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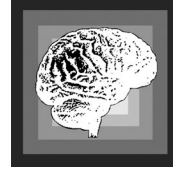
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## Psychology and mind in Aquinas

MIGUEL GARCÍA-VALDECASAS\*

*This article stresses the main lines of Thomas Aquinas's philosophy on the nature of the body-soul union. Following Aristotle, Aquinas sees the soul as a 'principle of life' which is intimately bound to a body. Together they form a non-contingent composition. In addition, the distinctive feature of the human soul is rationality, which implies that a human needs a mind to be what it is. However, this is not to say, as Descartes proposes, that the reason that I am a human is that I am fully self-conscious. On the contrary, I will show that self-consciousness is not necessarily a key to defining a human being. To that aim, and based on Aquinas's views, I draw a distinction between what I will call 'egos' and 'selves'.*

**Keywords:** *history; medieval; mind; philosophy; psychiatry; psychology; self; self-knowledge; theology; Thomas Aquinas*

Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274) is one of the best known medieval philosophers. His writings and thought have become familiar to those acquainted with medieval philosophy, as well as to many others interested in the wide range of problems he dealt with. These problems include: the concept of being, the world's creation, the immortality of the soul, the virtues and the proofs of God's existence. Aquinas's thought influenced discussion on these problems to such an extent that even now it is difficult to confront them without bringing his arguments into discussion. Nevertheless, in spite of the remarkable power of his legacy, modern philosophers have not always considered him a major figure. Whatever the reasons for this dismissal, the fact is that many philosophers are ignorant about many aspects of his thought, although, on the other hand, he is not the only one to be dismissed

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in this way. The same could be said of some other medieval philosophers who engaged actively in the affairs of their times and contributed largely to Western philosophy.

In this paper I will stress some of Aquinas's main ideas on the human constitution. In particular, I will discuss the way in which Aquinas addresses the central attribute of the human being: the *anima rationalis* or 'rational soul'. Aquinas thinks that every human being has a soul, but a proper understanding of his concept of 'soul' (*anima*) presupposes some familiarity with the medieval concept of *anima rationalis*. In a way, medieval philosophers meant by *anima* that human beings are more than beings that have a mind. Nowadays, to say that everyone 'has a mind' is to point out a trivial fact. But medieval philosophers meant by 'mind' and 'soul' something far deeper than that, and rather different. They considered that human beings were essentially different from any other kind of beings, notably animals, owing to their kind of soul. The property that made a human essentially different from them was his soul. The soul was considered the core of the human identity and, detached from the body to which it is intrinsically united, it cannot be seen, tasted or felt by means of the senses. Acquaintance with the soul is only afforded to the mind, since only rational beings can know that they have a mind. Consequently, thinking is only possible for beings which have a mind.

### **The soul as the first principle of life**

Following Aristotle, Aquinas defines the soul as the first principle of life, and classifies three kinds of soul which correspond to the kinds of life we observe in the universe: the *anima vegetativa*, *sensitiva* and *rationalis*. Each kind of soul constitutes a kind of life, so that kinds of life correspond to kinds of soul. The human soul is rational, but this does not make it incompatible with the other two kinds of soul, that of animals and plants. For Aristotle, the properties of lower degrees of life are also possessed by the higher degrees, so that the higher the kind of life is, the more capabilities a being acquires. Rational souls bear most of the abilities of plants and animals. Aquinas believes equally that we share some of their biological ends. This thesis requires, however, a careful understanding. For insofar as we do not perform some activities of plants such as photosynthesis, nor react to stimuli in the exact way that animals do, we cannot be put on a par with them. Aristotle suggests therefore, that we pursue some of their ends in activities such as nourishment and reproduction, whatever the means an organism has to put these ends into effect. This is how human nature embraces basic potentialities of plant and animal life, which Aquinas calls 'minor', in contrast to higher potentialities like reason. Aquinas (1981a: 386) remarks that minor potentialities are governed in humans by reason, a faculty which animals lack and which marks the border between the animal and human world.

Aristotle (1993: 8) defines the soul as ‘a substance *qua* form of a natural body which has life potentially’. As we will see, the soul is what makes the body to be the particular kind of body that it is. Therefore, it is not possible to conceive the existence of a rational soul independently from a body, although for the sake of philosophical analysis, we seek to define the soul in itself. Aquinas thinks that the soul is a matter of observation and physical study insofar as it forms a composition with the body. Considered in itself, in turn, the soul is the first actuality of a body and must not be confused with a physical element. The soul is not a sort of chemical substance to be found in some part of our organism such as the brain. Aquinas is by no means a materialistic philosopher. Indeed, none of the kinds of life that Aristotle described can be reduced to plain mechanisms. To believe that a plant is no more than a string of DNA considerably distorts Aquinas’s account of the soul, since this perspective ignores the formal constituent of any living body. In a reductive analysis of it, there is a formal constituent which will not appear or, in fact, that will only appear if empirical data are not taken to be all that we know of the body. To know the body fully, it is necessary to know what makes a body the kind of body that it is. The structure of physical bodies as studied by the natural sciences is just a step towards this.

These structures are in fact aspects of forms, and forms, for Aquinas, are particular types of soul. The attempt to reduce forms to their material constituents is almost as old as the history of philosophy. This theory was already held sometime before Aristotle by some pre-Socratic philosophers, who ‘asserted that only bodies were real things, and that what is non corporeal is nothing’ (Aquinas, 1981a: 363). In response, Aquinas points out that the opinions of those pre-Socratic philosophers precluded observing what is first in the order of the principles. He thinks that when bodies are taken as bare chunks of matter, something essential to them is missed. The materialist hypothesis reduces human activity to physical causes in a similar sense to contemporary physics reducing a phenomenon to that which is numerically determinable. For instance, a materialist would take for human actions the physical actions of a body. He would limit himself to pursue regularities in the movements of my limbs when I walk, in the movements of my fingers when I type, or in the vibrations of the vocal chords when I speak. This would certainly account for the manner in which my body behaves, and provide a scientific explanation of the body that is fully legitimate.

However, this is not a philosophical explanation but a scientific one, and as such the explanation falls outside the philosophical scope. To illustrate this point, Aquinas considers the case of the heart, which was said by some to be the ‘principle of life’. To say that the heart is the ‘principle of life’ in so far as it makes the blood flow is a sort of explanation in which Aquinas sees no fault. In turn, he thinks that it would be very misleading to contend that the heart is ‘*the* first principle of life’, as though this were the first cause of life. Indeed, it is hardly deniable that the heart is an essential organism, but we

might also consider that the liver and the brain are equally essential to live. The body is a complex system in which, metaphysically, no part can be said to be 'first' compared to any other – e.g., the heart to the liver or the brain to both of them – since none of the organs can subsist separately. Thus, for Aquinas what is intrinsically organic cannot be said to be 'first' in the order of causes, since no organ or limb is the primary source of the living organism. For that reason, even if it is possible to say in a way that the heart is a 'principle of life' and physical evidence is put forward, if philosophy does not go further, the question of what is primarily life for a body will remain unanswered. Physical causes, therefore, are merely one side of the issue. Physics, not in Aquinas's concept of 'natural philosophy' but in a reductive sense, could not help in solving the problem of the soul as a whole, since the soul of which Aquinas speaks is not simply reducible to matter. This is what Aquinas means when he denies that anything corporeal can be said to be the first principle of life, so that an explanation which does not take the form into consideration is a reductive and partial explanation of the body. Admittedly, then, the necessary physical study of bodies cannot replace the more intricate question of what ultimately keeps an organism alive. Inevitably, this question is only a philosophical one.

Aquinas still admits the necessity of facing the central question of what the composition of body and soul is. He thinks that unless we admit a first principle of life, our physical certainties would be limited to empirical observation and the rational analysis it supports. As a result, someone opposed to philosophical inquiry into the nature of a first cause should carefully avoid the use of some terms such as 'reality', 'knowledge' and 'truth' in any sense that goes beyond physics. Besides, to ensure that this strategy is not betrayed by meta-material concepts, he should get rid of common terms such as 'body' and 'soul', at least in their non-technical form, because contrary to other concepts of physics their meaning would not be physically well-defined. Likewise, a rigorous materialist should reject the strong meaning of sentences like 'this body is yours' because the term 'yours' would not refer here to anything empirically given. I can point to your body to show that it is yours, but this can hardly count as evidence of what makes your body actually *yours*. Inevitably, then, this body would be 'his' or 'hers' only on the basis of our conventions. The materialist will consider the talk of 'my body' as referring to the place where 'certain voluntary movements' occur, or the place 'where you should look to see if I am happy', avoiding the use of words whose meaning is physically unclear.

### **Matter and soul in composition**

These difficulties invite us to broaden the scope of the search for the first causes in the sense in which Aristotle and Aquinas conceived them. They both hold that the human being is a composition of soul and body, in which

the soul is a form and the body is matter. Form and matter are co-principles of physical reality; all physical entities are made of them. As the first principle of life, the soul amounts to its first and ultimate cause. But this cause does not stand alone; it is largely sustained by a large set of causes involved in keeping the body alive and ensuring that the first act effectively reaches the corporeal parts. Aquinas does not think that the soul in itself is something vague, undefined, ethereal or gaseous, to which corporeal elements are added. Following Aristotle, he regards the soul as a kind of act or activity intimately bound to each part of the body. The soul is altogether inseparable from the body, to the point that separation would be contrary to its nature. Aristotle considered that there is little room to question the unity of the body and the soul. He wrote: 'we should not ask whether the body and the soul are one, any more than whether the wax and the impression are one, or in general whether the matter of each thing and that of which it is the matter are one' (Aristotle, 1993: 9). He compared the soul to the capacity of some things, saying that the soul is to the body what the vision is to the eye, or the capacity to chop to the axe (p. 10).

Detached from the actualized body, the soul is a bizarre entity. Notably, it is not the soul that lives, it is the composition as a whole. Hence, none of the parts of a human being is less alive than its soul, because the soul does not make up a substance apart from the parts and powers that it informs. Powers and soul are intrinsically united. The variety of powers is an expression of the broad range of its activity, but interestingly they all are powers and activities of the same and unique substance. Something I think when I write these lines would not count as a different part of the soul whose activity allows me to think. My current ideas as I write have to be seen as my mind at a given stage. The variety of my actions, thus, does not multiply my principle of life.

The soul is not only the power which keeps powers and dispositions together; it is also the principle which keeps a body alive. To that extent, Aquinas defines the soul as being a form, the form of a body. The soul is not a form of things in general, but this particular one: he thinks that *this* form matches *this* body. Bodily forms are not sorts of universal concepts attached to particular things. The form of cat, which is universal insofar as it refers to a species, becomes particular when it is united to the body of a cat. In addition, the term 'form' does not refer to any bodily 'figure', 'shape' or 'boundary'. In the medieval context, 'the soul has not matter' (Aquinas, 1981a: 367). It is only the everyday use of the word which leads us to a pictured image of it, as though the form marked the beginning of an invisible entity which starts just where the body finishes. As a matter of fact, the 'form' is simply a suitable term which describes the activity of the soul in the body rather than a visible 'shape'. Aquinas's concept of 'form' is technical and more sophisticated than the everyday concept of 'form'. Of course, this does not imply that the concept can only be understood by philosophers. In fact, no special abilities are required to grasp forms which are co-principles of

things, together with matter, and which, once known, suit ordinary concepts like 'cat', 'tree' or 'table'.

Aquinas thinks that life is not something that the body can take for granted. The act of each form or the act that keeps the body alive can be understood as the 'content' or 'proper effect' of the form. The 'proper effect' of each act is the distinctive mark that the form lays down in matter as long as matter is informed by it. To specify the form of a particular matter is to find what is distinctive in it. In a way, each body depicts the kind of soul it belongs to. Thus, to speak of a 'cat' means to know what makes this cat to be a 'cat', and therefore to know that it belongs to a wider category of beings defined by what a 'cat' is. This categorization is possible because every speaker has in his mind the concept of 'cat'. The intelligible form of 'cat' is what makes the concept of 'cat' refer to an entity, whereas the real form is what makes the real cat to be the animal that it is. The so-called 'mark' or distinctive character of the form makes them subjects of different species, and allows for the typology and classification of entities by science. Otherwise cats could not be grasped differently from other animal species: plants, animals and humans would display everywhere the same form, overlooking the accidental differences that even biological clones have. In the case of human beings, those differences take place at several levels. First, it is clear that every human is either female or male; secondly, that he belongs necessarily to a race common to many others, and thirdly that he enjoys bodily features and a particular character which is proper to him.

I have stressed so far the role played by form in the composition. Yet in Aquinas's view, the body is also very significant. In order to understand this, a refinement in the concept of 'body' is required, because modern conceptions of the body often see it as a passive chunk of matter fully dependent on the will in humans. Not unusually the body is seen as a useful instrument to its possessor and as not more than bare matter, meaning that in any subject the instrumentality of the body makes a clear contrast with the immediacy of the mind. The truth is that this modern account of the body is a serious obstacle to understanding Aquinas's position, a hindrance whose roots can be traced back to Plato and more notably to the philosophy of Descartes. This seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician has been considered the main ambassador of dualism in the modern era. Later on, Descartes' views found support among some psychologists until the last century, and even now it is possible to find dualist echoes in the contentions of some neuroscientists. According to Descartes, the soul and the body are two different substances contingently united. Man was simply a soul, a thinking substance, whereas the body, comprising another substance, was extension in motion. The body was thus the extended counterpart of an unextended substance which is a free and thinking subject. He thought that 'I' am basically a thinking and conscious mind, whereas my body seems linked to me for reasons that we ignore. Therefore, dualists tend to think that

it is more accurate to state that 'I have a body' than 'I am a body' (Kenny, 1989: 17), because the body is not an intrinsic part of me. In contrast with Aquinas, the body is not 'informed' by the soul because it is thought to be independent and external to it. Dualists tend to show their apparent detachment from the given notion of 'body'. Descartes exemplified this attitude by affirming that 'I am really distinct from my body' to the point that I 'can exist without it' (Descartes, 1985, II: 54). So, rather understandably, on this account the unity of mind and body becomes haphazard.

If this account of dualism is true, Aquinas could hardly be considered a dualist. He regards the soul as the principle of bodily life. For Aristotle (1993: 8), the body is considered the proper subject of life. For the body, to be alive means to be united to the soul. They are co-principles, rather than instruments of each other: the soul bestows life, and the body supplies a subject to carry it out. As co-principle, the body ceases to be passive. For several reasons, this shift casts the issue in a different light. First, it sets the body as the proper bearer of life or its 'subject'. There is a sense in which the soul is not the bearer of the body; it is the body which bears the soul (Aquinas, 1951: 171). By underlying the composition, the body provides some matter for the soul, although, as Aquinas observes, not any matter is suitable for the soul. The living composition requires a specific kind of matter which has to be disposed to be the matter of *this* kind of form, rather than the matter of any form. When such matter is provided, we get a subject 'equipped with the various organs required by a living body in consequence of the life-principle's various vital activities' (Aquinas, 1951: 171).

Second, if the body is the subject of life, there is a sense in which the body is as perfect as the form. It may sound odd not to regard the body as 'inferior' to the form, as we did previously when we spoke about non-rational powers, which are governed by the rational ones in man. In order to answer this, a brief explanation is needed. The form is an act; and acts, according to Aquinas, follow potentialities (abilities or dispositions) as effects to causes. This means that acts can be later in time and prior in importance. The form is one of those acts which are prior in importance and later 'in time', because it requires the body which makes the form to be the 'form of X'. But this makes the body 'prior to' the form in its own sense, according to which the matter is 'primary' and the principle of individuation of forms, as Aquinas says, meaning that otherwise the form could not become particular.

Third, if the body is the subject of life, bodies cannot be understood as tools or mere instruments in a Cartesian sense. Possibly, Aquinas does not seem to be always free from this criticism. He occasionally refers to the senses as instruments, affirming that 'the whole corporeal nature is subject to the soul, and is related to it as its matter and instrument' (Aquinas, 1981a: 390). However, it has to be said that the union of body and soul is at the centre of the discussion of these passages, and it would be unfair to regard him as a dualist without taking into account that in several other places he



rejects any treatment of souls and bodies as distinct entities; for example, he emphasizes that 'inasmuch as the form of the body, it has not an existence apart from the existence of the body, but by its own existence is united to the body immediately' (Aquinas, 1981a: 390).

To underline the necessary union of soul and body, he referred to a type of matter, different from the matter of particular bodies X or Y, which every embodied soul has to bear even conceptually. It was called the 'common matter', a matter which is not particular, but belongs to the concept of form. To make sense of this notion, I must return to the starting point of this section. Aquinas thinks that once the body has been brought to act by its form, life becomes essential to its nature. Logically, this implies that the concept of 'body' cannot be taken away from the concept of 'life', which is given to it by its form. Eventually, death puts an end to the composition, but not to the relationship between form and matter. If the soul is bound up with the matter even conceptually, the same should apply to the body. Thus, Aquinas ruled out the concept 'man' detached from its bodily parts, even if we take 'man' universally. He writes: 'as it belongs to the notion of this particular man to be composed of this soul, of this flesh, and of these bones; so it belongs to the notion of man to be composed of soul, flesh and bones' (Aquinas, 1981a: 366). Thus, although our mind is able to separate soul and body conceptually, disembodied persons are as unnatural entities as the concept of music without tones or quantities without measures.

### **The immaterial character of the mind**

After considering that the soul is the first cause of bodies, Aquinas turns his attention to the intellect. Aristotle said that rationality is what most characterizes our soul, being the *anima intellectiva*, its cause or living principle. Widening this doctrine, Aquinas goes on to consider that the thing that keeps a body alive, namely, the rational soul, is the same as that which allows man to think, thereby equating 'rationality' and 'soul'. As such, the term 'rationality' seems to refer to a property rather than to an ability. But rationality is the property which expresses man's ability to think. Moreover, I should mention that, although we call the 'mind' the ability to think, in the medieval philosophical context it also included the will, a faculty whose correspondent property is 'freedom'.

The mind works, thanks to the act of the soul which is its principle (Aquinas, 1981a: 364). Similarly, the rational soul is framed by the intellect, because 'the intellect which is the principle of intellectual operation is the form of the human body' (Aquinas, 1981a: 371), which means that rational activity is not only the first act of the soul, but also that the human soul amounts to the effect to its intellect. Consequently, the same power that grants life to our body allows us to think. The soul is the principle of both life and intellect, both the ability of keeping a body alive and thinking. In fact,

this thesis should not come as a surprise, since Aquinas had earlier argued that the human soul is incorruptible by nature, in other words, that the soul is an immaterial substance. Following Aristotle, who contended that the intellect is ‘potentially everything’ (Aristotle, 1993: 65), Aquinas thinks that the scope of the intellect is unrestricted. There is no being which is beyond the reach of our mind, and it is precisely its immateriality which ensures that any form is potentially knowable. Aquinas (1981a: 367) asserts that:

whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the recipient. Now a form is known in as far as its form is in the knower. But the intellectual soul knows a thing in its nature absolutely: for instance, it knows a stone in its nature as a stone; and therefore the form of a stone absolutely, as to its proper formal idea, is in the intellectual soul.

Obviously, an operation which focuses on forms as such cannot be corporeal. For him, the knowledge of a stone implies grasping its specific form ‘absolutely’, that is, abstracted from the matter which it informs. Interestingly, the intellect does this separation without making a copy of the real form. By definition, knowledge involves the acquisition of forms as they are given in reality. Knowledge is *per se* ‘intentional’, which means that the known form is not made up by the intellect, but abstracted from the form of the body from which it originally proceeds. This is carried out, once the senses perceive the form, without any physical contact with the body. Consequently, knowledge is neither a mental picture nor an artificial replica of things.

Insofar as the intellect is put on a par with the soul, and provided that the soul is immaterial, the intellect is immaterial too. In the following, whenever Aquinas attributes to the intellect a certain property, this should also be attributed to the soul. This natural exchange of properties between the soul and the intellect is taken for granted in some other respects, e.g., in subsistence which is one of the various metaphysical properties of the rational soul. Aquinas sees in the incorruptibility of the intellect a new feature resulting from the previous reasoning. He thinks that ‘the intellectual principle, which we call mind or intellect, has an operation *per se* apart from the body’ (Aquinas, 1981a: 364). The self-dependence of the intellect, whose operations are immaterial, makes it subsistent on its own. By definition, we call ‘subsistent’ those substances which exist in themselves, not in others. In other words, subsistence is a metaphysical character of substances which yields stability to their being. Here, the human soul is said to be subsistent because ‘it is not dependent on the body for its existence’ (Aquinas, 1967: 204; Pasnau, 2002: 50). Matter is not the subsistent principle of the intellect. The fact that the body is essential to life does not make it capable of standing alone, for at least two reasons. First, the body is subject to corruption, so that to have a body does not guarantee continuity and subsistence under the same form. Second, although there cannot be bodies without forms, the existence of

forms without bodies is conceivable; this is a common thesis of Aquinas, and was one of Aristotle's too.

Subsistence is not exclusive of beings which have a mind. This property extends to any being capable of acting on its own, as is the case for other corporeal substances. Subsistence in human beings rests on its dependence on the body, not for its existence but only for its operation, as knowledge exemplifies singularly. Aquinas (1981a: 372) affirms that the mind needs to rise above matter to know, and 'the more it rises above corporeal matter, the less it is merged in matter'. By means of this property, the intellect shows its detachment from matter, which enables us to say that the soul has parts not composed of organs. Despite the fact that the body is largely co-operative with the mind, especially by supplying suitable impressions, cognition does not concern the body (p. 372). The body plays no part in the knowing act itself. This suggestion forcefully lessens the weight of the matter in the composition, which includes its being subject and principle of the individuation of forms, but which does not extend to the highest human faculties. Aquinas says that 'the human soul by reason of its perfection, is not a form merged in matter, or entirely embraced by matter' (p. 372). Nevertheless, we need to be careful not to turn this subtle distinction into a dualist thesis. If we do not do justice to the contribution of matter to the composition, we could make matter redundant, failing to understand Aquinas's account of the soul's subsistence. Two issues need to be distinguished here: first, the ability of the form to survive the loss of matter; second, the fact that, if matter were removed, a human being would become incapable of acting. For Aquinas, the subsistence of the form does not make matter contingent.

In fact, there is a different way in which the body contributes to knowledge. It supplies organs of knowledge such as the senses, the imagination or the memory, and the objects that come out from them such as external and internal impressions to the intellect. In a way, senses wake up the mind and cause the knowing process to start. They act as a sort of spark that fuels the intellect, which is a potentiality brought into act by the arrival of sensible images or 'phantasms'. This need of the mind to be brought into act, nevertheless, does not mean that this is its sole manner of knowing, or that knowledge works always with images. Aquinas envisages intellectual operations in which the body does not get involved at all, as is the case of the highest acts of the mind. In particular, he sees in self-knowledge a sort of circular movement in which the intellect turns upon itself. The aim of this act is self-knowledge, otherwise called 'self-consciousness'. For Aquinas, self-knowledge is a distinctive act of the mind in which bodily faculties do not intervene. In his comment on Proclus' *Book of Causes*, he describes the way in which the soul manages to know itself. Proclus claims that the operation in which 'the soul knows its essence' brings about 'the knower and the known' becoming one thing. Thus 'the knowledge by which it knows its essence, i.e. the intellectual activity itself, is from itself because it is a knower and is

toward itself because it is the known' (Aquinas, 1996: 101). The act of self-knowledge resembles a perfect turn-round of the mind on itself, thereby rendering impossible the classical distinction between the two sides of the knowing activity – the intellect and its object – because here the intellect becomes 'object' of itself without being reduced to an object. Aquinas took this idea from Proclus' book, but in spite of its neoplatonic inspiration, he subscribes fully to it.

Proclus holds that the intellect has no way of knowing its essence if both the known object and its activity do not merge. To know the intellect as such, the intellectual activity has to become object of knowledge. Aquinas thinks that this is possible owing to a habit of self-acquaintance of the soul with its acts. Once the presence of knowing acts is noticed, the soul turns out to be faced with itself. This knowledge, however, is indirect: there is no such a thing as a direct access to our self. 'Rather, it comes to a knowledge of itself through apprehension of other things' (Aquinas, 1994, II: 41). The soul is present to itself when it notices its acts or operations as a kind of habit or routine, and not as a result of any voluntary action. Aquinas writes (1981*b*: 1241): '*habitus per actus cognoscuntur*'. 'For one perceives that he has a soul, that he lives and that he exists because he perceives that he senses, understands and carries on other activities of this sort' (Aquinas, 1994, II: 40).

There is no need to delve much into the theory of habits here. It is enough to notice that only immaterial souls are capable of this kind of reversion upon themselves, and that no matter can revert upon itself in the way in which self-knowledge does. An analogous process in matter to this process of the intellect would imply two physical objects occupying the very same space, their properties merging momentarily. Of course, this suggestion is physically unrealizable, and does not respond completely to what self-knowledge is. But it illustrates a metaphysical possibility which rests on the fact that the intellect 'is not a form merged in matter'. Aquinas deems this argument to prove that the intellect surpasses matter altogether.

### **Death and survival of the soul**

Admittedly, as current theories of the mind rarely deal with this issue, the very contention that the soul will survive after death sounds controversial. Aquinas's idea of an existence of this sort raises questions that need to be discussed here. For if this account is right and the soul's survival comes as a logical consequence of the soul's incorruptibility, what then does death imply for man? Can a soul subsist really in the absence of its body? Is a disembodied soul capable of carrying out any sort of activity such as reflecting or desiring? To answer these questions I need to go back to the idea that the composition of body and soul is by no means accidental. Thus, a lifeless body can hardly be called a 'body'; more precisely, we call it a 'corpse'. When man dies, Aquinas understands that the body corrupts and the composition breaks

down. The following separation is unavoidable. Given that the soul is held to be incorruptible, one is then tempted to say that, as the body corrupts, the soul, in its turn, 'remains'. Yet the use of the verb 'remain' in this context should be carefully handled, for the soul does not 'remain' beside the corpse, as, for instance, these books and pens remain on my desk when I leave. Things that take space are material; if instead of these objects we were to consider a less corporeal object such as the 'family resemblance' of certain pictures, the indication of the place that 'this property' occupies is not easy. It could be objected that, in this context, 'family resemblance' is probably nothing more than a concept different from real properties. But the same objection is not applicable to the soul, since neither before nor after death is it a mere concept. The soul is of the nature of properties like the 'family resemblance' insofar as it has no spatial location, but it is not like it insofar as it is real. The corruption of its corporeal parts does not bring about the soul's end; it is rather the principle which yielded unity to the corporeal parts that death removes. Hence, for Aquinas death refers to the body-soul split rather than to the demise of the soul.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas does not think that a disembodied soul is entitled to be called a man. The previously outlined account of subsistence helps us to understand what will happen when we die. As the intellect is said to be a subsistent principle, it cannot be corrupted as matter is corrupted, that is, by being subjected to change. But once the body corrupts, it is difficult to imagine what the soul's new status will be. Logically, nothing apart from God's power could annihilate the rational soul. After death, God may leave it alone as it stands, but the intellect, separated from its corporeal organs, can do little. We have furthermore to face the problem of how to eschew a dualist account of the separation of mind and body, as the isolation of the intellect has to be understood in a way that does not undermine the primacy of the body-soul union. Nor can we give support here either to the idea that we are bare souls mysteriously placed in a body. A better explanation of what really survives after death is therefore required. Aquinas understands this challenge, for in the account of the separated soul there is much at stake. As a result, his response to this problem seeks to be clear. He holds that, as the soul is deprived of its bodily parts, its subsistence is incomplete. Once death has severed the soul's bonds to the body, the disembodied soul seems a bizarre entity.

Dealing with a question about what powers will remain after death, Aquinas points out that in the present life, some powers belong to the soul and some others to the body-soul composition. Once a man dies those elements which do not belong exclusively to the soul will corrupt, whereas those powers deriving from its very nature will remain. This suggests some kind of survival for immaterial powers of the soul, whereas bodily powers are doomed. However, it seems that death will not entail the disappearance of powers tied to the composition. Among these powers are found the ones

rooted in bodily organs like the external and internal senses. Aquinas (1981a: 389) writes that ‘such powers [which belong to the composition] do not remain actually [...] they remain virtually in the soul, as in their principle or root.’ Apparently, the soul keeps beyond death the powers lost with the separation of its parts. Aquinas suggests that the soul keeps those powers ‘virtually’ by contrast to its ‘current’ or ‘present’ ownership. The adverb ‘virtually’ might be difficult to understand here, as it might seem to suggest that the separated soul continues holding a small proportion of its former powers. But Aquinas is really saying that it does not possess them ‘actually’. If the soul had kept a small proportion of these powers, Aquinas would have spoken of an ‘actual’ but ‘weaker’ ownership of them. By saying ‘virtually’, he suggests rather that in its separated status, the soul would be able to exercise its former powers only if its former organs were restored to it by means that are only up to God. If this happened, those powers now remaining ‘virtually’ could be deployed again and work as they did before. On the other hand, if this does not occur, the normal exercise of these powers is inconceivable. Then, to have those powers ‘virtually’ would be like having the key of a house without the house, the ability of driving without a car or of reading without anything to read.

Nevertheless, Aquinas (1981a: 456) admits that there is a way in which the disembodied soul will be able to understand, ‘but in a different way, not by turning to phantasms but by a mode suited to a soul existing apart from a body’. Reading Aquinas, Geach (1973: 100) remarks that:

a disembodied soul is no longer liable to such physical influences [as that of the phantasms]. It does not follow that it will no longer be able to think; as McTaggart said, the fact that toothache may make consecutive thought impossible has no tendency to show that you cannot think when the tooth is extracted.

Geach is probably not suggesting here that God will restore our former body so as to enable us to think. Rather, he points out that, if the body were restored, nothing would prevent man from thinking. Doubtless, we do not know much about it apart from what the present state of affairs allows us to foresee. On the whole, since this problem remains a riddle, philosophical arguments do not reach so far. The forecast of the body-soul separation has sense only on the basis of what is currently knowable about the composition. As a result, only as a theologian can Aquinas spell out his understanding of the following events. As philosopher, he would admit to have only weak intuitions.

Unsurprisingly, Geach sees the situation of the separated soul as meagre and rather unattractive, and I think Aquinas would too. No doubt, the separated soul will be beyond the contingencies it experienced before. This idea seems cogent, but for similar reasons the intellect could not work as it did on earth. Bodily requirements prevent saying much about what will be

the situation of the soul apart from the fact that the lack of bodily powers prevents speaking of a 'complete' man. As a result, the soul will not possess the bodily powers required to start thinking and to sense. Death has not only taken the body away, but also – and above all – the required body-soul union. Without organs, if some thinking is possible, it will not be the kind of thinking which involves the work of internal bodily faculties, and hence of mental images. Divine intervention is then proposed as a means of providing the mind awareness of its situation, so that the powers which formerly fuelled the mind may work again (Aquinas, 1981a: 453). Obviously, as we have said, this is now a theological contention. As a theologian, Aquinas deems the state of being dead a temporary stage while awaiting God's assistance.

Although to speak of divine intervention seems to shift the problem to the realm of theology, Aquinas's appeal to God is not trivial. He is not in a position to prove philosophically that God has to intervene. Therefore, if this occurs, philosophy could not say why. Interestingly, however, he thinks that the situation of the disembodied soul calls necessarily upon God. He stresses that, in the beginning, God created a complete man, whereas death has turned him into a disabled man. This state of affairs is contrary to man's proper nature and does not do justice to God's original idea of creating man in his own image. Aquinas contends that 'to be separated from the body is not in accordance with [the soul's] own nature, and to understand without turning to the phantasms is not natural to it' (Aquinas, 1981a: 45).<sup>1</sup> The prospect of a disembodied soul existing perpetually challenges God's original plans. In fact, God could have created the soul to be material and corruptible instead of immaterial and everlasting but, as this did not happen, theology speaks of God's willingness to restore man's body after death.

Leaving theology aside, the problem posed to philosophy by the separated soul is whether the disembodied soul constitutes a person. Broadly speaking, medieval philosophers thought that a 'person' is a complete and particular being which has a mind. For them, 'persons' are not concepts, but real people, complete and able to act. Aquinas (1981a: 156), following Boëthius, defines 'person' as '*individua substantia rationalis naturae*', that is, an individual substance of rational nature. He stresses that every substance participates in its species, and it is the fullness of this participation that the disembodied soul lacks. 'The soul is part of the human species; and so, although it may exist in a separate state [...] it cannot be called an individual substance [...] Thus neither the definition nor the sense of "person" belongs to it' (p. 156).

If someone argues that, although not individuals, disembodied souls are still *real* in the sense that they still exist, we can ask whether this reason is enough to make the soul a person. Another question, independently from their being real, is whether they are persons. The reality of a being does not necessarily mean the same as its being a person. Of course, both non-persons and persons are 'real' entities, but the question is rather whether disembodied souls are 'persons' in the technical sense given by medieval philosophers.

Someone subscribing to the former opinion might invoke the idea that both life and death are different moments *nm* of the whole 'life' of a soul. He will take the disembodied soul to be a moment *n* similar to any other moment of it if death had not deprived it of some of its properties. On this basis, being alive or dead would turn out to be one of the soul's possible states compatible with several others such as to stand or to sit down; all of them would account for different times of the existence of a soul. But if this involves the idea that nothing is lost in death, this reasoning conceals an element of dualism since, contrary to what Aristotle suggested, it leaves the soul alone as the subject of human activities. In this, Aquinas followed Aristotle who ruled out the belief that the soul was in itself the subject of activities: 'to say that the soul is angry is as if one were to say that the soul weaves or builds. For it is surely better not to say that the soul pities, learns or thinks, but that the man does this with his soul' (Aristotle, 1993: 6). Aristotle realized how ludicrous it is to attribute thinking to a soul instead of attributing it to this man *with* his soul. Thus, given that disembodied souls cannot think except in certain circumstances addressed by Aquinas, the belief that we are essentially souls or that the soul is more 'real' than any other thing has obvious difficulties.

I am not suggesting here that the separated soul does not think. Aquinas stresses that the separated soul will retain after death the habit of knowledge acquired while it was united to its body. But he seems to leave open the question of how this knowledge will be possible, remarking simply that the separated soul will understand the species retained by that habit 'in a different way' (Aquinas, 1981a: 456), as I have already mentioned.

Death therefore undermines Aquinas's definition (1981a: 366) of the human being, which is not the same without his body. Whenever I talk to, e.g., Peter to ask him a question I am not asking just a soul. I expect him to answer my question, but this is not something that a soul does independently of its body. Peter needs at least to have his voice, mouth, hands and eyes to convey his ideas to me, and to do it in a way that I can understand. If Peter is dead, I cannot address him any more. If his soul survived after death I should not suppose that he does not speak any more just because he lost the bodily shell he had, despite being capable of speaking. As Aquinas affirms, death dissolves the composition altogether and Peter, while alive, was a living composition. From that point of view the medieval notion of 'person' does not extend to man beyond death. Separated souls are incomplete substances because they lack an essential constituent: their matter.

### **Unconscious 'selves' or conscious 'egos'? Human selfhood**

The affairs of the separated soul might seem obscure and difficult to understand. However, they help us to understand Aquinas's theory of the body-soul union better. Undoubtedly, his study of the separated soul played a



significant part in its elaboration. We saw above that Aquinas denies that the intellect has any direct understanding of itself, thereby placing himself in what is now the philosophical mainstream (Pasnau, 2002: 335), according to which the self is not accessible in the way in which most substances are. Together with this is the idea that disembodied souls are not human beings. Aquinas holds that:

a human being naturally desires his own salvation; but the soul, since it is part of the body of a human being, is not a whole human being, and my soul is not I (*anima mea non est ego*); so even if a soul gains salvation in another life, that is not I nor any human being. (Aquinas, 1953: 411; Kenny, 1988: 27)

Most scholars, when reading this passage, have consistently stressed the idea that disembodied souls do not qualify as 'what I am' or 'my self' due to their lack of a body. In the following, I am going to suggest some remarks which draw their inspiration from this passage, although they are not in any way an interpretation of it. Rather, they derive from a comparison between Aquinas's ideas of the self and that of some contemporary philosophers on self-knowledge. In this passage, Aquinas puts forward an objection against those who, misinterpreting the passage of St Paul that he is commenting on, think that spiritual goods are more suitable to the other life than to the present one. For them, just as this life provides goods for the body, which is mortal, the eternal life will provide goods for the soul, which is immortal. For Aquinas, this idea conceals a misunderstanding of the essential union of soul and body. He emphasizes that if the soul gains salvation, this would hardly count as salvation without the body, since 'the soul, separated from the body, is imperfect' (Aquinas, 1953: 411). On the face of it, if every human is to face God's judgement after death, this could not happen if what is judged is not 'me', but a part of me, the disembodied soul, which can only be self-conscious under some circumstances (Aquinas, 1981*a*: 456).

This implies that, for Aquinas, the disembodied soul is a 'which', not a 'who': it is not 'I'. 'I' or 'ego', taking this pronoun in the contemporary sense, can be described as a self-conscious state or, even more generally, as a particular state of mind, whereas sheer 'souls' insofar as they are metaphysically considered are unconscious entities. The sense of the 'ego' has been seen as a by-product of the self-awareness of the mind. But if this characterization is valid, it proves to be inessential to the body-soul composition, for Aquinas's denial of any straight access to the self makes self-consciousness not a necessary mental state in the way in which, in a different sense, the bodily composition is necessary to man. In his theory of knowledge, Aquinas insists repeatedly that the 'primary object' of our mind is the nature of material things, and it is by dealing with them that mental acts give rise to self-consciousness. For him, self-consciousness is an act of the intellect which follows the potentiality of the intellect and occurs when

mental acts are present, but it is not an act *per se*, that is, an act which makes the intellect to be what it is. In addition, we should consider that not all humans are able to think. Some humans are incapable of self-consciousness for various reasons: they may be evolving as embryos in a womb, frozen in a test-tube or in coma due to severe brain damage. Whatever prospects of life they have, none of those individuals are necessarily self-conscious, while it seems obvious that they are human beings.

Some modern psychologists and philosophers have claimed that, in order to be fully human, self-consciousness is required. Descartes, who placed self-consciousness as the basis of mental activities, thought so, thereby challenging Aquinas's idea of things as primary objects of thought. Other philosophers like Locke regarded self-consciousness as a criterion of personal identity, binding this feature to the concept of 'human being'. A long period of the dominance of the self-consciousness criterion did not appear to end until the twentieth century with Freud's analyses on the role of non-conscious tendencies on the mind, which pointed to hidden mechanisms as cause of several diseases. Freud's influence on both psychology and psychiatry marched in the opposite direction to that in which continental thought had moved so far: against the dominion of self-consciousness both in theory and practice. Nevertheless, on the basis of what we know of Aquinas and other medieval thinkers, philosophy and psychology did not always move in the same direction.

For several reasons, Aristotle and Aquinas could not have endorsed Freud's theories, basically because, whatever significance is given to unconsciousness in explaining some mental diseases, man is not reducible to a bunch of uncontrolled tendencies. Both Aristotle and Aquinas would have agreed with Freud's contention that our mind is not tailored by acts of self-consciousness. In their own times, they strived to get rid of the extended (as it was then) conception that the soul comprised man's essence, leaving its bodily parts aside. Aristotle asserted that 'the part of the soul called the intellect [. . .] is actually none of existing things before it thinks [*sic*]', and compared thinking to 'being affected by the object of thought or something else of this kind' (Aristotle, 1993: 57), although not passively but in the manner in which desiring means to be affected by objects of desire. Thus, Aristotle's account rules out self-consciousness as a steady or necessary state of the intellect, especially if connected to Aquinas's remark that self-consciousness is attained by means of the acts of the intellect and not by its mere existence.

The first consequence of Aquinas's statement '*anima mea non est ego*' is that egos are not souls. If self-consciousness is a part of our mental life, I do not have more reason to say that I am a soul than to say I am my two hands or just a simple head; both hands and head are parts of me, and speaking about 'parts' can only have a certain analytic significance, not a real one.

The second consequence of this is that 'I', understood as an expression of self-consciousness, cannot be a 'who' in the sense of Aquinas. This is why we should draw a further distinction between 'egos' and 'selves'. 'Ego' can be taken

to be a centre of conscious thoughts, whereas 'selves' can refer to metaphysical entities composed of body and soul. For any human being, the body-soul composition entails rationality and self-consciousness. Rationality is just a potentiality of our mind, whereas self-consciousness points to a specific mental act which arises when that potentiality is in act. Thus, Aquinas would probably accept that we are selves, but not that we are self-conscious egos. Most recently, Wittgenstein (1960) rejected that there is such a thing as the 'self' in the sense in which Descartes spoke of it as a substance. Kenny (1988) exploited Wittgenstein's ideas regarding the mistake of speaking of 'the self' instead of '*myself*', since the 'the self' resembles an entity in the sense in which most substances are, whereas '*myself*' stands for the individual's unique accession to himself. This distinction, however, does not show what makes our self to be precisely 'ours', as it only points to the fact that self-consciousness is not a criterion of real identity.

Surely, Kenny is right to highlight that the self is neither a plural nor a shared substance, for which he proposes the concept of '*myself*'. It is a truism that others do not know my 'ego' as I do or that others do not have my own self-consciousness. 'Ego' or 'I' is the door to myself that only I can have. My most inner feelings and desires do not concern others, and certainly someone else's self is not '*myself*' in Kenny's sense. But were we to suppose that what prevents others from being '*myself*' is my self-consciousness, the concept of '*myself*' would only serve Descartes' aims, for in that case 'my self' would be of the same nature of that self-consciousness: a particular mental act. If self-consciousness constituted the core of our self, 'my self' would be metaphysically equal to its mental act. In a sense, Kenny's search for '*myself*', for my genuine self-consciousness, is not incompatible with Aquinas's self-consciousness account, but this is not the point now, since Aquinas's chief contribution to this issue is his account of the metaphysical character of the question of man's constitution, which he addresses by pointing to a real criterion of identity rather than to a mental one. He considers that matter, as opposed to self-consciousness, is the criterion of individuality of rational substances, and form, insofar as it makes man to be what it is, is the criterion of their distinction.

Kenny's '*myself*' can be taken to be one of the visions of themselves that individuals have. Still, it is not unique; we could also say that Aquinas's notion of self, insofar as is a metaphysical notion, is not restricted to private or privileged self-access. Aquinas's notion of self is open to external criteria of identification. My real self is irreducible to what my self-consciousness and other states of mind apprehend of it, because my self does not consist in a particular state of mind. For the same reason, others may know 'my self' as well as I do, and this does not take away from me the right to be who I am, because it is not the knowledge of me that others have which makes me the person I am. The same 'self' is *myself* for me, *yourself* for you and *himself* or *herself* for others, as Kenny proposes, but my conception of my self is only one among others.

Consequently, the individual's self-knowledge is not necessarily more accurate than the knowledge of my self as shown to me by others. What others claim to know about me when they say that I am so-and-so are bodily or mental features that may pass unnoticed or be seen otherwise by me. Thus, my real self is not a sort of private room unexposed to others' judgements, and I think that there are several instances of it. He who is infuriated hardly realizes that he is furious. Eccentric dictators tend to create images of themselves fully removed from reality, often to the point of taking as unreal everything that does not match their desires. Consequently, to make real sense of our self, my self-consciousness is not enough, and others have certainly much to say.

Of course, the knowledge of my self which I propose is different from self-consciousness. In my view, Aquinas's contribution to the contemporary debate on the self is to have hinted at the irreducibility of the self to self-consciousness criteria, a distinction which I want to emphasize. This means that we are 'selves' who cannot always be self-conscious 'egos'. In this way, 'my self' is open to external criteria of identification and, after all, the distinction of 'myself' with self-consciousness is not unrelated to that of Wittgenstein (1960: 66–7) between the 'subjective' and 'objective' ways of speaking of myself, a proposal aimed to reconcile first-person and third-person perspectives of oneself. Like Aquinas, Wittgenstein realized that to distinguish between the internal and external dimensions of the self, the modern characterization of man as a self-conscious being will not do. This is what makes Aquinas's psychology and philosophy still an invaluable resource.

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### Endnote

1. 'People, for Aquinas, are very much part of the physical world. Take that world away and what you are left with is not a human person. You are not, for example, left with something able to know by means of sense of experience (Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 19). Nor are you left with something able to undergo the feelings or sensations that go with being bodily. On Aquinas's account, therefore, a human soul can only be said to survive its body as something purely intellectual, as the *locus* of thought and will.' (Davies, 1998: 260).

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