

Spurious Soul: A Modern Critique of the Thomistic Soul

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Perpetual reevaluations of the mind-body relationship argued from religion leave empirically minded materialists with the dissatisfying truth that “disproof” of soul existence is as elusive as dualists’ postulations of “proof,” because, of course, religious systems are founded upon faith. This is the case, according to philosopher of religion Stephan Davis, because “[n]o thesis having to do with the presence or absence of a soul—or of a certain soul—is ever testable; there are no criteria for determining [a soul].”¹ This dichotomy results in a semantical problem (what does “soul” mean?), leading to an epistemological problem (how can we know whether the soul truly exists and does it actually complete man in the realization of his form?), ultimating in an ontological problem (does the soul represent life-force and purpose, thereby instilling man with the requisite intelligence, spirituality, and reason to affirm said purpose?)—all of which are confounded by metaphysics. And if man employs reason in the pursuit of happiness, is the conception of the soul the determining factor in the attainment of said happiness? If so, does the soul not simply represent an autono-

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mously undeniable, though immaterial, life-force? In light of cognitive and neurological scientific advancements, along with linguistic and biological evolution, much of man's evolved brain functions account for many of the properties traditionally attributed to the immaterial soul. That said, this neither seems to deny man a spiritual capacity, nor deny him of his human-defining faculty of reason—deliberate actions taken to achieve happiness as judged through cost-benefit analyses. But Saint Thomas of Aquino deemed it necessary to define and mate the notions of spirituality and reason in man as leading to happiness. The problem with this line of thinking is that one of these capacities will always rely on the other for determining truth. Historian of philosophy Richard E. Rubenstein says of this that "Thomas had made a hash of things by conflating the[se] two realms" thus resulting in confluence: "His system had mystified nature."²

The lasting result of Thomas Aquinas' relationship between reason and spirituality yields contemporary dualists across religious and cultural divides to hold to an almost innate and requisite notion of a soul to explain life, or imply something beyond us. But why is the presumed need to believe in an immaterial, otherworldly soul so firmly held—held irrationally by rational animals for a spiritual connectedness? I posit that the soul is not necessary for spiritual capacity in man, instead arguing that the soul merely serves as a conception presumed to be necessary for spirituality, and that the steadfastness to retain notions of the soul as representing answers to life questions is archaic and thought constraining. This disparity begs definitional assessment and philosophical inquiry into the conception of the soul.

For the purpose of this paper, interpretive and critical efforts will focus on the Thomistic soul and its influential longevity, due to the pains taken by Thomas Aquinas to define an immaterial conception as instilling the requisite life-giving properties of man, while simultaneously affirming Biblical interpretations of the soul. And although the Thomistic soul is Biblically-based, "soul" has different meanings in the Old Testament as compared with the New Testament's treatment thereof. For example, the

Hebrew word *nephesh* is used throughout the Old Testament to denote an individual life with a material body; nevertheless, *nephesh* is translated in contemporary terminology as “soul.”³ In contrast, the soul of the New Testament shows itself to be heavily influenced by the Hellenization of the Holy Land, representing something more akin to the Greek conception of an immaterial spirituality, which continues in eternal conscious existence after the human body passes away. Thomas sought to meld the various Biblical conceptions of the soul by employing an Aristotelian approach, thereby resulting in a systematic theological science concerning the soul, Christian or otherwise. The outcome of Thomas’ efforts yields a *hylomorphic* interpretation of the soul-body relationship: the body and soul are necessarily related to one another as form and matter, resulting in one entity. The lingering effects of the Thomistic soul are neither fully materialist in scope (physicalist), nor dualist; rather, the Thomistic soul shares defining qualities of both theoretical platforms and serves as a median philosophy between the two, offered as definitive. An evaluation of Thomas’ work on the subject will help flesh out this dichotomy.

The Thomistic soul is defined as being the subsistent and incorruptible – constant and unchanging – form of man. Through the realization of the soul-body relationship, the soul represents man’s conscious and mental faculties, as well as the life-giving property necessary in making the body animate – alive. Thomas makes this clear when he says, “the human soul is a spiritual substance; but inasmuch as it is touched upon by matter and shares its own actual being with matter, it is the form of the body.”⁴ In line with this definition is the extrapolation that a body does not actually become a living being until the soul informs the body of its form, thereby ultimating in a living human being. Thomistic scholars Robert Pasnau and Christopher Shields say of this that “a living body is that which is potentially alive. A form, or soul, is that whose presence makes it actually alive.”⁵ Accordingly, Thomas premises that “the soul is defined as the first principle of life in those things in our world which live; for which we call living things animate.”⁶ The soul, there-

fore, is not inanimate but is an active informant to the body of the body's form. Regarding this, Thomistic authority Eleonore Stump holds that "by 'form' Thomas means an essentially configurational state."⁷ From this it follows that a human being is not identical with his requisite soul but requires it to realize his human form, and together they function as one. This is a fair interpretation of the soul-body relationship within Thomism because "a human being is not a soul only but rather a composite of soul and body."⁸

The relational necessity of the soul to a non-living body, which results in a living human being, is not unique to man. Animals too are defined by their souls, as outlined by Thomas' intellectual forebearer, Aristotle. In working within an Aristotelian framework, Thomas asserts that all life is realized in accordance with a hierarchical order of souls: vegetative → appetitive → rational. These functions provide life-defining characteristics to matter, thus informing matter of its liveliness through its form — *actuating* life in line with matter's natural inclinations. Thomas articulates this in saying that "[e]ach being comes to be a member of its species through its essential form. Now a human being is human insofar as he is rational. Therefore, a rational soul is the essential form of a human being."⁹ Both Aristotle and Thomas declare rational animals to be at the top of the hierarchical order of souls, and rightfully so, because they both assert that humans possess all the abilities of the lower faculties in addition to the faculty of reason. In accordance with the faculties of souls among living things, Thomas separates the rational animal (man) from non-human animals by stating that through reason man is afforded intelligence, cognition, linguistic faculties, spirituality, and morality. Thomas concludes that "man understands through the soul," in that he relies on "the principle of intellectual operation."¹⁰ It is through the soul's intellection and reasoning that man deliberates and acts over his dominion (Gen. 1.26-28).

Another approach to the culmination of these phenomena is through actually assessing man's cognitive faculties, as opposed to inferring definitive proclamations through spirituality. According to philosopher Paul Churchland, this cannot be stressed

enough: "To decide scientific questions by appeal to religious orthodoxy would therefore be to put social forces in place of empirical evidence."¹¹ In the effort of empiricism, man's mental faculties are explored via psychology and the cognitive and neurological sciences. These scientific approaches attempt to understand the mind by mapping and exploring brain functions in accordance with actions, feelings, memories, and intelligibility. According to psychologist Steven Pinker, ideas that hold that a soul is the defining factor of the mind and the mind's relationship to the body are brazenly problematic due to "the overwhelming evidence that the mind is the activity of the brain."¹² This line of thinking serves as the general foundation for many materialists, who thus look to the cognitive and neurological sciences as the starting point for answers pertaining to human functions and purpose. To a certain extent, though, Thomas recognizes this type of materialist interpretation of man's physiology, when he infers, concerning the mind-body question, that "medical men assign a certain particular organ, namely, the middle part of the head: for it compares individual intentions, just as the intellectual reason compares universal intentions."¹³ But because he defines these attributes as appetitive powers of the soul, he constrains the mind-body question to terms of unwavering *hylomorphic* dualism. In rebutting this type of thinking, Churchland counters by arguing that "[c]ompared to the rich resources and explanatory success of current materialism, dualism is less a theory of mind than it is an empty space waiting for a genuine theory of mind to be put in it," and that "what the neuroscientist can tell us about the brain, and what he can do with that knowledge, [discounts] what the dualist can tell us about spiritual substance, and what he can do with those assumptions."¹⁴

For Thomas, though, the starting point for questions about life and answers pertaining to human cognition is explained in the realization of the soul informing the body as instilled and defined by God; for Thomas states that "while the souls of brutes are produced by some power of the body, the human soul is produced by God."¹⁵ Thomas likely arrived at this conclusion from the second creation account in Genesis, which reads, "the Lord

God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and ... man became a living being" (Gen. 2.7 NRSV).¹⁶ But *is* human life the culmination of soul (intellect) and body, thereby equating to the philosophically defensible notion that life is undeniably realized through the soul informing the body of the body's form? Pinker answers authoritatively by saying absolutely not: "A spirit [soul] is stipulated to be exempt from one or more of the laws of biology (growing, aging, dying)" and thus "[represents] hypotheses intended to explain certain data that stymie our everyday theories."¹⁷ From this it is apparent that the soul seems unable to comport with observable science, not merely for its immateriality but because it presumes to account for man's mental cognition and rationale. Why can life not be defined as "life gives life," deferring to evolution to account for diversity among living things? The Thomistic conception of the soul is shown to be antiquated, offering only a theologically-defined philosophy that adds little, if anything, beyond speculation to scientific inquiry into man's cognition. This results in Thomas' explication of the soul as relevant only in terms of classical literature of Medieval thought.

But if latitude is to be given to those whose ideas penetrate levels of academia, social stratification, religious divides, and culture and tradition, then the following philosophical postulation serves as an analogous counter-point to the Thomistic conception of the soul. Following the cynical assertion of John Lennon's that "God is a concept / by which we measure / our pain,"¹⁸ conceptually speaking, the notion "God" represents "good" when good is perceived to be in abundance. Conversely, the notion of a God assumes the role of straw man when evil is perceived to be in abundance; all the while the notion of a God never ceases to exist, and our experiences and perceptions of truth and happiness are defined by our interpretations of His nature—His nature, to be sure, as man defines it and instills in Him (i.e., God is created in the image of man). In like manner, then, the notion of the soul never ceases to exist. I should posit that the soul is an abstract concept—a conception—by which belief therein skirts seemingly unanswerable questions, while it simultane-

ously represents the answers to said questions, which thus defines and affirms belief in the soul with circular reasoning. This is an issue for the empirically minded materialist because “the status of the circular argument is only that of persuasion. It cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle,” according to physicist and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn.¹⁹ Consequently, these “seemingly unanswerable questions” that result from the belief in the conception of the soul include: What is the meaning of life; Why is man deemed a rational animal and is he *truly* rational; To what ends does reason lead the inquisitive man to infer there to be an ordered purpose? — *ad infinitum*. But it has been consistently shown throughout history that man can neither answer these questions definitively nor unanimously (e.g., religion v. secularism, science v. tradition), and man has therefore continued to look to an ethereal spirituality that, through its philosophical prevalence and understandings, has assumed a defensible role of representing reality — the soul represents man; man is real; therefore the soul is real. Subsequently, the soul serves as *via media* between questions concerning man’s place and purpose within the cosmological design, and the infinitude in which man has ascribed undeniable meaning and essence (i.e., a Providential God of Creation and/or a purpose-driven cosmos). And according to the Thomistic view of the soul, the soul acts as the spiritual conduit that not only allows these questions to be posed (intelligence), but also allocates a sense of connectedness to said purpose (spirituality). When man’s intelligence and spirituality are used in conjunction with one another the result is the realization of the defining human faculty of “rationality.” Thus, Thomas proclaims man to be a rational animal whose employment of reason and spirituality are innate and necessary in man’s ultimate goal of happiness.

The question then becomes: Is happiness intrinsic? It seems plausible to say that humans define happiness in terms of context, time, and space; this would also cohere with the evolutionary account of man. Though this characterization does not seem to cohere with the notion of “happiness” as intrinsic, happiness

possesses an intrinsic value. In this way, happiness is a virtue. But in terms of specificity, contemporary definitions of personal happiness, assessed in context, results in extrinsic values as determining happiness – thereby defining the virtue of happiness. In line with this rationale, Pinker says that “happiness tracks the effects of resources on [man’s] biological fitness” and that “there are more things that make us unhappy than things that make us happy.”²⁰ Granting this, the soul conception serves the false pretence of guaranteeing, or at least defining, man’s due happiness. But through our evolved nature we must work towards happiness as we see fit and also as it is defined in the contemporary and temporal reality. This fact is not absent from the work of Thomas, but the question now becomes: How does the Thomistic soul account for man’s pursuit of happiness in light of evolution? This question complicates the mind-body problem to the point that I assert that the Thomistic soul cannot reconcile the apparent discord between a *hylomorphic* dualistic reality and man’s undeniable evolution in an evolved world.

Accordingly, happiness is man’s goal, though not for the impetus or ends of a soul. This is made clear by philosopher of science Karl Popper and neurophysiologist John Eccles in their assessment of the mind-body problem. They reason that to attribute answers of life and consciousness and the pursuit of happiness to an immaterial soul, “gives rise to a whole new set of problems.” They go on to ask that if man is defined by his soul, “[h]ow does my soul come to be in liaison with my brain [which] has an evolutionary origin?”²¹ How, then, can an immaterial informant, which is subsistent and incorruptible, cohabit with the material and mediate *any* life functions of the physically and mentally evolved human being? How can an un-evolved *thing* define oscillating definitions of happiness in an evolved world? The following argument shows the notion of the Thomistic soul to be asymmetrical to man’s evolved form:

- (i) Man realizes his human form by way of being informed by his subsistent, incorruptible *soul*.
- (ii) The observable human form shows man to possess the faculty of reason, or rather, what it means for man to be human.

(iii) If man has evolved, it should be reasonable to deduce that man has evolved from his being informed by an already evolved *soul*.

(iv) But the *soul* is subsistent and incorruptible, thereby inhibiting its own evolution and its ability to inform man of his evolved human form.

(v) Yet man has evolved, and reasoning follows that the subsistent, incorruptible *soul*, which represents the explanation of man's form, cannot inform man of what it means to be human.

(vi) Consequently, reason deems the *soul* unfit to serve the explanatory purpose of what it means for man to be human.

Thus, this argument renders the Thomistic soul, in its state of subsistence and incorruptibility, to be a *false* form of man, which, by definition, is unable to evolve. As such, the Thomistic soul is an unnecessary conception for man's definition of himself. This assertion is arrived at because, as stated, man *has* evolved. How, then, is the conception of the soul to reconcile this paradoxical disparity? Perhaps my argument has not allowed the soul its due autonomy, wrongly discrediting its essential, undeniable, otherworldly, and atemporal characteristics. What is clear, however, is that the question of soul existence and its conceptual relevance begs for a dualist counterargument. However, as long as the soul is defined in Thomistic terms – form and matter, subsistent and incorruptible, thereby equating to one – reconciliation seems to be an insurmountable task; if pursued, it would result in a soul of modern apologetics defined as a first principle and affirmed by faith.

It should be stated that the efforts exerted here are not to “disprove” soul existence, for this is as impossible as “proving” soul existence. Rather, what is of primary concern is that the notion of holding to traditions of the soul²² in place of what we can see, what we can prove, what we can know, can be regarded as inhibiting free thought concerned with answers beyond the noumenal soul. This is the case because the sciences of the rational man instill hopes of further explaining and understanding ourselves and our place in the universe, which complements philosophical inquiry. But regardless of soul conceptions and beliefs

therein, Saint Thomas of Aquino's man-defining teleological purpose of life's pursuit of happiness seems worthwhile. And yet, conceptually speaking, notions of a soul are not necessary for the defining and attainment of said happiness, and thus do not determine man's spirituality.

Our assessments of physical "proofs" tell us more about our makeup, cognitive faculties, and experiences than does debating the metaphysics of the immaterial *thing* that is presumed to define a *hylomorphic* dualistic reality. The result of approaching *that* slippery slope is that the Thomistic soul is offered as authoritative: Thomas' presuppositions of the soul results in the defining of an assumed truth rather than verifying said truth to actually be. The epistemological problem that results from this fallacy, as arrived at by Rubenstein, is that the soul "stands squarely on the boundary line between science ... and religion."²³ In turn, the soul defines that boundary line in terms of mitigation. That is, if science were to ever account for everything knowable about man and human experience, then the reasoning employed would have necessarily derived from the life-defining virtues of the soul. But how is it that we can affirm immateriality as defining materiality? Finally, the intellectual nature of the soul outlined by Thomas Aquinas allows man his requisite reasoning abilities to contest, and even deny, the soul's very existence. If the explanatory nature of this premise is accepted, then the very thing that gives man his form is thereby proven by its own virtue to no longer serve as relevant for man's understanding of himself. The reasoning for identifying with materialism, versus belief in dualism, shows the soul to be an archaic conception, unfit to explain what it means for man to be human.

Notes

- ¹ Stephan T. Davis, "Survival of Death," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Phillip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 557.
- ² Richard E. Rubenstein, *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Dark Ages* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003) 252.
- ³ The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon.
- ⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On Spiritual Creatures (De Spiritualibus Creaturis)*, trans., Mary C. Fitzpatrick and John J. Wellmuth (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1949), 33-34.
- ⁵ Robert Pasnau and Christopher Shields, "The Human Soul and the Human Body" - chap. 6, of *The Philosophy of Aquinas* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 157.
- ⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica, The Summa Contra Gentiles - Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1945), Q. 75. Art. 1 reply.
- ⁷ Eleonore Stump, "Non-Cartesian Substance Dualism and Materialism Without Reductionism," in *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (October 1995), 505-31.
- ⁸ *Summa*, Q. 75. Art. 4 reply.
- ⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Questions on the Soul (Quaestiones de Anima)*, QDA. 1 sc. 1.
- ¹⁰ *Summa*, Q. 75. Art. 2 reply.
- ¹¹ Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 15.
- ¹² Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 64.
- ¹³ *Summa*, Q. 78. Art. 4 reply.
- ¹⁴ Churchland, 19.
- ¹⁵ *Summa*, Q. 75. Art. 6 reply.
- ¹⁶ Genesis 2.7 New Revised Standard Version.
- ¹⁷ Pinker, 556-557.
- ¹⁸ John Lennon, *God*, "John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band," 1970, Apple compact disc 782.42166 L5482J.

¹⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 94.

²⁰ Pinker, 392.

²¹ Karl Raimund Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain* (New York: Routledge, 1977), 559-560.

²² i.e., Western understandings of the soul as influenced by the Thomistic definition, having theologically informed the propagation of modern Christianity, later secularized and traditionalized.

²³ Rubenstein, 221.

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