greatly diminished and incomplete state, indeed diminished to the bare minimum possible consistent with the substance's existing at all. So, you might say that the substance has gotten as close as anything possibly could get to being a substantial form existing all by itself. Moreover, the material side of this substance is completely gone, so that we do have a form without *matter*, even if it is not exactly a form existing apart from any *substance*. So, there is a loose sense in which we can say that we have a substantial form by itself; and there is a strict sense in which we can speak of a substantial form without a *body*, specifically. So, since the soul just is that substantial form, it is quite natural to speak of the soul existing all by

itself – even if, were we speaking more strictly, we'd speak instead of the soul continuing to exist together with the substance of which it is the form, but without the *corporeal* features of that substance being present any longer.

So, since there is a sense in which we might call this thing that persists beyond the death of the body the soul, and this thing that exists beyond the death of the body is also a substance – albeit an incomplete one – and, since this incomplete substance just is the human being in a radically impaired state, it is quite natural to say that the soul that survives death just is the human being surviving death (again, in a radically incomplete state). Now, that is just what the survivalist position says. So, the position I have been developing in this paper is essentially the survivalist position.

Now, I think that one of several very good reasons for a Thomist to take the survivalist position rather than the corruptionist position is that the corruptionist position would make Aquinas's view as mysterious as people sometimes suppose it to be (mistakenly, as I have argued). For the corruptionist position holds, again, that at death the human being ceases to exist, even though the soul carries on. Yet the human being is the substance of which the soul is a form. So, if the human being ceases to exist at death, then that means that the substance of which the soul is the form ceases to exist at death. And in that case, how could the soul carry on? How could a form exist apart from the substance of which it is the form? Corruptionism seems to make Aquinas's position as incoherent as its critics accuse it of being. But survivalism does not have this problem, precisely because it does *not* say that the human being ceases to exist at death.

There are two further important arguments for survivalism, one philosophical and one theological. The first is this. On Aquinas's philosophical anthropology, just as it is the *human being* who sees, and not the eye, it is the *human being* who thinks, and not the intellect. The eye sees only in a loose sense, and the intellect thinks only in a loose sense. Now, on both the survivalist view and the corruptionist view, the intellect survives the death of the body and thought occurs as well (albeit only with divine assistance since the intellect's normal corporeal sources of information are gone). But if thought occurs and if on Aquinas's own principles it is strictly speaking only the human being, and not the intellect, which thinks, then it follows that there must be a sense in which the human being survives as well (Oderberg 2012, p. 8).

The second, theological argument is this. After death the soul is rewarded, punished, or purged in light of the deeds of this present life. But it makes sense to reward, punish, or purge only persons, not mere parts of persons. It makes no sense, for example, to speak of rewarding or punishing Bob's foot or his pancreas for Bob's good or bad deeds. But then the soul as it exists after death must in some sense be the human person existing after death, rather than a mere part of the person (see Hershenov and Koch-Hershenov 2006).

Naturally, corruptionists present arguments of their own. One of them appeals to the *weak supplementation principle*, a widely accepted thesis of mereology (the study of parts and wholes). The principle holds that a thing cannot have only a single proper part, where a proper part is a part that is less than the whole. Now, the disembodied soul is merely part of a human being. If the human being persisted after death as the disembodied soul, then the human being would exist as a single proper part of a human being, thus violating the Weak Supplementation Principle. So, concludes the corruptionist, the human being does not persist.

There are several things that could be said in response to this. Oderberg suggests that the weak supplementation principle seems like a universal truth of mereology because the

examples we tend to focus on when thinking about mereology are material objects, whose parts are spatially smaller than the whole. But what is true of material things will not necessarily be true of immaterial things, and the soul is immaterial.

It seems to me, though, that a more important point is that here as elsewhere when thinking about the metaphysics of substance, we need always to keep in mind the distinction between the properties which flow from a thing's substantial form and the actual manifestation of those properties, and the corresponding distinction between the normal or paradigm case and the aberrant case. Again, all dogs by virtue of their substantial form are four-legged, and this is not falsified by the existence of three-legged dogs, because such dogs are defective instances. The manifestation of one of the properties they would naturally tend to exhibit (four-leggedness) is in this case being blocked. And if we consider the more radically damaged dog of my example – reduced to its merely vegetative functions – we can see how a thing might be reduced to something close to a single one of its proper parts.[4] Now, I would suggest that this is exactly what happens in the case of the disembodied soul. The human being has been reduced to a single one of its proper parts. This doesn't violate the Weak Supplementation Principle if we interpret that principle as applying to a thing *in its mature and normal state*. For the human being qua disembodied soul is *not* in his normal state.

Another corruptionist argument appeals to Aquinas's famous remark in his Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians that "I am not my soul," and similar remarks. Doesn't this entail that Aquinas himself denied that the human being survives death as a disembodied soul, and was therefore a corruptionist rather than a survivalist?

It does not entail that. It would entail that only if, when making such remarks, Aquinas was addressing the *specific* issues in dispute between corruptionism and survivalism. And he was not. I would suggest that the target of such remarks was not what we would today call survivalism, but rather Platonism. The Platonist, recall, takes the view that a person is an *entirely* incorporeal thing, which is only *contingently* related to the body. The survivalist certainly rejects that view, but it was one which would have been very familiar in Aquinas's day, and one to which many thought (and many still think) belief in the immortality of the soul tends to lead to. What Aquinas intends in making remarks like "I am not my soul" is to indicate that he rejects this Platonist view. He means "I am not *merely* my soul," or "I am not *reducible to* my soul," because the body is essential to me and thus something I would have when in my mature and normal state. It doesn't follow that there is no sense at all in which I am my soul. Nor does this follow from Aquinas's view that it is St. Peter's soul, rather than St. Peter, to whom we pray. For just as it is a person who thinks, rather than part of a person, it is only a person to whom we can intelligibly pray, not part of a person. It would make no sense to say "Left foot of St. Peter, pray for us," or "Pancreas of St. Peter, pray for us." But it does make sense to say "Soul of St. Peter, pray for us." The only way that can be true is if there is a *sense* in which St. Peter's soul just is St. Peter.

Certainly this is what Aquinas *should* say given the general metaphysics of substance in the context of which he develops his philosophical anthropology, or so I would argue.[5]

Notes

1. See Feser (2014, ch. 3) for a thorough exposition and defense of Aquinas's understanding of substance.
2. For an overview of the traditional Aristotelian position on the irreducibility of the different forms of living thing, see Koren (1955); and for a recent defense, see Oderberg (2007, chs. 8–10).
3. See Oderberg (2012, n2) for a list of philosophers on each side of the debate.

4. Oderberg makes a similar point and illustrates it with the vivid example of a human being reduced to just his head, kept alive through futuristic technology as in a science fiction story. His point is well taken, but I prefer my example of the radically damaged dog, since (a) the human head example brings to mind the sorts of thought experiments characteristic of the complicated contemporary debate over personal identity, and (b) from a Thomistic point of view, even the human being preserved as a severed head is not *just* a head, but the head plus the incorporeal aspect of the human being. These factors threaten to lead the discussion down irrelevant side paths which can be avoided if we stick with the dog example.
5. For comments on an earlier version of this paper, I thank audience members at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York, on June 5, 2015, and at Harvard University on October 2, 2015.

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