**Thomas Aquinas on the soul: the form of the body**

* Texts: *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 75 (a. 1-2), q. 76, a. 1
* Questions:

1. what does it mean, that the soul is the form of the body?
2. why is the intellect such form?

What we learn about the soul from q. 75:

1. [First definition of soul] **it is the first principle of life** in a body and as such, must be something different from a body: otherwise, we would have only animated bodies (this is a sort of empirical argument by Thomas Aquinas) and, most importantly,
2. [Second definition of soul] it is what makes a body being “of a given sort” (*actu tale*), because it is **such body’s act**:

*Therefore, a soul, i.e., a first principle of life, is the act of a body and not itself a body – just as heat, i.e., a principle of heating, is a certain act of the body and not itself a body.*

* In what sense, “first principle of life” and not just “principle of life”?

“First” here must be intended as “entirely responsible for the whole compound (for the whole human being)”: the example given by Aquinas of the heart offers a good example of what is a partial principle of life for instance, and also, lets the door opened to the fact that, such principle, is something that goes beyond, something more than the mere functioning of the body:

**TA, *ST* Ia, q. 75, a. 1, Answer**

It is evident that not every principle of a vital operation is a soul, since otherwise an eye would be a soul, given that it is a principle of seeing; and the same thing would have to be said of others among the soul’s instruments. Instead, we are claiming that a soul is the *first* principle of life. For even though a body can in some sense be a principle of life, in the way that the heart is a principle of life in an animal, nonetheless, a body cannot be the first principle of life. For it is clear that being a principle of life, or being alive (*vivens*), cannot belong to a body by reason of its being a body; otherwise, each body would be alive or would be a principle of life. Therefore, the fact that a body is alive – or is even a principle of life – is something that belongs to it by virtue of the fact that it is a body of a given sort (*tale corpus*). But the fact that a body is actually of a given sort (*actu tale*) is due to a principle that is called its act (*eius actus*). Etc.

* Which “bodies” do we know, identified by different kinds of acts? (souls)

Plants, animals, human beings: the three Aristotelian “souls”, namely the vegetative soul, the sensitive soul, the intellective soul

A third feature, this time concerning human soul only, namely its **subsistence**, introduces the specific kind of soul proper to human beings.

* What does being-subsistent mean?

**TA, *ST* Ia, q. 75, a. 2, Objections [they help us figuring out the sense of “subsistence”]**

That which is subsistent is said to be a this-something (*hoc aliquid*) (…)

Anything that is subsistent can be said to operate

If a soul were something subsistent, then it would have an operation without a body (*operatio sine corpore*). But none of its operations occurs without a body (*nulla est sine corpore*) – not even the act of intellective understanding, since the soul cannot have an act of intellective understanding without phantasms, and phantasms cannot exist without a body

Being subsistent =

1. being “this-something” = being a thing
2. being able to perform an activity
3. being independent: in the case of the intellect, from sensory representations in particular, say the phantasms, and more generally, from the body (NB: what is expressed in the objection is an – the! – argument against the soul’s separability)

Axiom [*sed contra*]: ***The human mind is not only incorporeal but also a substance, i.e., something subsistent***

Why, is explained by Thomas Aquinas in the “Answer” to q. 75 a. 2

1. the intellect must be incorporeal because it knows the natures of all the bodies
2. if it were corporeal, it would not know the bodies, being a body itself
3. what has a corporeal nature, cannot know every nature but only one specific kind of nature (example of the sick tongue infected with bilious and bitter humors)
4. thus, the intellect not only has no corporeal nature (= is not a body) but also, such incorporeality is the necessary condition for intellectual knowledge to take place
5. thus, intellect has an operation which is independent from the body
6. and is subsistent
7. conclusion: the human soul, “which is called the intellect or mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent”

**TA, *ST* Ia, q. 75 a. 2, Answer:**

One must claim that the principle of intellectual operations, which we call a man’s soul, is an incorporeal and subsistent principle. For it is clear that by means of his intellect a man is able to have cognition of the natures of all bodies. But that which is able to have cognition of given things must be such that it has nothing of those things in its own nature, since what exists in it naturally would in that case impede the cognition of those other things. For instance, we see that a sick tongue infected with bilious and bitter humors (*infecta cholerico et amaro humore*) is unable to perceive anything sweet; instead, everything seems bitter to it. Therefore, if an intellectual principle had within itself the nature of any sort of body, it would be unable to have cognition of all bodies. But each body has some determinate nature. Therefore, it is impossible that this intellectual principle should be a body. And, similarly, it is impossible that it should have intellective understanding through a bodily organ, since the determinate nature of that bodily organ would likewise prevent its having cognition of all bodies—in just the same way that if some determinate color exists not only in the pupil but also in the glass vase, then a liquid poured into that vase seems to be of that same color. Therefore, the intellectual principle itself, which is called the *mind* or the *intellect*, has an operation in its own right (*habet operationem per se*) that the body does not share in. But nothing can operate in its own right unless it subsists in its own right (*nihil potest per se operari nisi quod per se subsistit*). For to operate belongs to a being that is actual (*in actu*), and so a thing operates in the way in which it exists. It is for this reason that we say that it is the hot thing (*calidum*), rather than the heat (*calor*), that gives warmth. It follows, then, that the human soul, which is called the intellect or mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent.

* What kind of soul is not subsistent?
* Animal’s one, namely the **sentient soul**, for it always needs the body to operate: cf. ST Ia q. 75 a. 3. NB the following argument at the end of this article:

**TA, *ST* Ia, q. 75 a. 3, ad 3:**

There are two sorts of moving powers. There is one which *commands* movement (*imperat motum*), viz., the appetitive power. And its operation in the sentient soul does not occur without the body. **Rather, anger and joy and all passions of this sort exist along with some change in the body.** The second sort of moving power is one which *executes* movement (*exequens motum*) and through which the members of the body are rendered capable of obeying the appetite. This power’s act is to be moved and not to effect movement. **Hence, it is clear that to effect movement is not an act that the sentient soul has without the body.**

**But let us go back to the claim, the soul is the form of the body**

* Which soul?
* And in human beings?

**The answer is the long a. 1 of q. 76:**

One must claim that the intellect, which is the principle of an intellectual operation, is the form of the human body. For that by which something operates first and foremost (*primo operatur*) is the form of that to which the operation is attributed. For instance, that by which the body is first and foremost made healthy is health, and that by which the soul first and foremost knows is knowledge (*scientia*); hence, health is a form belonging to the body, and knowledge is a form belonging to the soul. The reason for this is that nothing acts except insofar as it is actually such-and-such, and so that by which it is actually such-and-such is that by which it acts. But it is obvious that the soul is that by which the body is first and foremost alive. And since life is made manifest by different operations within the different grades of living things, the soul is that by which we perform each of these vital works. For instance, the soul is that by which we first and foremost assimilate nourishment (*nutrimur*), have sensory cognition (*sentimus*), and move from place to place (*movemur secundum locum*); and, similarly, the soul is that by which we first and foremost have intellective understanding (*intelligimus*). Therefore, this principle by which we first and foremost have intellective understanding—regardless of whether it is called the intellect or the intellective soul—is the form of the body. This is Aristotle’s demonstration in *De Anima* 2.

Why must the intellect be the form of the human body? Many answers in the body of the dense q. 76 a. 1.

1. According to a metaphysic principle: *illud quod primo aliquid operatur est forma operantis* (see above): namely the first agent, responsible of the actualization of a thing, is its form

* Fair enough, but why does the **intellect** need to be linked to the body exactly as its **form** (and **not** as an autonomous substance)? (NB: this is an argument against Avicenna’s soul/intellect dualism)

**TA *ST* Ia q. 76 a. 1, Answer (-s):**

(…) some have wanted to claim that an intellect is united to a body as its mover, and that a single entity is made up of an intellect and a body in such a way that the intellect’s action can be attributed to

the whole. However, there are a number of things wrong (*multipliciter vanum*) with this claim:

(…) Second, Socrates is an individual in a nature whose essence is unified (*una*) and composed of matter and form. If an intellect were not his form, it would follow that it lies outside his essence, and in that case an intellect would be related to the whole Socrates as a mover is related to the thing moved. But intellective understanding is an action that comes to rest within the agent and that, unlike the action of heating, does not pass into another. Therefore, it cannot be the case that understanding is attributed to Socrates by virtue of his being moved by an intellect.

(…) On the other hand, if (a) Socrates is a whole composed by the union of the intellect to the other things belonging to Socrates and if (b) the intellect is nonetheless united to the other things belonging to Socrates only as a mover, then it follows that Socrates is not a single thing absolutely speaking (*non sit* *unum simpliciter*) and hence is not an entity absolutely speaking. For an entity is a being in the same sense in which it has oneness (*sic enim aliquid est ens quomodo et unum*). Therefore, the only way left is the one proposed by Aristotle, viz., that *this* man understands because an intellective principle is his form. Thus, it is clear from the intellect’s very operation that an intellective principle is united to the body as its form.

* A couple of considerations:

In all the latter arguments, Aquinas is targeting the **intellect/soul dualism** in general and the intellect/soul dualism suggested **by Avicenna** in particular. According to Avicenna, the intellect is related tothe human ensouled body as a captain to her ship.Although Aquinas disagrees with this view, Avicenna’ intellect/souldualism is **not incompatible** with the Cristian dogma of personalimmortality. Since the intellect according to Avicenna is separable fromthe body, the kernel of human personality can survive death and beavailable for punishment or reward, as required by Christian faith.

* Aquinas rejects Avicenna’s view not (primarily) for theological reasons, but rather from a **philosophical** (psychological) point of view: according to Aquinas, an intellect/soul dualism does not account properly for the **unity of the human being** (considered as a **basic phenomenological constraint** for a theory about “mind and body”).

**TA, *ST* Ia, q. 76, a. 1:**

Now if someone [e.g. Avicenna] wants to claim that the intellective soul is not the form of the body, then he has to find a sense in which […] intellective understanding is an action that belongs to this man. **For each of us experiences that it is he himself who understands.**

* Let’s try an assessment

Aquinas has good arguments against the intellect/soul dualism. His basic point is that a human being loses his unity if the intellectual function does not essentially belong to him/her. So Aquinas can convincingly reject both Avicenna’s position (= each human being has an individual but separate intellect) and Averroes’ position (= all human beings have a unique separate intellect). According to Aquinas, the **intellect is not the captain of the ship, but the very form of the ship**. In other words, **only hylomorphism can account for the unity of man.**

* But how coherent is Aquinas’ own position? How coherent is to assume that the intellect is both the form of the body and self-subsistent (incorporeal)? Is that not a contradiction?

**Aquinas’ plausibility argument: ST Ia q. 76 a. 1:**

[…] **the more noble a form is, the more it dominates corporeal matter, and the less immersed it is in it, and the more it exceeds it in its operation or power.** Hence, we see that the form of a mixed bodyhas certain operations that are not caused by the qualities of theelements. And the further one proceeds in nobility among forms, themore the power of the form exceeds elemental matter; e.g. thevegetative soul exceeds it more than does the form of a metal, and the sentient soul exceeds it more than does the vegetative soul. But the **human soul ranks first in nobility among forms. Hence, by its power it** **exceeds corporeal matter to such a degree that it has a certain** **operation and power that corporeal matter does not share in at all.** And this power is called the intellect.

* How convincing is Aquinas’ plausibility argument? Can the intellect (as the form of the body) really have the ontological independence from the body Aquinas ascribes to it? Or more precisely:
* **Does the intellect really possess an operation (understanding) that is completely independent from matter**, as Aquinas’ criterion of ontological independence requires?

This is questionable, since Aquinas in his epistemology assumes that the intellect’s basic operation (= understanding) **necessarily rests on** **sense perception** (= according to him, we can only have intellectual understanding of what we have previously perceived with our senses). But sense perception is a **corporeal cognitive function**. For this reason, Aquinas even emphasizes that the human intellect **requires a body organized** as the human body is organized:

**TA, *ST* Ia, q. 76, a. 5:**

Nature is not lacking in necessities, and so the intellective soul had to possess not only the power of intellective understanding, but also the power of sensing. But the action of the senses does not exist in the absence of a corporeal instrument. Therefore, the intellective soul had to be united to a body of a sort that could serve as an appropriate instrument of the sensory power.

BONUS:

**Different positions about the mind/soul/body problem up to 1300:**

• Materialism (e.g. Democritus): soul (= mind) **=** (part of) body

• Soul/body dualism (Plato, Augustine): soul (= mind) **vs.** body

• Aristotelian hylomorphism (soul = form of the body; intellect is incorporeal; mind is distributed on different powers of the soul);

Different varieties of hylomorphism:

§ intellect/soul dualism (Avicenna): intellect is not (a power of) the soul, but is **individual**

§ intellect/soul dualism (Averroes): intellect is not (a power) of the soul and is **universal**

§ strict hylomorphism (Aquinas): intellect is (a power of) the soul, but **incorporeal**

§ strict hylomorphism (Alexander of Aphrodisias): intellect is (a power of) the soul and **corporeal**