Nova et Vetera, English Edition, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2005): 231–58

The Physical Status of the Spiritual Soul in Thomas Aquinas*

STEPHEN L. BROCK
Pontificia Università della Santa Croce
Rome, Italy

Introduction: Form of the Body, or Subject of Truth?

THERE ARE probably several factors contributing to make Thomas Aquinas's conception of the human soul difficult for the contemporary mind to assimilate. But one of them is surely the profound change in the approach to the study of man initiated in the seventeenth century by René Descartes. This is the so-called "turn to the subject."

In relation to Thomas, a particularly interesting figure in the transition to the modern approach is that of Nicolas Malebranche. As is well known, Malebranche received Descartes' *L'Homme* with great enthusiasm. On the other hand, Malebranche remains in some ways closer to Thomas than Descartes. Like Thomas, he is first and foremost a priest and a theologian; and the spirit of his philosophical thought is still very much in the tradition of *fides quaerens intellectum*. What he does not share with Thomas is the aristotelianism of the scholastics (against which, of course, Descartes also strove).

This difference is nowhere more significant than on the question of the soul. And no one thinks this question more important than does Malebranche. A passage from the very beginning of his major work, *The Search for Truth,* shows how grave the issue is for him.

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* My thanks to Prof. Kevin Flannery, SJ, and Prof. Federica Bergamino for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper. A slightly revised version of this article was published last year in Italian: "Tommaso d'Aquino e lo statuto fisico dell'anima spirituale," in *L'anima. Annuario di filosofia 2004*, ed. Vittorio Possenti, Milan: Mondadori 2004.

> I do not wonder that the common run of men, or the Pagan Philosophers, only consider the soul in its relation and union with the body, without recognizing the relation and union that it has with God; but I am surprised that Christian philosophers, who ought to prefer the mind of God to the mind of man, Moses to Aristotle, St. Augustine to some wretched Commentator on a Pagan Philosopher, look upon the soul rather as the form of the body than as made in the image, and for the image, of God; that is, according to St. Augustine, for the truth, to which alone it is immediately united.[1]

The soul's true nature is spirit, a subject of truth. Its union with the body is quite secondary.

> Since it is the will of God that rules everything, it is more in the nature of the soul to be united to God by the knowledge of the truth, and by the love of the good, than to be united to a body; for it is certain . . . that God has made the spirits for the sake of knowing and loving, rather than for informing bodies.[2]

Elsewhere Malebranche confesses to finding the union of soul and body philosophically inscrutable (just as Descartes did). He can offer only a theological conjecture for it.

> Do not ask me . . . why God wants to unite spirits to bodies. It is a constant fact, but the chief reasons for it have remained hitherto unknown to philosophy. But here is one fit to propose to you. It seems that God wanted to give to us, as to his Son, a victim that we might offer to him.[3]

Now, there can be no doubt that for St. Thomas, what is of special interest about man is his soul. And its interest lies in its being spiritual—

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[1] Je ne m'étonne pas que le commun des hommes, ou que les Philosophes Payens ne considérent dans l'ame que son rapport et son union avec le corps, sans y reconnoître le rapport et l'union qu'elle a avec Dieu; mais je suis surpris que des philosophes chrétiens, qui doivent préférer l'esprit de Dieu à l'esprit humain, Moyse à Aristote, S. Augustin à quelque misérable Commentateur d'un Philosophe Payen, regardent plutôst l'ame comme la forme du corps que comme faite à l'image et pour l'image de Dieu, c'est à dire, selon S. Augustin, pour la vérité à laquelle seule elle est immédiatement unie. Nicolas Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la Vérité,* I, Préface, in *Œuvres de Malebranche*, vol. I, Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1972), 9–10, my translation. The "wretched Commentator" is surely Averroes.

[2] [L]a volonté de Dieu réglant la nature de chaque chose, il est plus de la nature de l'ame d'être unie à Dieu par la connoissance de la verité, et par l'amour du bien, que d'être unie à un corps, puisqu'il est certain . . . que Dieu a fait les esprits pour le connoître et pour l'aimer, plûtost que pour informer des corps. Malebranche, *De la Recherche*, I, préface, 11.

an incorporeal subject of existence and activity. Theology studies the body, Thomas says, only as it relates to the soul.[4]

At the same time, Thomas fully embraces the Aristotelian conception of the soul as essentially the form of a body. Indeed, unlike many of his contemporaries, Thomas insists that the soul is united to physical matter in an immediate way.[5] In a sense its union with matter is for him even more immediate than its union with truth. For it is united to matter from the very beginning of its existence. It exists as the "term of human generation."[6] But at that moment it is a sheer *tabula rasa*.[7] It does not begin to know any truth until some later moment in its career.

We might very well wonder whether Thomas does not, in effect, subordinate the soul's spiritual nature to its being the form of a body. One rather striking source of this suspicion is his understanding of the difference between the human soul and those spiritual creatures that are not united to bodies, the angels. Souls and angels, Thomas insists, are not the same kind of thing.[8] In fact, they should not even be grouped together in the same genus. He explains why in his reply to an objection against the thesis that the soul does not exist prior to the body.

> *Objection:* The rational soul agrees more with the angels than with the beasts. But the angels were created before bodies, or else right at the beginning, with bodily matter; whereas the body of man was created on the sixth day, when the beasts were produced. Therefore the soul of man was created before the body.[9]

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[3] Ne demandez pas . . . pourquoi Dieu veut unir des esprits à des corps. C'est un fait constant, mais dont les principales raisons on été jusqu'ici inconnuës à la Philosophie. En voici une néanmoins qu'il est bon que je vous propose. C'est apparemment que Dieu a voulu nous donner, comme à son Fils, une victime que nous puissions lui offrir. Nicolas Malebranche, *Entretiens sur la métaphysique,* in *Œuvres de Malebranche*, vol. XII, André Robinet, ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1984), IV, §12, 96–97.

[4] *Summa theologiae* I, q. 75, proem. Since this paper is not intended only for medievalists or specialists in Thomas's thought, I have for the most part confined my quotations and references to the *Summa theologiae*, it being the most generally accessible of his works. Happily, it contains sufficient treatments of all the pertinent issues, in many cases his most complete and mature ones. The translations are mine.

[5] See *ST* I, q. 76, aa. 3, 4, 6, 7.

[6] *ST* I, q. 76, a. 1, ad 1.

[7] *ST* I, q. 79, a. 2.

[8] *ST* I, q. 75, a. 7.

[9] Anima rationalis magis convenit cum angelis quam cum animalibus brutis. Sed angeli creati fuerunt ante corpora, vel statim a principio cum corporali materia; corpus autem hominis formatum est sexto die, quando et bruta animalia sunt producta. Ergo anima hominis fuit creata ante corpus. *ST* I, q. 90, a. 4, obj. 2.

> *Reply:* If the soul had a species of its own, it would agree more with the angels. But inasmuch as it is the form of the body, it pertains to the genus of animals, as a formal principle.[10]

The soul does not have a "species of its own." It is not a complete, fully distinct entity, or what we might call an autonomous unit of signification. It is only part of a complete entity—a human being. A human being is a kind of animal, a physical being. Man's "formal principle" is something spiritual; but nevertheless it is a principle of something physical, and essentially so. Its nature is proportioned to that of which it is the principle. Even if it is "on the border" of spiritual and bodily creatures,[11] its natural home is squarely in the physical world.[12]

How should we judge such a view? Are we seeing just what Malebranche laments—the vestige of a pagan outlook not yet fully purged, a still imperfect consciousness of man's uniqueness as "subject"? The verdict is not so easily drawn. Consider these passages.

> The intellectual soul . . . , according to the order of nature, is not naturally endowed with the knowledge of truth, as the angels are; rather it needs to gather it from divisible things by way of the senses, as Dionysius says in the seventh chapter of *On the Divine Names*.[13]
>
> The inferior spiritual substances, namely souls, have a being akin to the body, insofar as they are forms of bodies; and therefore, from their very mode of being it belongs to them to attain their intelligible perfection from bodies and through bodies. Otherwise they would be united to bodies pointlessly.[14]

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[10] Anima si per se speciem haberet, magis conveniret cum angelis; sed inquantum est forma corporis, pertinet ad genus animalium, ut formale principium. *ST* I, q. 90, a. 4, ad 2. See *ST* I, q. 76, a. 3, obj. 2 and ad 2.

[11] *ST* I, q. 77, a. 2.

[12] On this point see the excellent study of B. Carlos Bazán, "The Human Soul: Form and Substance? Thomas Aquinas's Critique of Eclectic Aristotelianism," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 64 (1997): 95–126, esp. 117–23. "It is only as the most perfect of substantial forms that the soul is at the borderline between bodily and separate substances, not as the lowest of spiritual substances (except if we use the term substance in a derivative way, *per reductionem*)." Ibid., 123.

[13] Anima autem intellectiva . . . , secundum naturae ordinem, infimum gradum in substantiis intellectualibus tenet; intantum quod non habet naturaliter sibi inditam notitiam veritatis, sicut angeli, sed oportet quod eam colligat ex rebus divisibilibus per viam sensus, ut Dionysius dicit, VII cap. *De div. nom*. *ST* I, q. 76, a. 5. On the "divisible things," see ~~p. 321.~~ below, at n. 54.

[14] Substantiae enim spirituales inferiores, scilicet animae, habent *esse* affine corpori, inquantum sunt corporum formae, et ideo ex ipso modo essendi competit eis ut

Malebranche finds the soul's union with the body philosophically inexplicable. He considers it incidental to the soul's end, the knowledge of truth. Thomas sees the need for truth as the very reason for the union. And the nature of the union is just what "the Philosopher" said it was.

My aim in this paper is to understand Thomas's view that the human soul exists as the form of a body for the very sake of knowing truth. It is a surprisingly subtle doctrine. The most delicate point concerns the status of the soul separated from the body. In order to appreciate it, however, we must first survey various elements of Thomas's conception of man and his soul.

Soul, Mind, and Subject

Soul and Mind

In Thomas's vocabulary, "mind" is synonymous with "intellect." Not infrequently, he also uses these words to refer to the human soul. However, he does not actually identify soul and intellect. Rather, intellect is a particular power or faculty of the human soul. It is a principle of a certain type of vital activity. It is rooted in the soul, but not quite the same thing.

One general reason for this distinction is simply that the soul carries other vital powers as well, for instance sensitive and generative powers. The soul is one, its powers many. No single power can be identical with it. However, even if intellect were the soul's only operative power, they would still have to be distinguished. This will require some explanation.

Earlier we saw that Thomas describes the human soul as man's "formal principle." This means it is a principle, and the dominant one, of man's very nature or "essence." The essence of a thing is what the thing is just in itself, absolutely, in its own identity with itself and distinction from everything else. And in a way, for Thomas, the essence of a thing does constitute a sort of capacity or power. It is the thing's power to be itself, to exercise its own being.

"Intellect," on the other hand, signifies the power for the activity of understanding. Like any activity, understanding has an object, something that it bears upon or is about. In general, understanding is about the intelligible. If this is an obscure notion, perhaps we can make do with the signifiable—that which can be named or targeted for consideration. The point to notice is that this is extremely broad. Indeed it covers everything. It is as wide as being itself. Through intellect, a subject can exercise activity about all things—whether identical with or distinct from itself.

a corporibus, et per corpora suam perfectionem intelligibilem consequantur, alioquin frustra corporibus unirentur. *ST* I, q. 55, a. 2.

In a way what has intellect is even able to *be* all things.[15] For although understanding bears upon many things outside its subject, it is an activity that stays within the subject, "immanent" activity.[16] This means that the things upon which it bears must somehow be united to the subject and exist in it. Of course, if the thing known has its own being outside the knower, then it does not exist in the knower in the same way as it exists in itself. It is only "in a way" that a knower "is" whatever he knows. What is in the knower is only a kind of likeness of what he knows, a cognitive "species" or form.[17] The knower is "informed" about what he knows and knowingly signifies.

In a sense, then, mind or intellect is something infinite. As is obvious, however, a human being is something finite, one particular kind of thing among many. Human nature, and especially its formal principle, the soul, is the power to be a human being. But the power of mind extends far beyond man's own being. The human form does not, by itself, make someone be all things. It does not do so even in the qualified way in which a knower "is" what he knows. Having the human form cannot suffice to inform someone about all the things he can know. Other things have their own distinctive forms and perfections, features that human nature does not display. This is true even of things inferior to man, things whose perfection is less than his.[18] Understanding human nature does not, for example, provide a sufficient basis for understanding the nature of the sun. This is why the human form, the soul, cannot be simply identical with the human mind.

In fact, for Thomas, this is true of any created mind, even an angel's.[19] Only in God can intellect and essence—his power to understand and his power to exist or to be himself—be perfectly identical. This is because the divine essence is itself infinite.[20] Being the very source of all other things, its own perfection does somehow contains all the perfections found in other things. And so it "contains in itself, in a supereminent way, whatever can be signified or understood by a created intellect."[21]

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[15] Thomas never tires of citing Aristotle's description of the intellectual soul as *quodammodo omnia* (*De anima* III.8, 431b20).

[16] See *ST* I, q. 14, a. 2; also I, q. 54, a. 2; I, q. 87, a. 3; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX.8, 1050a35–1050b1.

[17] This species is not *what* the knower knows, in knowing the thing. It is a principle by which the knower knows the thing itself. Knowing the species itself requires a distinct act of reflection. See *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2.

[18] *ST* I, q. 84, a. 2, c. and ad 3.

[19] *ST* I, q. 55, a. 1.

[20] See *ST* I, q. 7, a. 2.

[21] *ST* I, q. 12, a. 2. See I, q. 14, a. 6.

Even in an intellectual creature, of course, its nature or form is some sort of principle of its intellectual activity. Understanding does not just "happen" to its subject, as though by chance. It is rooted in what the subject is, and so is the power for it.[22] But the immediate result of the subject's form is only his own existence, his being himself. The acts by which he is "all things" must be mediated by a kind of companion principle. In order to be qualified for understanding, he needs additional power, a connatural quality that further perfects his form. This is his mind.

The Soul and the Self

Human nature is not something added on to some more fundamental kind of entity. That is, a human being is a "substance." As the "formal principle" of a human being, the human soul is also something quite fundamental, something substantial. In a certain sense, it is even the "subject" of intellect. This is because, as we shall consider further on, Thomas thinks that intellect must be an immaterial power, not seated in any bodily organ. Nevertheless, the soul is not, for Thomas, the whole substance of a human person. It is not by itself a complete subject.[23] The essence of a human person is not soul alone, but soul and body together.

Thomas does not simply take it for granted that human beings are essentially corporeal. Perhaps he would do so if he thought that our knowledge of their existence must always rest upon observation of their bodies. But Thomas is quite conscious of the fact that the individual subject, the particular human being, also has "inward" awareness of himself, that is, awareness of himself as performing immanent acts such as understanding or sensation. In fact Thomas follows Aristotle in judging that this is how a person *first* knows of his own existence.[24] Thomas also

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[22] On the powers as "flowing" from the soul, see *ST* I, q. 77, a. 6. Even though intellect is in a way more perfect than the essence of the soul, with respect to its infinity, in another way it is less perfect. For it is only an "accident," an "addition" to the soul, not something that subsists on its own. Hence the substantial actuality of the soul can be a cause of it, even though the soul is also perfected by it. On intellect as an accident and a quality, see *ST* I, q. 54, a. 3, ad 2; I, q. 78, a. 1, ad 5. More generally on the ontology of substance and accident in relation to the intellect, see Lawrence Dewan, OP, "St. Thomas and the Integration of Knowledge into Being," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1984): 383–93.

[23] Thomas's notion of "subject" is very close to Aristotle's. On Aristotle's notion in comparison with the modern one, see Enrico Berti, "Soggetto, anima e identità personale in Aristotele," in *Peri Psyche, De homine, Antropologia. Nuovi Approcci,* M. Sánchez Sorondo, ed. (Roma: Herder, 1994), 1–14.

[24] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* IX.9, 1170a29–34.

judges that the human subject's original awareness of himself is extremely confused. It does not immediately display his nature in a clear and distinct way at all, whether as something spiritual, something corporeal, or a composite of spiritual and corporeal elements. Ascertaining his nature requires careful analysis of what is targeted in that original self-awareness.

I shall present Thomas's explanation of this situation in a moment. But first I wish to stress the fact that for him, even if we do start from the point of view of the "self," the "thinking subject" who has inward awareness of himself *qua* "thinking," we must still eventually conclude that the object of this awareness is not the soul alone. It includes both soul and body. The content of a human person's inward awareness of himself does *imply* his being corporeal. This is because human "thinking" always includes sensation. (I am using "thinking" as Descartes does, to cover all types of immanent activity: understanding, sensing, willing, etc.)

Thus, a key premise in Thomas's effort to prove that the soul is the substantial form of the human body is that "it is the very man himself who perceives himself both to understand and to sense; but sensing is not without the body, and so the body must be some sort of part of the man."[25] A little earlier he offers an argument for this premise. The soul of an individual man could be identified with the man, Thomas says,

> if it were held that the operation of the sensitive soul were proper to it, without the body. For all the operations attributed to the man would belong to the soul alone; and each thing is that which performs the operations of that thing. Hence that which performs the man's operations is the man. But it has been shown that sensing is not an operation of the soul alone. So, since sensing is a certain operation of man, albeit not his proper one, it is clear that the man is not soul alone, but something composed of soul and body.[26]

For Thomas, then, the "self" is not something "inside" a person's body. It includes the body. If we took "mind" in the sense of the whole "thinking subject," then on Thomas's view matter would be a part of the human

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[25] Ipse idem homo est qui percipit se et intelligere et sentire, sentire autem non est sine corpore, unde oportet corpus aliquam esse hominis partem. *ST* I, q. 76, a. 1.

[26] Hoc quidem sustineri posset, si poneretur quod animae sensitivae operatio esset eius propria sine corpore, quia omnes operationes quae attribuuntur homini, convenirent soli animae; illud autem est unaquaeque res, quod operatur operationes illius rei. Unde illud est homo, quod operatur operationes hominis. Ostensum est autem quod sentire non est operatio animae tantum. Cum igitur sentire sit quaedam operatio hominis, licet non propria, manifestum est quod homo non est anima tantum, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 4.

mind (although for him this would be an improper use of "mind," since he restricts this term to intellect).[27] The identification of the self with something incorporeal might be possible if we experienced ourselves engaging solely in intellectual acts. But for Thomas no human person can have such experience. This is because a human person's exercise of intellect must be accompanied by his exercise of some sense-activity, at least that of imagination. The identification of the self with something incorporeal might also be possible if the sensations that one immediately experiences were not necessarily one's own. But sensations are immanent acts, remaining in the subject that exercises them. The only one who can have immediate experience of them is their own subject.[28]

Self-Knowledge

Now, if Thomas does not simply take it for granted that the human subject includes the body, neither does he take it for granted that sensation is an operation involving the body. He sees the need to reason to this.[29] We shall consider his argument in the next section. But first let us glance at his explanation for the "confused" character of the interior perception of oneself as a subject of immanent acts. As we shall see further on, his explanation is closely connected with his understanding of the human soul's appropriate starting point for getting at truth.

Thomas judges that the interior perception gives a very high degree of certainty about one's own existence. It also gives great certainty about the existence in oneself of some sort of principle or source of one's cognitive acts—the principle that goes by the name "soul." Nevertheless, by itself, this perception yields only a very vague and confused apprehension of one's own nature and of the nature of this "soul." Speaking of how the intellect knows itself through knowing its acts, Thomas says that it does so two ways.

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[27] St. Paul speaks of the "interior man." Thomas takes this to refer, not properly to the whole man, nor even to the whole soul, but only to the intellectual part. See *ST* I, q. 75, a. 4, obj. 1 and ad 1.

[28] See *ST* I, q. 57, a. 1, ad 2; also *ST* I, q. 87, a. 4. By "immediate experience" I mean an apprehension that consists in union with the object itself, in its real being, not just with a likeness of it.

[29] Compare: C'est par l'instinct du sentiment que je suis persuadé que mon ame est unie à mon corps, ou que mon corps fait partie de mon être: je n'en ai point d'evidence. Ce n'est point par la lumiére de la raison que je le connois: c'est par la douleur ou par le plaisir que je sens, lorsque les objects me frappent. Nicolas Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la Vérité,* V. v, in *Œuvres de Malebranche*, vol. II, Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 172.

> In one way, in the particular, according as Socrates or Plato perceives himself to have an intellectual soul from the fact that he perceives himself to understand. In another way, universally, according as we consider the nature of the human mind from the act of the intellect. . . . But there is a difference between these two apprehensions. In order to have the first apprehension of the mind, the mind's very presence suffices, this being the principle of the act from which the mind perceives itself. And therefore it is said to know itself through its presence. But for the second apprehension, its presence does not suffice; but rather a diligent and subtle inquiry is required. Hence many are ignorant of the nature of the soul, and many have also erred about the soul's nature.[30]

Thomas goes on to indicate that these two sorts of cognition go together.

> For this reason, in the tenth book of *On the Trinity*, Augustine says of such inquiry about the mind that "the mind is not seeking to perceive itself, as though it were absent; but being present, it is seeking to discern itself," that is, to know its difference from other things, which is to know its quiddity and its nature.[31]

Why does it take so much work to get at what is truly proper and distinctive of the human mind, and thereby of man? The reason lies in the fact that the intellectual acts through which the mind first knows itself are not themselves acts of knowing oneself, or one's soul, or even one's mind. Rather they are acts of knowing the natures of things presented by the senses. The human mind

> is not its own act of understanding, nor is its own essence the first object of its understanding; this rather is something extrinsic, viz., the

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[30] Uno quidem modo, particulariter, secundum quod Socrates vel Plato percipit se habere animam intellectivam, ex hoc quod percipit se intelligere. Alio modo, in universali, secundum quod naturam humanae mentis ex actu intellectus consideramus. . . . Est autem differentia inter has duas cognitiones. Nam ad primam cognitionem de mente habendam, sufficit ipsa mentis praesentia, quae est principium actus ex quo mens percipit seipsam. Et ideo dicitur se cognoscere per suam praesentiam. Sed ad secundam cognitionem de mente habendam, non sufficit eius praesentia, sed requiritur diligens et subtilis inquisitio. Unde et multi naturam animae ignorant, et multi etiam circa naturam animae erraverunt. *ST* I, q. 87, a. 1.

[31] Propter quod Augustinus dicit, X de Trin., de tali inquisitione mentis, non velut absentem se quaerat mens cernere; sed praesentem quaerat discernere, idest cognoscere differentiam suam ab aliis rebus, quod est cognoscere quidditatem et naturam suam. (*ST* I, q. 87, a. 1.) In his own study of the soul's nature Thomas often appeals to inner experience; see, e.g., *ST* I, q. 76, a. 1; I, q. 79, a. 4; I, q. 84, a. 7; I, q. 88, a. 1.

> nature of a material reality. And therefore that which is first grasped by the human intellect is an object of this sort; and secondly is grasped the very act by which the object is grasped; and through this act is grasped the intellect itself, of which the act of understanding is a perfection.[32]

The mind's immediate perception of itself engaging in understanding is not something intrinsic to its primary act of understanding. It is a distinct act, a reflection upon the primary one.[33] And the primary act displays the mind, not in an absolute way or just by itself, but together with the corporeal reality that is known in that act.[34]

The result of this situation is that the mind must inquire into its own nature, reason to it, as to a cause—the cause of the acts that it perceives in itself. And it must do so by comparison and contrast with bodily things. For since these are its first objects, they constitute an indispensable reference point for its knowledge of anything whatsoever, including itself.[35]

Still, Thomas is remarkably optimistic about the possibility of reaching a true and complete understanding of the nature of the soul. It is precisely the phenomenon of understanding that makes the soul fully accessible to itself. "The human soul understands itself through its act of understanding, which is its proper act, perfectly displaying its power and nature."[36]

However, before examining the soul in light of its activity of understanding, Thomas first examines sensation. This is because, in a number of ways, sensation stands midway between purely corporeal reality and the mind. Understanding it is a step toward understanding mind. In order to determine the mind's own relation to the body, it is a crucial step.

Materiality and Immateriality in Sense and Intellect

The Materiality of Sense

Thomas does not treat it as self-evident that sensation is a corporeal operation. Obviously sensation is somehow *associated* with the body—and

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[32] [Intellectus humanus] nec est suum intelligere, nec sui intelligere est obiectum primum ipsa eius essentia, sed aliquid extrinsecum, scilicet natura materialis rei. Et ideo id quod primo cognoscitur ab intellectu humano, est huiusmodi obiectum; et secundario cognoscitur ipse actus quo cognoscitur obiectum; et per actum cognoscitur ipse intellectus, cuius est perfectio ipsum intelligere. *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3.

[33] *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3, ad 2.

[34] At the same time, the mind's reflection on itself does put what it first knows in a new light. For example, it is through such reflection that it knows things as matters of truth, and as good: *ST* I, q. 16, a. 4, ad 2.

[35] *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7.

[36] [A]nima humana intelligit seipsam per suum intelligere, quod est actus proprius eius, perfecte demonstrans virtutem eius et naturam. *ST* I, q. 88, a. 2, ad 3.

each particular sense with some particular part of the body. But the "association" of a sensitive operation with the body or some part of it may or may not mean that it is itself a bodily operation, that is, one exercised by the body or the part. Perhaps the body is only some kind of extrinsic condition for it. Is the body that I call mine really a part of me, or is it only somehow attached to me? Is it really intrinsic to my capacity to sense? According to Thomas's sources, Plato held that sensation was an activity of the soul alone. This is why Plato could identify a man with his soul.[37] Thomas treats it as a serious position, even if ultimately mistaken. For indeed, it does have some initial plausibility.

We first know bodily natures according to their sensible qualities. But although a power of sense, like intellect, is a certain quality in the sensitive subject, it is not itself a *sensible* quality. Or at least it is not any of the qualities that are sensed by it. If it were, then it would be very difficult to explain why not everything having that quality has sensation of it, or why the one sensing is not constantly sensing his own quality. Nor does the exercise of the sensitive power even consist in the subject's taking on the same sensible quality as what he senses. Someone seeing green does not thereby look green. Moreover, every sense is a power for sensing things in a whole range of qualities. If it were any one of those qualities, or included any of them, it would in effect "filter out" all of the others.[38]

Hence, even if the subject that exercises sensation, as such, is corporeal, it is clearly of a different nature from the corporeal subjects that are only sensible and cannot sense. At least to some extent, sensation stands opposed to sensible matter.[39] It "rises above" what we first grasp about bodily natures.[40] So it is not too surprising to find thinkers who draw the conclusion that the sensitive nature is not bodily at all. Why does Thomas think it must be?

Sensation does not rest upon having the same sensible quality as the thing sensed. It does however rest upon having a likeness of that quality. Each sense is a kind of natural capacity for having such likenesses. At the same time, the likenesses of things are not in the sensitive subject simply by virtue of its own nature or natural capacity. If they were, it would always be sensing them. In itself it is only in potency to sensing. In order

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[37] See *ST* I, q. 75, aa. 3 and 4; I, q. 84, a. 6. His sources on this point seem to be Nemesius and Augustine.

[38] See the passage from *ST* I, q. 75, a. 2 quoted below, note 44.

[39] See *ST* I, q. 84, a. 2: ratio cognitionis ex opposito se habet ad rationem materialitatis.

[40] Thomas even ascribes a qualified sort of infinity to sensation: *ST* I, q. 54, a. 2. See *ST* I, q. 80, a. 1.

to sense anything, it must undergo a change. It must receive the thing's likeness. What produces the likeness in it, the mover or agent of the change, is the very thing that the likeness is a likeness of: the object, the thing sensed. This follows the general principle that what is produced is like what produces it.

For Thomas, in order to see the essential corporeity of the subject of sensation, we must focus on how it is moved by its object. What we find is that its reception of the object's likeness always involves a corresponding change in the body. "Sensation, and the subsequent operations of the sensitive soul, clearly occur along with some change of the body; as in seeing, the pupil is altered by the impression of color; and the same holds in the other cases."[41]

This seems undeniable. Still, does it really show that the body is intrinsic to the very subject of sensation? After all, when the sensible object moves the sense, the medium of sensation also undergoes a corresponding change. For instance, the transmission of sound involves the propagation of waves in the air. Yet the medium is not part of the subject of sensation.

What seems to be decisive for Thomas is the way in which sensible objects can affect the subject's very ability to sense. "The sensitive subject is acted upon by the sensible object together with an alteration of the body; and for this reason, an excessive intensity of sensible objects impairs the sense."[42] A very bright light dazzles. It hinders subsequent vision in a dimmer light, at least for a while. What this shows is that sight is not a totally "pure" potential. It exists in proportion to a determinate set of conditions. Its own actualization involves a modification of the conditions. When the actualization is too intense, some kind of balance is lost. And readjustment takes time. This shows that the conditions are physical or corporeal.

The seat of the conditions is also the seat of the power of sight, and it is something corporeal. Since it is only a part of a whole animal, the part that the animal uses to see with, it is called an "organ," that is, an instrument. The organ of a given sense may or may not be absolutely essential

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[41] Sentire vero, et consequentes operationes animae sensitivae, manifeste accidunt cum aliqua corporis immutatione; sicut in videndo immutatur pupilla per speciem coloris; et idem apparet in aliis. (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 3.) We might obeserve that this alteration is not itself sensed, at least not in the very act of sensation that it is part of. It is the physical accompaniment of the sense's reception of the species of the object sensed, and like the species, it is only a means or a principle by which the object is sensed. (See above, note 17.)

[42] Sensitivum patitur a sensibili cum corporis immutatione; unde excellentia sensibilium corrumpit sensum. (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 3, ad 2.) See *De anima* III.4, 429b1–3.

to the animal. But it is certainly essential to the sense, as the sense is essential to it. Neither exists without the other.

The Immateriality of Intellect

In Thomas's judgment, it is impossible that the human intellect be either a body or a power seated in a body. His preferred way of showing this comes directly from Aristotle's *De anima*.[43] It runs as follows.

> It is clear that man, through intellect, can apprehend the natures of all bodies. But what can apprehend some things must have none of them in its own nature, because that which is naturally within it would impede the apprehension of the others; thus, we observe that the tongue of someone ill, being is infected with a bilious and bitter humor, cannot perceive something sweet, but everything seems bitter to it. And so if the intellectual principle had in itself the nature of some body, it would be unable to apprehend all bodies. But every body has a determinate nature. So it is impossible that the intellectual principle be a body. And it is likewise impossible that it understand through a bodily organ, because even the determinate nature of that bodily organ would impede the apprehension of all bodies. Thus, not only if some determinate color is in the pupil, but also if it is in a glass vessel, the liquid poured into the vessel seems to be of that same color. Hence the intellectual principle itself, which is called mind or intellect, has an operation of its own, in which the body does not share.[44]

The reasoning here is quite straightforward. However, at the least the first sentence surely raises a question. Is it really so "clear" that man can know the natures of all bodies? As far as I know, Thomas never offers any proof for this claim. Like Aristotle (who in fact says simply "all things"),

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[43] *De anima* III.4, 429a13–429b6.

[44] Manifestum est enim quod homo per intellectum cognoscere potest naturas omnium corporum. Quod autem potest cognoscere aliqua, oportet ut nihil eorum habeat in sua natura, quia illud quod inesset ei naturaliter impediret cognitionem aliorum; sicut videmus quod lingua infirmi quae infecta est cholerico et amaro humore, non potest percipere aliquid dulce, sed omnia videntur ei amara. Si igitur principium intellectuale haberet in se naturam alicuius corporis, non posset omnia corpora cognoscere. Omne autem corpus habet aliquam naturam determinatam. Impossibile est igitur quod principium intellectuale sit corpus. Et similiter impossibile est quod intelligat per organum corporeum, quia etiam natura determinata illius organi corporei prohiberet cognitionem omnium corporum; sicut si aliquis determinatus color sit non solum in pupilla, sed etiam in vase vitreo, liquor infusus eiusdem coloris videtur. Ipsum igitur intellectuale principium, quod dicitur mens vel intellectus, habet operationem per se, cui non communicat corpus. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 2.

he takes it for granted. How does he know it? Does he think he has actually understood each and every kind of bodily nature?

Perhaps he is not presuming quite so much. The argument does not really seem to depend upon the assumption that no bodily nature has remained hidden from us. It only assumes that the intellect is, in itself, open to the knowledge of all bodily natures. To appreciate this, it seems sufficient to consider that the intellect can know the general nature common to all bodies; that is, the very nature of "body," in abstraction from any specific kind. Knowing generally what a body is, the intellect already ranges over the entire field. No specific kind falls outside its scope. The argument then is that if it were itself some specific kind of body, or if it knew by means of some such kind, it would not have this universal scope. Its own nature would block the apprehension of alien or contrary kinds.

Still following Aristotle, whose subtlety on this point he frankly admires,[45] Thomas confirms the incorporeity of mind by way of the very sort of consideration that establishes the corporeity of sensation.[46] Intellect and sense have it in common that they pass from potency to act, from not knowing to knowing. Hence, as with sense, the mind's object is something distinct from it, something that moves it and actualizes it. In this respect mind is passive. Yet it is not passive to the same degree as sense is. For it is never impaired by the action of its own objects. A bright light hinders vision; but highly intelligible things do not make lesser intelligibles harder to understand, even for a while. If anything, Thomas says, they make it easier.

What does this mean? In general, something is intrinsically more knowable, more apt to present or display itself, the more it is "in act." The more intelligible things are those that are more in act, more perfect. But a more perfect thing may be the very point of reference for the understanding of a less perfect thing. For instance, of a pair of contraries, one is more perfect than the other; and the less perfect one is understood by comparison with the more perfect one. It is defined according to its privation of the other's perfection. Dimness is lack of brightness. Thomas is arguing that the mind can never be acted upon in a way contrary to its own nature.[47]

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[45] See his opusculum *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, cap. 1, §24 (ed. Keeler).

[46] See *ST* I, q. 75, a. 3, ad 2.

[47] Non enim invenitur corruptio nisi ubi invenitur contrarietas, generationes enim et corruptiones ex contrariis et in contraria sunt. . . . In anima autem intellectiva non potest esse aliqua contrarietas. Recipit enim secundum modum sui esse, ea vero quae in ipsa recipiuntur, sunt absque contrarietate; quia etiam rationes contrariorum in intellectu non sunt contrariae, sed est una scientia contrariorum. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6.

Mind, then, is indeed a totally "pure" potential. It is not a function of a determinate set of bodily conditions. And there is no such thing as a body that has no determinate conditions. So the mind can neither be, nor reside immediately in, a bodily subject, an "organ of understanding." If the intellectual subject as a whole is corporeal, then his mind must reside immediately in some incorporeal part of him, and belong to the whole by way of that part.[48] The incorporeal part of the human substance is the soul. It is in this sense that the soul is the subject of the mind and its acts.

The Bond between Mind and Matter

In arguing for the incorporeity of the human mind, Thomas focuses upon what he considers to be its first and proportionate objects, the natures of bodily things.[49] This approach underscores the fact that he does not at all mean to claim that the human mind works in complete independence from the body. The mind's first objects are bodily natures, precisely because it only gains access to its objects through the senses. Its primary objects are "founded" in sensibles.[50] As Thomas puts it, "the body is needed for the action of the mind, not as an organ by which such action is excercised, but by reason of the object; for the [sensible] image is related to the intellect as color to sight."[51]

Thus, although the mind's power cannot be blunted by the action of any of its objects, it can still be hindered in its operation, indirectly. It can be deprived of the conditions needed for bearing upon its objects. In particular, Thomas judges that without the exercise of imagination, the mind can neither acquire knowledge of things, nor even use knowledge already acquired. It must gather the likeness of its primary objects from sensible images, and it must turn back to such images in order to consider the objects in their proper mode of being.[52] If the mind did not depend

[48] *ST* I, q. 76, a. 1; see Aristotle, *Physics* V.1, 224a31.

[49] *ST* I, q. 84, aa. 7 and 8. This is not inconsistent with the fact that what we first understand is something more universal than any specific bodily kind, and indeed more universal even than corporeal nature in general: the common nature of being. For we first understand this in corporeal instances of it. Obiectum intellectus est commune quoddam, scilicet ens et verum, sub quo comprehenditur etiam ipse actus intelligendi. Unde intellectus potest suum actum intelligere. Sed non primo, quia nec primum obiectum intellectus nostri, secundum praesentem statum, est quodlibet ens et verum; sed ens et verum consideratum in rebus materialibus, ut dictum est; ex quibus in cognitionem omnium aliorum devenit. *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3, ad 1.

[50] *ST* I, q. 84, a. 8, ad 1.

[51] Corpus requiritur ad actionem intellectus, non sicut organum quo talis actio exerceatur, sed ratione obiecti, phantasma enim comparatur ad intellectum sicut color ad visum. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 2, ad 3.

[52] *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7.

on the senses for the presentation of its object, it would be unaccountable how a failure of the senses or the injury of an organ could obstruct its operation, as they obviously can. It could always be exercising understanding, as Thomas believes the angels and God are.

In one place Thomas says that the human intellect, joined to the body by way of the soul, is at the maximum grade of "concreteness."[53] By this he seems to mean that it is the most "conditioned" of all intellects. Its own activity is tied to a bodily activity. They are distinct activities, but they form an operative unity. This fits with the fact that the intellect's spiritual subject, the soul, is joined to bodily matter in a single act of being, that is, the being of a single substance.

As Thomas sees it, the thesis that the human mind depends upon the senses for the presentation of its object explains many features of human understanding. For instance, it explains why the human mind's first objects are also the most "concrete," that is, composite or divisible, of intelligible objects. It takes work for the mind to reach a grasp of absolutely indivisible natures, even those which exist in bodies and are within its power to understand properly. This is because such natures are at a kind of opposite extreme from the divisible manifolds presented by the senses.[54] Thus, for example, the pre-Socratic "physicists" thought that everything, even soul, was some kind of body. They did not see that what first differentiates one kind of body from another, as soul differentiates a living from a non-living body, cannot be yet another body, but must be something indivisible and incorporeal, a "form."[55]

The mind's dependence upon the senses also explains why, even though it is a spiritual power, its way of operating has much in common with that of bodily or physical things, that is, mobile things. Thomas even compares the human mind to prime matter: In itself it is merely in potency and needs to be moved into act.[56] The comparison is not perfect; among other things, the mind's potency is not only passive but also, in part, active. It possesses a kind of "light," the so-called "agent intellect," which acts upon a thing's sensible image so as to manifest the thing's nature or to make it intelligible "in act." However, the agent intellect does not cause any act of understanding immediately or by itself, without material furnished by the senses. It merely frees the corporeal nature from the material conditions of the senses, "abstracts" it. This enables the nature to produce a likeness of itself that has the mind's own immaterial mode

[53] *Sentencia libri De sensu et sensato,* lect. 1 (Marietti §4).
[54] See *ST* I, q. 85, a. 8.
[55] See *ST* I, q. 75, a. 1.
[56] *ST* I, q. 87, a. 1; see *ST* I, q. 56, a. 1.

of being, a likeness that the mind can receive.[57] To some extent we could compare the agent intellect to the nutritive power, which makes the organism grow, but not without food.

Moreover, the human mind's "assimilation" of the intelligible, or its work of attaining a full and proper grasp of the truth of the object, is a gradual and successive process—again similar to the way in which physical things reach their perfection.[58] By contrast, what the angels and God first know are the natures of simple and absolutely immaterial entities, separate forms;[59] and their grasp of these natures is complete right from the start, without movement.[60] For Thomas, in fact, the mobility of the human mind serves to sum up the difference between it and other minds. The human mind is the discursive, *rational* mind.[61] And its mobility, rooted in its proper subject's conjunction with bodily matter, is a clear sign of its lesser perfection.[62]

Yet Thomas believes that the human soul *can* exist separately from matter, as God and the angels do. He also holds that the separate soul can engage in understanding. As we shall see, this raises some serious doubts about his view that its union with the body is natural for it.

The Need for the Body

The Knowledge of the Separate Soul

As is well known, St. Thomas holds it to be philosophically demonstrable that the human soul is incorruptible, lacking any inner potential to cease to exist. His argument rests on the fact that the soul is both subsistent, or a subject of existence, and a form, a pure determination to the existence that it has.[63] It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this argument in detail. Our interest is in the intellectual activity of the soul once it is separated from the body.

Thomas's own conception of the nature of man's intellectual operation poses a difficulty for the thesis that the soul outlives the body. He was well aware of the difficulty.

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[57] See *ST* I, q. 79, a. 3; I, q. 84, a. 6.
[58] See *ST* I, q. 85, aa. 3, 5.
[59] See *ST* I, q. 12, a. 4; I, q. 14, aa. 2, 5; I, q. 84, a. 7.
[60] See *ST* I, q. 14, aa. 7, 15; I, q. 58, aa. 1, 3, 4.
[61] Homines autem ad intelligibilem veritatem cognoscendam perveniunt, procedendo de uno ad aliud, . . . et ideo rationales dicuntur. *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8.
[62] See *ST* I, q. 79, a. 4.
[63] See *ST* I, q. 75, aa. 2, 6.

> No thing exists without its proper operation. But the proper operation of the soul, which is to understand with an image, cannot be without the body; for the soul understands nothing without an image, and an image does not exist without the body, as it says in the *De anima*. So upon the destruction of the body, the soul cannot remain.[64]

Nothing exists without its own operation. Things exist for the very sake of their operations; these are their proper perfections.[65] Perhaps the corruption of the body does not entail the disappearance of the human soul in the way that it entails the disappearance of non-intellectual or non-subsistent forms. But it seems to entail the complete suspension of the soul's operation. The separate soul would be utterly inert, and so pointless. Nature does not behave pointlessly.

Thomas answers the objection very briefly. "Understanding with an image is the proper operation of the soul, insofar as it is united to the body. But once separated from the body, it will have another way of understanding, similar to that of other substances that are separate from the body."[66] The soul can both exist and understand without the body. It will understand, not by abstraction from sensibles, but in a way similar to that of the substances that are never joined to bodies, the angels. The crucial question will be, would this not be positively better for it? First though, let us look more closely at this "other way of understanding."

The death of the body does not change the human soul's essential nature.[67] Nevertheless it does involve the soul's taking on a different mode of being. It no longer exists in matter. As regards its intellectual operation, this is an extremely significant difference. Once again following Aristotle, Thomas holds that a nature existing separately from matter is by that very fact actually intelligible. There is no need to abstract an immaterial likeness of it from anything. It is immediately apt not only for understanding, but also for being understood. For this reason, Thomas teaches, an angel understands its own nature immediately, and from the very beginning of its existence. The form or "species" through which it

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[64] Nulla res est sine propria operatione. Sed propria operatio animae, quae est intelligere cum phantasmate, non potest esse sine corpore; nihil enim sine phantasmate intelligit anima; phantasma autem non est sine corpore, ut dicitur in libro *De anima*. Ergo anima non potest remanere, destructo corpore. (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 6, obj. 3.) The reference seems to be to *De anima* I.1, 403a9.

[65] See *ST* I, q. 105, a. 5; cf. *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3.

[66] Dicendum quod intelligere cum phantasmate est propria operatio animae secundum quod corpori est unita. Separata autem a corpore habebit alium modum intelligendi similem aliis substantiis a corpore separatis. *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6, ad 3.

[67] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1.

understands its own nature is its own nature, to which of course it is naturally united.[68]

This however does not mean that through understanding itself, the angel understands everything that it naturally can; for it can also understand other things. As we considered before, an angel is only a finite entity. Its understanding of itself provides only a kind of general and confused understanding of other things. This is true as regards not only things above it but also things beneath it.

> The things that are beneath an angel, and those that are above it, are in a way contained in its substance, yet not perfectly, nor according to their proper definitions, but only according to some common feature; for the essence of an angel, being finite, is distinguished from others according to its proper definition.[69]

Hence, in order to understand all that it naturally can, the angel needs additional intelligible forms or likenesses of things. It has these by nature, being endowed with them by the intellectual author of nature, whose own "intelligible species" is a perfect representation of all things.[70] Here of course Thomas is going beyond anything explicit in Aristotle's works.[71]

The angel needs additions to its own nature, additional likenesses of things, in order to reach its natural intellectual perfection. On the other hand, Thomas teaches, it does not need a *distinct* likeness for each of the natures that it understands, even as regards what is proper and distinctive of them. It can receive from God a more perfect intelligible species, in which many natures are all properly and distinctly represented. The more

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[68] Angelus autem, cum sit immaterialis, est quaedam forma subsistens, et per hoc intelligibilis actu. (*ST* I, q. 56, a. 1.) See *ST* I, q. 55, a. 2; I, q. 87, a. 1, ad 2. For the Aristotelian basis, see *De anima*, III.4, 430a3–5, and III.6, 430b24–26; *Metaphysics* XII.9, 1074b35–1075a11.

[69] Ea quae sunt infra angelum, et ea quae sunt supra ipsum, sunt quodammodo in substantia eius, non quidem perfecte, neque secundum propriam rationem, cum angeli essentia, finita existens, secundum propriam rationem ab aliis distinguatur; sed secundum quandam rationem communem. *ST* I, q. 55, a. 1, ad 3.

[70] On God's "intelligible species," see *ST* I, q. 14, a. 5, ad 3. Thomas argues that angels are simply incapable of abstracting intelligible objects from corporeal things, since they lack imagination (*ST* I, q. 55, a. 2, ad 2).

[71] He cites Augustine and ps.-Dionysius. In any case, I see nothing in the reasoning that Thomas would consider essentially dependent upon revelation. Bazán, "The Human Soul," 125, claims that Thomas's argument for the separate soul's intellectual activity is not philosophical. But he does not enter at all into its details, and neither does his sole reference: Joseph Owens, CSR, "Aquinas on the Inseparability of Soul from Existence," *New Scholasticism* 61 (1987): 268–69.

perfect the angel, the more it approaches God's absolute simplicity, and the fewer species it needs.[72]

It is in a way similar to the angels that a soul separated from the body can engage in understanding.[73] So it can know its own nature immediately, and it can know other things through species infused by God.[74] Just as in the case of the angels, this discussion applies independently of any consideration of grace or the supernatural order. And it applies to souls that do not conserve any knowledge previously received by way of abstraction from sensible things.[75]

The Weakness of the Human Mind

Thomas believes that his aristotelianism carries even so far as to making a positive contribution to the account of the knowledge of the separated soul. But the very success of his use of it also raises another doubt about it. Thomas dedicates a long discussion to its resolution.[76]

The doubt is this. If the soul separated from the body can understand in a way similar to that of separate substances, why is it natural for the soul to be in the body and to know by conversion to sensible images? Would it not be better for the soul to have the "angelic" way of knowing right from the start? Nature is always ordered toward what is best. Must God not have instituted the nature of the soul according to the angelic mode of being, viz. separate from the body, so that it could understand by conversion to the things that are intelligible per se? In other words, if the human soul can understand without the body, can its union with the body be deemed truly natural for it? It is a question that challenges Thomas's entire anthropology.

The core of his answer is a distinction. It is true, he says, that absolutely speaking, the angelic mode of understanding, through conversion to the higher intelligible things, is better than the mode of understanding through conversion to sensible images. But with respect to the human soul's capacity for it, the angelic mode is less perfect.

To explain this, Thomas has us consider the fact that the power to manifest the truth, intellectual "light," exists in many grades of perfection.[77] The most perfect is the light of the divine mind, which is absolutely

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[72] *ST* I, q. 55, a. 3; see *ST* I, q. 14, a. 6.

[73] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1.

[74] *ST* I, q. 89, aa. 2 and 3.

[75] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1, obj. 1 and ad 1.

[76] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1; see *Quaestio disputata de anima*, a. 15.

[77] "Light, as pertaining to intellect, is nothing other than a certain manifestation of truth." *ST* I, q. 106, a. 1.

one and simple. Created minds are like concentric rings, revolving around the simple common center at various distances; and their lights derive from the divine light like lines emerging from the center. As the lines move outward, toward rings farther from the center, the more divided and diversified they are. Thus, God understands all things by virtue of his single essence. The higher intellectual creatures, boasting powerful lights, need only a few additional intelligible forms, each containing a great wealth of information about many things. But the lower intellects, endowed with weaker lights, need many forms, each of which represents fewer things and contains less information about them.

Consequently, Thomas says, if a lower mind receives intelligible forms of the sort that suits the higher minds, it will not have sufficient light to exploit them fully. They will be, as it were, too dense for it to unpack. Through them, it will only know things imperfectly, in a kind of general and confused way. Thomas notes that the same thing happens among different men: Some are able to understand many things, and well, by means of just a few abstract and synthetic formulations; for others such formulations mainly produce confusion, and clear comprehension requires longer, more detailed explanations, accompanied by concrete examples.[78] This is how it stands with the human mind in relation to "angelic" intelligible forms. Through them it could indeed understand something, but not well. To understand well, it needs the more particular forms that are gathered from the experience of sensible things.

The human mind is the weakest of all. Yet it too deserves to exist. "The perfection of the universe required that there be various grades in things." And so, Thomas concludes, it is better after all for there to be spiritual substances that are joined to bodies. The human soul's natural mode of being is the one best suited to it. Complete separation from matter would not, by itself, improve the condition of the human mind; quite the contrary. The human mind's inferiority to that of the angels is not the effect of its union with matter. The inferiority is intrinsic to it, and is the very reason for the union.

For Thomas, then, the soul's union with the body is directly in the service of its knowledge of truth. This is certainly an explanation for the union that someone like Malebranche could take seriously. But could it satisfy him? It seems to me that yet another doubt might be raised.

Thomas does acknowledge that separation from matter would have its advantages for the soul. He concedes that although the body is a necessary vehicle for the soul's proper knowledge of corporeal things, it is also

[78] On varying grades of strength in human intellects, see *ST* I, q. 85, a. 7.

a kind of weight and distraction.[79] What the separate soul knows, it knows immediately, effortlessly, without any inquiry or study. Moreover, Thomas seems to judge that the separate soul's knowledge of incorporeal substances, though not perfect, is better than the knowledge that it can have of them while it is in the body.[80] And at least its knowledge of itself, and of other human souls, is perfect and proper.[81]

What it cannot have is complete or proper knowledge of the things below it, corporeal things. It does know something about these things, through the "angelic information" that it is given about them; but its light is not strong enough to discern all of the implications of this information.[82] It needs to have the natures of corporeal things "spelled out," presented singly, according to their own mode of existing in sensible matter. God conveys the knowledge of corporeal natures to the human soul by creating things that have such natures, and by uniting the soul to a body through which they can be presented to it.[83]

Clearly Thomas is setting a very high value on "proper"—we might almost say "clear and distinct"—knowledge of things; and precisely of bodily things. Is it too high? The union with the body entails a lesser knowledge of the angels. And although it does not simply exclude the soul's proper knowledge of itself (since the soul too pertains to the nature of a bodily entity), it does make this more difficult, a matter of diligent and careful inquiry rather than of immediate intuition. Moreover, even the separate soul can know other bodily natures, albeit in a general and confused way. Yet for Thomas this is not enough. "The effort of study is not in vain," he insists, because "the knowledge got through it is proper and complete."[84] He is talking about getting the proper and complete knowledge of bodily natures.

Thomas seems to think that this is a sufficient reason for the soul's union with the body, despite all the disadvantages thereof. To be sure, it is a reason pertaining to the knowledge of truth; but only truth about bodily things.

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[79] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 2, ad 1; see *ST* I, q. 65, a. 1, obj. 2 and ad 2.

[80] Compare *ST* I, q. 89, a. 2 with *ST* I, q. 88, aa. 1 and 2. See *Quaestio disputata de anima*, a. 15.

[81] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 2.

[82] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 3; see *Quaestio disputata de anima*, a. 18. Obviously, in rendering these judgments about the separate soul's knowledge, Thomas is not drawing upon his own personal experience, or for that matter anyone else's. He is offering a reasoned conclusion. His chief assumptions are that the soul is naturally united to the body, that its natural end is to know truth, and that the author of the natural order has done well in giving it this mode of being.

[83] See *ST* I, q. 84, a. 4, ad 1.

[84] *ST* I, q. 89, a. 3, ad 4.

Could Malebranche possibly be satisfied with this? Surely he would find such a high regard for merely physical knowledge rather too "pagan."

However, we should not forget Thomas's metaphor of lines emerging from a common center. For him, the truth about bodily things is not "only" truth about bodily things. It is also a derivation from the First Truth. What we need to consider is his appreciation of the role of the truth of bodily things in the human soul's overall "search for truth."

To Represent God

First let us go back for a moment to the way in which Thomas defends the existence of low-grade intellectual substances like us. "The perfection of the universe," he says, "required that there be various grades in things." This is a point that he explains earlier in the *Summa theologiae*.[85] God produced the universe of creatures for the sake of the communication and representation of his own goodness. But no one creature can represent it sufficiently, and what is lacking in one is supplied by another. This is why he made many things, and especially many *forms* of things. But "formal distinction always requires inequality."[86]

This doctrine is connected with what we saw earlier about God's knowledge of things. Only He can know all things properly and perfectly just by knowing himself, because he alone contains in himself all the perfections of things. This means that he contains not only the perfections common to all things, for instance being or goodness, but also their proper perfections. Their distinctive forms and differences are perfections too.

> Not only that which creatures have in common, namely being, pertains to perfection; but also those features by which creatures are distinguished from one another, such as life, and understanding, and so forth, by which living things are distinguished from non-living, and intelligent things from non-intelligent. And every form, by which each thing is constituted in its proper species, is a certain perfection. And thus all things pre-exist in God, not only as regards what is common to them all, but also as regards the features according to which the things are distinguished.[87]

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[85] *ST* I, q. 47, a. 1.

[86] *ST* I, q. 47, a. 2. He explains this in *ST* I, q. 75, a. 7. Formal distinction is the sort of distinction found among species of a genus. The differences dividing a genus into its species are contraries, and these are are related as perfect to imperfect. This is because the root of contrariety is possession and privation.

[87] Non solum autem id in quo creaturae communicant, scilicet ipsum esse, ad perfectionem pertinet; sed etiam ea per quae creaturae ad invicem distinguuntur, sicut vivere, et intelligere, et huiusmodi, quibus viventia a non viventibus, et intelligentia a non intelligentibus distinguuntur. Et omnis forma, per quam quaelibet *res* in propria specie constituitur, perfectio quaedam est. Et sic omnia in Deo praeexitunt,

The perfections of all things preexist in God. They exist in the things themselves for the sake of representing him. Each makes its own partial, but special, contribution. What this means is that the lower kinds of things in the world are not just good; they also contain perfections that the higher do not. They even represent God's goodness in ways that the higher do not. This is true not only of the lowest spiritual things, but also of the lowest things simply, the bodies.[88]

Man's natural end is not to know the truth about corporeal things. But then, neither is it to know the truth about himself.[89] It is to know the truth about God, and thereby to love him. Man reaches the knowledge of God through his created representations—through man himself, of course, and in a special way through the knowledge of his own mind;[90] but not solely. The lower creatures also represent God to man, and in ways that man himself does not. This is why the knowledge of them perfects him, promotes the achievement of his end.[91]

"The form of a stone, or of any sensible thing," Thomas says, "is inferior to man. Hence through the form of a stone the intellect is not perfected insofar as it is 'such' a form." And nevertheless the intellect is perfected by it, "insofar as in it is participated some likeness of something that is above the human intellect, namely an intelligible light, or something of that sort."[92] It is in order to gain access to such participated light that the soul is united to the body.

We should notice that it is by reason of its *form* that the sensible thing shares in this light. The Cartesians rejected the very notion of "substantial form," not only as a description of the human soul, but also quite generally as a principle of corporeal reality.[93] From Thomas's standpoint,

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non solum quantum ad id quod commune est omnibus, sed etiam quantum ad ea secundum quae *res* distinguuntur. (*ST* I, q. 14, a. 6.) On the presence of the very differences of things in God, see I, q. 4, a. 2, ad 1.

88 *ST* I, q. 65, a. 2. Here he argues against Origen's view that bodies were created only to bind sinful spirits.

89 Even this judgment has aristotelian credentials: see *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, 1177b27–1178a7.

90 See *ST* I, q. 88, a. 1, ad 1.

91 We might also consider the fact that the goodness of the universe, considered as a whole, represents the goodness of God in an especially excellent way (*ST* I, q. 47, a. 1). The unity of the universe consists in the order of its parts (*ST* I, q. 47, a. 3), including the lowest ones (*ST* I, q. 65, a. 2); and the understanding of this order depends on a distinct and proper understanding of the parts (*ST* I, q. 15, a. 2).

92 *ST* I–II, q. 3, a. 6.

93 See Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la Vérité,* VI.ii.iii, in *Œuvres*, vol. II, 309–20.

this amounts to severing the natural "line of communication" between the human mind and the divine light. For it is a line that passes through sensible things, by way of their forms.

Finally, although man is the lowest of the intellectual substances, he too must resemble and represent God in some way or ways that the higher do not. Thomas draws our attention to at least two such features. They are directly tied to the spiritual soul's being the form of the body and existing as the term of human generation.

All creatures, Thomas teaches, are in some way like God. But only the intellectual creatures have that special degree of likeness which goes by the name of "image."[94] Now, absolutely speaking, the angels are more in the image of God than are men, because their intellectual nature is more perfect. Nevertheless, in certain respects, man is more in the image of God than angels; namely, insofar as man is from man, as God (the Son) is from God (the Father); and insofar as the soul of man exists whole in his whole body, and whole in every part, as God is in the world. Thomas notes that these traits constitute an image of God only on the supposition of an intellectual nature. Otherwise, he says, even the beasts would be in the image of God.[95]

"Man is from man": This is easy enough to understand. That the whole soul is in the whole body, and also in every part, is difficult. But what it chiefly means is that the soul's whole essence, its whole substantial perfection, is in the whole and in every part.[96] This one perfection embraces a whole range of grades. The soul, "being one and the same, perfects matter according to diverse grades of perfection. For it is by a form that is essentially one and the same that a man is a being in act, and

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[94] *ST* I, q. 93, a. 2.

[95] De imagine Dei loqui dupliciter possumus. Uno modo, quantum ad id in quo primo consideratur ratio imaginis, quod est intellectualis natura. Et sic imago Dei est magis in angelis quam sit in hominibus, quia intellectualis natura perfectior est in eis, ut ex supra dictis patet. Secundo potest considerari imago Dei in homine, quantum ad id in quo secundario consideratur, prout scilicet in homine invenitur quaedam Dei imitatio, inquantum scilicet homo est de homine, sicut Deus de Deo; et inquantum anima hominis est tota in toto corpore eius, et iterum tota in qualibet parte ipsius, sicut Deus se habet ad mundum. Sed quantum ad hoc non attenditur per se ratio divinae imaginis in homine, nisi praesupposita prima imitatione, quae est secundum intellectualem naturam, alioquin etiam animalia bruta essent ad imaginem Dei. Et ideo, cum quantum ad intellectualem naturam angelus sit magis ad imaginem Dei quam homo, simpliciter concedendum est angelum magis esse ad imaginem Dei; hominem autem secundum quid. *ST* I, q. 93, a. 3.

[96] *ST* I, q. 76, a. 8.

a body, and alive, and an animal, and a man."[97] Every part of the body is distinctively human, which is to say, rational.[98] Diversified according to their operative powers, all of the parts are naturally ordered toward contributing to the work of "gathering truth from divisible things."

To conclude: The spiritual soul's natural mode of existence puts it in a physical genus, making it "belong more with the beasts than with the angels." Yet the perfection naturally due to it, which is not its mere existence, is something spiritual, more like that of the angels: the knowledge of truth. Nevertheless, to exist in their mode would degrade the soul's share in this perfection. Man needs the help of the perfection that he shares with the beasts, the life of the senses. From what we have seen, it seems hardly a coincidence that the Cartesians denied that beasts have sensation.[99] In any case, it should be clear that the "turn to the subject" raises theoretical issues that go well beyond the "philosophy of man." N&V

[97] Una et eadem existens, perficit materiam secundum diversos perfectionis gradus. Una enim et eadem forma est per essentiam, per quam homo est ens actu, et per quam est corpus, et per quam est vivum, et per quam est animal, et per quam est homo. *ST* I, q. 76, a. 6, ad 1.

[98] See *ST* I, q. 76, a. 3, ad 4. When used to express man's differentia, "rational" does not signify a faculty or power (*ST* I, q. 77, a. 1, ad 7). It signifies the grade of substantial perfection that the power's operation discloses (see *ST* I, q. 110, a. 4, ad 4). Although it is an adjective, it does not refer to accident added to a subject that is essentially just an "animal." On the contrary, the differentia constitutes the subject's *chief* essential trait, its determination to true unity of existence and signification.

[99] See Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la Vérité,* VI.ii.vii, in *Œuvres*, vol. II, 389–94.