Aquinas, Hylomorphism and the Human Soul

Aquinas asks, What is a human being? A body? A soul? A composite of the two?

1. You Are Not Merely A Body: Like Avicenna, Aquinas argues that you are not merely a body. For, you are a LIVING body. So there needs to be something that ANIMATES it; i.e., some “first principle of life”.

If BODY was itself the first principle of life, then (Aquinas thinks) it follows that ALL bodies would be alive. Consider a living human moments before death, and a corpse moments after death. The material body has not changed. Yet, the thing goes from alive to dead. So, there must be some immaterial, non-bodily thing that animates the body.

[You might be thinking, “Sure, it’s not MERE matter that is alive—but matter ARRANGED in certain ways always gives rise to life. So, we needn’t accept that life (or consciousness) comes from something immaterial.” Here it will help to remember the distinction between the material and formal causes. What you’ve really said is that matter by itself isn’t automatically alive. Rather, it needs a certain FORM in order to be alive. But, keep in mind that Aquinas thinks matter and form are distinct. The matter is the material cause of life. But, the arrangement that you are appealing to is the FORMAL cause. In that case, we DO need something in addition to mere matter in order to get life. Namely, we need a FORM. Well... That’s really close to what Aquinas is saying. Ultimately, he is going to propose that the soul is the form of the living body.]

Conclusion: There is something non-corporeal that animates the body. This is the soul. (Latin, anima; Greek, psyche) Further, the soul is the seat of your psychology, or mind.

Objection: Nothing can move a body unless it itself moves. Furthermore, moving the body requires CONTACT with it. But, whatever both produces motion and is itself in motion is a body. Furthermore, only bodies can come into contact with bodies. Therefore, the soul could not move the body unless it were itself a body.

Reply: We’ve already accepted the existence of an Unmoved Mover (motionless both intrinsically AND accidentally) who is not a body (namely, God). The soul, he says, is only in “motion” accidentally (that is, relative to, or through another). Bodies are in motion intrinsically. Regarding contact, this can occur by physical contact (which only bodies are capable of) or contact of POWER. This does NOT require a body (for instance, God could be said to be “in contact” with Creation via His power to affect things in it).

2. You Are Not Merely A Soul: Those who accept the existence of an immaterial soul may be tempted to conclude that what a human being IS is a soul. What you ARE is a
soul, and you just INHABIT or CONTROL a body (like a little ghost operating a big machine). This was a popular view, but Aquinas rejects it. Why? He writes,

"any given thing is identified with what carries out the operations of that thing, and so a human being is identified with what carries out the operations of a human being." (I.75.4)

What a human being IS is what carries out human operations. But, one of those operations is sensation (i.e., seeing, hearing, tasting, etc.); and sensation is a BODILY operation. Therefore, the body is a part of the human being.

[Is this weird? Why does something that is required for a human operation have to BE a PART of the human being? For instance, another human operation is the use of tools. Is the tool a PART of me, then? If not, then perhaps we just use bodies like we use tools.]

3. You Are Not A Composite Of Two Distinct, Complete Substances: Aquinas’s reasons for thinking that the human being is not a soul become more clear once we understand that he rejects the view known as substance dualism.

Many who believe in souls believe that there are two, fundamentally different kinds of substances in the world. The body is a complete substance (extended, material, etc.), and the soul is ALSO a complete substance (non-extended, immaterial, etc.). If the soul were itself an independent, complete substance, it is easy to see how one could find the view that human beings JUST ARE souls attractive.

Aquinas rejects this. On his view, though a soul SUBSISTS (i.e., is capable of surviving without a body), a disembodied soul is INCOMPLETE.

The Soul is ‘Subsistent’ But Not a ‘Substance’: Aquinas says that the soul is a THING. But, something can be a ‘thing’ in one of two ways: (a) As any sort of thing that can have some sort of incomplete existence on its own, or (b) A complete thing.

The soul (like a severed hand) can exist on its own only in the first way, (a), as an INCOMPLETE thing; but not in the second way, (b), as a complete thing.

4. You Are A Hylomorphic Union of Body and Soul: Aquinas’s view is that what a human being IS is a “hylomorphic” UNION of the two. Since each is incomplete without the other, the WHOLE human being is really the composite of the two.

You Are Body + Soul, Understood as Matter + Form: It helps if we understand that Aquinas, following Aristotle, believes that all individual corporeal things are composed of form + matter.
For instance, what is Sparky the dog? Is he MERELY some material? No! says Aquinas. For, matter can’t exist without some form. So, then, is Sparky the form of ‘dog’? No! says Aquinas, since then Sparky would not be individuated from Fido (who also has the form of ‘dog’). So, individuals are always composites of form + matter.

Each human is like this too. In short, the human soul is the FORM of the body.

5. Three Potential Problems: As follows:

Problem #1: Forms Are Not Subsistent: Aquinas has called the soul the FORM of the body. But, not only are forms not (complete) substances, they aren’t even subsistent things. A form is the very sort of thing that CANNOT exist on its own (e.g., there is no ‘horseness’ floating around out there independent of any matter). They don’t exist independently of matter. In short, Aquinas makes the following two claims, but they seem to be incompatible:

- The soul is the form of the body.
- The soul is a subsistent thing.

Problem #2: Disembodied Souls Cannot Be Individuated: Forms are not multiplied by being instantiated in multiple parcels of matter. For instance, there are not multiple ‘horsenesses’. There is just ONE form of horseness. There are distinct horses because that one form inheres in different parcels of matter. In short, it is the MATTER that differentiates individuals who share the same form. So, if the soul is the form of man, and matter is the principle of individuation, isn’t there really just ONE soul (i.e., one form of ‘humanity’)? If so, then souls are not individuated when disembodied.

Reply to #2: First, note that this leads to absurdities. Since the soul is the seat of the intellect, this would mean that there is only one intellect among all human beings. So, Socrates and Plato share one and the same intellect, and so on. This seems clearly false.

Second, Aquinas appeals to matter as an individuator EVEN AFTER the soul has been separated from the body. He writes, of the disembodied soul after death,

“nevertheless it is the form of some matter ... so there are many souls belonging to a single species, corresponding to the divisions in matter.” (I.76.2.R1)

His view seems to be that, because my soul was the form of THIS PARTICULAR matter, and your soul was the form of THAT PARTICULAR matter, they are different forms—yet, forms of the same species, humanity.
Reply to #1 & #2: You may be thinking: But, how can that be!? Surely this is not the case for any other form. It’s not like there are multiple dognesses just because dogness was in Sparky’s matter and also in Fido’s matter!

Answer: Recall from the “4th Way”, Aquinas accepts a “hierarchy of being”. Among corporeal things there is a hierarchy from unthinking stones to vegetables to animals to humans. Among intellectual things there is a hierarchy from humans to angels to God. We straddle these two ends of the spectrum.

As the lowest of intellectual beings, we are the only ones that need or have bodies. God and the angels can all intellect things without the aid of a body—but, since we’re the lowest, we need to gain ideas through a body.

As the highest of bodily beings, we are the only ones who have intellects. But, most importantly, we are the only ones with forms that (a) can subsist on their own, and (b) be individuated within the same species in the way described above!

[You might be thinking, “Okay, but angels NEVER had bodies! So, how are THEY individuated!?” Answer: Each one is a different species. (Hmm, does this sound kind of like haecceitism, but ONLY for angels?)]

Problem #3: Animal Souls: There are really two issues here. The first is that it seems as if animals and plants must have souls too. After all, Aquinas says that the soul is the first principle of life. So, do they have souls? Yes and no. Aquinas believes that there are three kinds of souls:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Soul</th>
<th>Characterized By</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nutritive/Vegetative Souls</td>
<td>Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive Souls</td>
<td>Sensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Souls</td>
<td>Intellect (Reason)</td>
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Plants and animals DO have souls. However, merely vegetative and sensitive “souls” are not like human souls since they are not subsistent (i.e., they do not continue to exist after the death of the organism). As we’ve seen, Aquinas thinks that lower operations such as sensation require bodies (as does organic life; e.g., breathing, growing). However, the distinctly human operation—i.e., intellect—does NOT.

So, e.g., when Sparky’s body dies, everything that defined its doggy operation (namely, bodily life functions as well as sensation) dies too. But, when Socrates’s body dies, there is one operation that his form/soul can still do—namely, reason.
[Keep in mind that Aquinas believes that (rational) THOUGHT is the only operation that the soul conducts on its own. That’s partially how we knew in the first place that it is a separate, individual thing, distinct from matter (because anything that has its own unique kind of operation must be a unique individual thing). Operations like sensation, on the other hand, require bodies.

Another note: The soul, when separated from the body, will still be able to have THOUGHTS, just not sensory perceptions. How can this be? Well, imagine someone in a sensory deprivation tank. Don’t they continue to exist and have thoughts?

I Have 3 Souls?: But, then, isn’t a human being really a union of THREE souls and a body (vegetative, sensitive, and rational)?

Reply: No, that couldn’t be. The form of an individual thing is what gives it existence. So, if there were three forms, we’d really be THREE DISTINCT THINGS, rather than one single individual human being.

We don’t need vegetative and sensory souls because each kind of soul possesses the powers of those below it. For instance, a dog’s sensory soul gives life in addition to sensation. Similarly, a human’s intellective soul gives the life and the power of sensation in addition to the capacity for rational thought.

6. On Abortion and Ensoulment: Aquinas has established that human beings have an (intellective) soul. So, with respect to embryos, he has two options:

(1) The intellective soul is present in the embryo from the moment of conception.
(2) Or it is not.

Clearly, an embryo is at least nutritive (i.e., vegetative), since it takes in nutrients and grows, just as a vegetable does. And, a bit later, it is sensitive (i.e., has at least some rudimentary sensations). So, he (1) could be true if either:

(a) A nutritive, sensitive, AND an intellective soul are present from conception.
   
   But, as we have seen, Aquinas rejects the claim that humans have multiple souls.

(b) Only an intellective soul is present from the moment of conception, but with nutritive and sensitive powers.

   Aquinas rejects this, on the grounds that the soul is the form of the human body. Aquinas seems to suggest that the human soul cannot fulfill this role until the human body is fully present. He writes, “since the soul is united to the body as its form, it is united only to a body of which it is properly the act.” (SCG, II.89)
So, consider the possibility that the intellective (human) soul is NOT present from the moment of conception, but is generated at a later time. Option (2) could be true if:

(a) There is no soul at all in the early fetus, but rather the nutritive (and later, sensory) powers are derived from the mother, or else from the father’s sperm.

But, Aquinas believes that the fetus is truly alive, and distinct from the mother’s body. As a distinct, individual living organism, it must have its own soul. He writes, “for vital functions such as feeling, nourishment, and growth cannot be from an extrinsic principle.” (ST, I.118.2.R2)

(b) Or, first there is a nutritive soul, then a nutritive AND a sensitive soul, then a nutritive, sensitive, AND intellective soul (so that humans have at least 3 souls).

Again, we have seen Aquinas’s reasons for rejecting this.

(c) A single soul is present throughout, but is slowly perfected into a human soul.

But, that’s not how forms work. For, “no substantial form is susceptible of more or less.” (ST, I.118.2.R2) Forms are static. They don’t “improve”. If an embryo moves from vegetative to sensitive, this requires a substantial change.

(d) There are a series of souls (e.g., nutritive, sensitive, intellective), each new soul replacing the former through a series of “generations and corruptions”.

Option (e) is the one Aquinas endorses. He writes,

“Thus, the vegetative soul, which is present first (when the embryo lives the life of a plant), perishes, and is succeeded by a more perfect soul, both nutritive and sensitive in character, and then the embryo lives an animal life; and when this passes away it is succeeded by the rational soul introduced from without, while the preceding souls existed in virtue of the semen.” (SCG II.89)

Furthermore, recall that Aquinas believes that only the human intellective soul is immaterial and incorruptible. Nutritive and sensitive souls are not. Therefore, he has no problem claiming that these arise in virtue of the powers of the father’s semen imparted to the embryo. However, material, corruptible things cannot generate immaterial, incorruptible ones. So, it is God who creates the immaterial human soul at the final stage of the formation of the fetus. He writes,

“We conclude therefore that the intellectual soul is created by God at the end of human generation, and this soul is at the same time sensitive and nutritive, the pre-existing forms being corrupted.” (ST, I.118.2.R2)
Implications for Abortion: It follows on Aquinas’s view that an early-term fetus is not yet a human being. He writes,

“It follows that the human body, so far as it is in potentiality to the soul, as not yet having one, precedes the soul in time; it is, then, not actually human, but only potentially human.” (SCG, II.89)

So, we might suspect that Aquinas believes early-term abortions to be morally permissible—or at least no worse, morally, than killing a vegetable (when the fetus merely has a vegetative soul) or an animal (when it merely has a sensitive soul). He even seems to suggest as much in ST II-II.64.8.R2 when he states that killing an ANIMATED (i.e., ensouled) fetus is equivalent to homicide.

Though, even if Aquinas did believe that killing a fetus that has not yet been “animated” with a human soul was morally permissible, this would not be of much use to pro-choice advocates. For, in an early work (Commentary on the Sentences III.3.5.2, Resp.), he tentatively suggests (following Aristotle) that the fetus becomes a human being on the 40th day after conception (at least, males do; females get souls on the 90th day). Most women do not even discover that they are pregnant until after 40 days into their pregnancy, however.

[I suppose if he’d had technology advanced enough to determine sex during the first trimester, Thomas could’ve still endorsed aborting FEMALE fetuses in the 40-89 day range. However, if he’d had that sort of technology, he would not have claimed that it takes 50 days longer for the bodies of female fetuses to develop into a human form!]

Furthermore, as it turns out, Aquinas DOES NOT think even early-term (i.e., non-ensouled) abortions are morally permissible. He explicitly states that—though, he admits, not as wrong as post-ensoulment abortions (which are morally equivalent to homicide). (He refers to an Augustinian commentary on Exodus 21:22-25) He writes,

Although this sin is serious, and should be counted as a wrongdoing, and is contrary to nature (since even a beast hopes for its fetus), still it is less than homicide, because conception could still be impeded in some other way. (Sentences IV.31, exp.)

He does not tell us explicitly why he believes this, but likely he has in mind one or both of the following reasons:

• It “is contrary to nature” (i.e., unnatural), and doing something unnatural is wrong.
• Even though embryos are not ACTUALLY human, nevertheless they are “potentially human”; and this is still morally significant, and makes it wrong to destroy them.