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The Human Being as 'Compound': Aquinas versus Descartes on Human Nature

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The intuitively right answer to the question 'What am I?' is not 'an incorporeal spirit', but 'a human being'. Aquinas reflects this common-sense view when he says that 'the human is no mere soul, but a compound of soul and body.' And Descartes, despite his notorious dualistic thesis that I am a substance that does not need anything material in order to exist, insists nevertheless that the human mind-body compound is a genuine unity in its own right, not a mere soul making using of a body. This paper argues for the enduring philosophical importance of this notion of our 'compound' nature as human beings, and explores its significance across three principal dimensions – the psychological, the phenomenological, and the moral.

Keywords: soul – body – human being – Aristotle – Aquinas – Descartes – hylemorphism – intellect – passions

I. Introduction: Souls, Bodies, and Human Beings

The distinguished philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne recently published a book entitled *Are We Souls or Bodies?* And his answer to this question is that we are souls. We are 'essentially non-physical beings', he declares; 'souls is what we essentially are' (Swinburne 2019, 1). In both his conclusions and in the arguments for them, Swinburne follows a very Cartesian line. René Descartes, in his first published work, the *Discourse on the Method* (1637), spoke of *ce moi, c'est à dire l'âme, par laquelle je suis que je suis* – 'this "me", the soul, by which I am what I am.' And Descartes famously, or notoriously, went on to

argue that the body was no part of this essential 'me': he declared himself to be 'a substance whose whole essence or nature is to think, and which does not require any place or depend on any material thing in order to exist.'[1]

Swinburne follows the Cartesian line when he argues that the body is not a necessary part of our essence. Essentially, says Swinburne, we are merely 'souls who control bodies' (Swinburne, 2019, p. 1). This calls to mind the phrase Antoine Arnauld used in the seventeenth century to describe what he took to be Descartes's position. In one of the sets of Objections published with the *Meditations* in 1641, Arnauld wrote: 'It seems that [Descartes's] conception takes us back to the Platonic view that I am a soul that makes use of a body (*anima corpore utens*).'[2] As I shall explain in a moment, Descartes was not quite happy with this way of describing his position. But it certainly corresponds to the way many people have read him, notably Gilbert Ryle, who in a celebrated phrase called Cartesian dualism the doctrine of the 'ghost in the machine' (Ryle, 1949). 'Ghost in the machine', 'a soul making use of a body', 'a soul controlling a body' – all these phrases point to an incorporeal or immaterialist view of our essential nature, one that has its roots in Classical times in the ideas of Plato, is systematically articulated in the seventeenth century by Descartes, and still has its vigorous defenders such as Swinburne in our own time.

That the incorporeal view has survived so long perhaps owes something to the sense most of us have that we are not simply bodies, not merely material things. But on reflection it seems perfectly possible to agree that we are more than mere bodies without being forced to conclude that we are mere souls. Speaking for myself, I should say that the right answer to the question 'Are we souls or bodies?' is: *neither*. We are not incorporeal minds or souls, nor are we bodies; we are *human beings*. Ordinary language cannot perhaps decide philosophical questions, but it's still worth noticing that 'I am a mind' or 'I am a soul' sounds a very odd sentence in English (and indeed in the corresponding sentences in Spanish, or French, or Latin), and 'I am a body' sounds equally odd,

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[1] René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], part iv (AT VI 33: CSM I. 127). All references to the works of Descartes in this paper cite the following standard editions: 'AT' refers to C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' to J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (eds), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and 'CSMK' to vol. III, The Correspondence, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991).

[2] Fourth Objections, AT VII 203: CSM II 143.

while 'I am a human being' is an intuitively straightforward and universally accepted way of identifying what one is.

Perhaps surprisingly, Descartes himself would readily have acknowledged this point. For despite his identification of 'this me' with an incorporeal soul, Descartes was nevertheless in many places very concerned to acknowledge our status as embodied human beings. In his reply to the criticism of Arnauld I just mentioned, Descartes explicitly rejected the Platonic idea that I am a mere soul making use of a body. This is not my view, he told Arnauld.[3] And elsewhere, when challenged as to whether he really wanted to say that we are not essentially human, or, in the terminology of the time, that a human being was merely an 'accidental entity' (*ens per accidens*), Descartes fiercely rejected this suggestion, and insisted that a human being was a genuine entity in its own right, an *ens per se.* Mind and body, he went on to say, are united 'in a real and substantial manner' by a 'true mode of union'; and the proof of this, he explained, lay in the character of sensations such as pain, which are 'not pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body'.[4] The human mind-body complex, for Descartes, is a genuine unit, not a soul making use of a body. When my body is damaged *I* feel pain. And that gives us proof, the best kind of intimate proof – proof available, says Descartes, even to those who never philosophize – of the genuineness of the union.[5] This accords with several passages where Descartes insists that the character of our sensory awareness is the signature of our genuine humanity, showing that each of us is what Descartes called *un vrai homme*, a genuine human being.[6] These passages (some of which I'll come back to later) are interesting because they show Descartes striving to accept the intuitively attractive idea of our essential humanity as embodied creatures, despite the fact that this seems to clash with his official identification of the 'I' (*ce moi*) with something incorporeal.

So where would Thomas Aquinas position himself in this debate? His answer is unequivocal: 'Man is no mere soul, but a compound (*compositum*) of soul and body.'[7] In the same article he suggests that a human soul is no more a human person than is a human hand or foot. Elsewhere, in his commentary on

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[3] Descartes, *Meditations,* Fourth Replies, AT VII 227 – 228: CSM II 160.

[4] Descartes, letter to Regius of January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

[5] Compare Descartes's letter to Elizabeth of 28 June 1643, AT II 691 – 692: CSMK 227.

[6] Descartes, *Discourse*, part v, AT VI 59: CSM I 141; letter to Regius, January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

[7] *Homo non est anima tantum, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore*. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266 – 1273], Ia, 75, 4.

St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he famously insists that 'my soul is not me' – *anima mea non est ego*.[8] And so, although Aquinas follows a traditional line in believing that the soul is separated from the body at death, he thinks of a separated soul as essentially *incomplete*, indeed as in some sense deficient, or as Brian Davies puts it '*ailing* until it animates a human body again'.[9] Or (quoting Davies again) 'a human soul separated from the body of the person whose soul it is has to be *in a bad way*, since it exists in a state that is not natural for it.'[10]

So what is the significance of this Thomistic view of the soul as something incomplete? And what about the closely linked Thomistic view of the nature of a human being – a nature that is not that of a mere soul, but of something that is essentially a psycho-physical compound? This view clearly influenced even a radical dualist like Descartes towards the view that a human being is not just a soul temporarily making use of a body, but on the contrary a genuine entity in its own right. According to Descartes (who was of course educated in the scholastic tradition), even though from an ontological point of view a human being might owe its nature to two distinct and independent substances, mind and body, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, nevertheless a human being was, for him, as it was for Thomas, a genuine entity in its own right – a *compound* entity.

But what exactly does this talk of a compound entity or composite mean? Are we dealing with (to coin a phrase) a purely 'academic' issue – a tangle of medieval and early-modern terminology that might be of scholarly interest to the historian of ideas, but has no enduring philosophical interest? Or is there something philosophically at stake here: does this notion of our 'compound' nature as human beings have something philosophically important to say, even to a scientifically informed twenty-first century audience?

I should like to suggest that the Thomistic idea of a human being as a genuine compound is significant, and indeed enlightening, in three respects:

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[8] Aquinas, *Commentary on I Corinthians* [*Super I ad Corinthios*, 1270 – 1273], Ch. 15, lectio 2 (verses 12 – 19): *si negetur resurrectio corporis … difficile est sustinere immortalitatem animae. Constat enim quod anima naturaliter unitur corpori, separata autem ab eo contra suam naturam, et per accidens. Unde anima exuta ex corpore, quamdiu est sine corpore, est imperfecta. Impossibile autem quod illud quod est naturale et per se, sit finitum et quasi nihil, et illud quod est contra naturam et per accidens sit infinitum, si anima semper duret sine corpore.*

[9] Davies, 2014, Ch. 9, §1, p. 134, emphasis added.

[10] Davies, 2014, Ch. 9, §4, p. 146, emphasis added. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*: 'It belongs to the very essence of soul to be united to a body… So the human soul, remaining in its own existence after separation from the body, has a natural aptitude and a natural tendency to union with body' (Ia, 76, Qu. 1 ad 6).

it is *psychologically* significant, it is *phenomenologically* significant, and it is *morally* significant.

II. The Hylemorphic Framework and the Special 'Exemption' for the Intellect

Let me take the psychological dimension first. The notion of the human being as psycho-physical compound draws our attention to the fact that our characteristic human psychological functions and activities are *irreducibly body-involving*. In other words, they cannot be fully understood as abstract psychological modifications or transactions, but always involve a physical change – a modification of some bodily organ. Vision, as Aquinas points out in Part I, Question 75 of the *Summa Theologiae*, involves a change in the eye, and so with the other senses:

> Some operations that belong to the soul are carried out through bodily organs, such as seeing (through the eye) and hearing (through the ear), and likewise for all other operations of the nutritive or sensitive part. Hence the powers that are the sources of such operations *are in the compound as their subject, not in the soul alone*.[11]

This is of course part of the Aristotelian hylemorphic or 'materio-formal' legacy that Aquinas inherited – and which in my own view is just as valid today as it was in classical or medieval times.

The basic hylemorphic insight is that *function and structure are intimately related.* In the first book of his *De anima,* Aristotle says that the way people often speak about 'souls' has something absurd about it. For there are various philosophers who 'tack the soul on to the body', or locate it *in* the body, but they give no account of what the condition of the body must be like for this to be possible. The relation between soul and body, Aristotle goes on to say, surely cannot be a purely contingent or haphazard one. So when the Pythagoreans, for example, talk of 'metempsychosis', the transmigration of souls, this is nonsense, since it suggests that any soul could flit into any body:

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[11] *Summa theologiae*, Part I, Qu. 77, art. 5 (emphasis supplied). Peter King draws attention to this passage in an interesting article entitled 'Why isn't the mind-body problem medieval?' in Lagerlund (ed.) (2005, 187 – 206). For Aquinas's insistence that the relevant operations are in the compound, not in the soul alone, compare Aristotle, *De anima* [*c.* 325 BC], Bk I, ch. 4, where Aristotle says that we should not say that the *soul* is angry, or pities, or learns, or thinks. 'This would be an inept as saying that the soul weaves or builds houses; it is better to say the *human being* does these things with his soul.'

> The Pythagorean stories suggest that any soul can find its way into any body, which is absurd; for we can see that every body has its own special shape or form. The Pythagorean view is like suggesting that carpentry can find its way into flutes. But each craft must employ its own tools, and each soul its own body.[12]

In other words, each body or physical structure has a characteristic form or shape that enables it to perform the relevant functions. Because structure and function are intimately related, the job done by a carpenter's saw or hammer requires tools of a certain shape and strength – it would be absurd to say the function could float away and be embodied in a different physical object like a flute.

All this is a perfectly straightforward consequence of Aristotle's hylemorphism. The soul is not a separate entity in its own right, but is related to body as form is to matter, or as organizing principle is to material constitution, or as function is to structure. To follow up Aristotle's analogy, *formally* speaking, a flute is an instrument whose job is to produce a series of characteristic high-pitched, breathy piping sounds; and in order to instantiate this form, the *material* has to be constructed out of a tube made of hard wood or metal or something similar, with holes or stops and a mouthpiece shaped so that the player's breath can strike a narrow edge. For this reason, the 'soul' (in inverted commas) of a flute couldn't migrate into the body of a trombone, still less into a chisel or a hammer; nor for that matter could the 'soul' of a chisel migrate into the body of a hammer. The relation between the activity being performed and the structure of the relevant materials is not a haphazard one, but is tightly constrained by the specification of the form – the design specification, if you like – and the suitability of the materials, properly configured, to execute this design.[13]

This Aristotelian line of thought about the relation between body and soul has proved remarkably durable, and (though it would take me too far round to argue this out here) it seems to me to offer the basis for a credible and attractive middle way between on the one hand radical materialism – the attempt to reduce all mental phenomena to purely physical properties or events, and, on the other hand, substance dualism – the introduction of a Platonic-style, 'pure' incorporeal soul.[14]

There is, to be sure, one psychological function that Aristotle could not quite fit into his hylemorphic framework, namely rational understanding or

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[12] Aristotle, *De anima*, Bk 1, ch. 3.

[13] For more on this see Cottingham (2020, Ch. 2).

[14] For an impressive recent defence of the hylomorphic framework, see Jaworski (2016).

intellection. Aristotle, and later on Aquinas, were surely influenced here by the fact that in neither the classical nor in the medieval world had the resources needed to identify a bodily organ configured to facilitate the function of thought and understanding (in the way there is a bodily organ, the eye, configured to facilitate vision). So the intellectual soul, as Aquinas puts it 'lacks', or (as the Dominican translation has it) 'is exempt from' the composition of matter and form (*caret compositione formae et materiae*).[15] Coming down to the early-modern period, we find Descartes abandoning the hylemorphic framework and attempting to derive a whole range of animal functions from purely material principles; but he still falls into line with one aspect of the Aristotelian and Thomistic view of things, in so far as he argues for a *special exemption* for the intellect: having explained a whole range of psychological functions in terms of physical mechanisms, he stops short when it comes to the rational soul, which, he asserts, 'cannot be derived in any way from the potentiality of matter, but must be specially created.'[16]

All three philosophers just mentioned have independent metaphysical arguments which they take to support the immaterial nature of intellection. But in so far as they were influenced by what they took to be the absence of any physical organ of thought, we need to remember that none of them had any conception whatever of the role of the brain in cognition, or the staggering neurological complexity of the cerebral cortex. Though this is a speculative question, it's perhaps worth asking whether any of the three would have been so ready to insist on a wholly immaterialist account of intellection had they been aware of the incredible complexity of the human brain, consisting, as we now know, of many thousands of millions of neural connections.

III. Phenomenology as the Signature of our Humanity

Let me now move to the *phenomenological* dimension – the dimension of how things feel to the conscious, experiencing subject – and ask how this relates to the doctrine of the 'compound' or 'composite' nature of the human being. Let me start with a rhetorical question. As you go through life, following your daily routine, eating breakfast, sipping coffee in your study, taking a walk in the fresh air, and so on, do your experiences really *feel* like those of an immaterial mind or soul that happens somehow to be lodged in a physical body? The answer I should myself give, and I imagine most of us would give,

[15] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Part I, Qu. 75, art. 5.

[16] Descartes, *Discourse,* part v (AT VI 59: CSM I 141).

is something like the following: "No! It does *not* feel as if I am an incorporeal spirit, or soul. No; it feels instead as if I am a living organism that belongs in the physical and biological world, a creature of flesh and blood – in short a member of the biological species 'homo sapiens', a *human being*."

In short, the Thomistic idea of the human being as compound, as having an essentially corporeal component to its nature, seems to harmonize very well with the way we experience the world in our daily lives. The phenomenology of our conscious experience, for example in our sensory awareness of the smell of a cup of coffee, or the ache of a toothache, or the churning of passion and desire, is, as it were, *phenomenologically coloured* – in each case there is a distinctive qualitative aspect which puts us intimately in touch with our embodied, biological selves. If we really were 'souls making use of bodies', as Richard Swinburne claims we are, it seems (in so far as we can imagine such a thing) as if the qualitative nature of our conscious experience would be very different. But the human condition being what it is, it does not *feel* as if we were immaterial spirits, ghosts or angels, manipulating our bodies. We are surely much more closely and intimately involved with our bodies than that.

In the case of Descartes, some of his modern critics have attacked him on just this point, as offering us a philosophical picture that fails to acknowledge our intimate involvement with the physical and bodily world. The celebrated Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain criticized Descartes along exactly these lines. 'The sin of Descartes', Maritain declared, 'is a sin of *angelism*. He turned knowledge and thought into a hopeless perplexity … because he conceived human thought after the model of angelic thought. To sum it up in three words: what he saw in man's thought was *independence of things*' (Maritain 1928, 54-55).

By contrast, the Thomistic view insists, in more down-to-earth Aristotelian vein, on what may be called our biological nature, on the essential link with the body. Indeed, this is so much the case, in the Thomistic way of looking at the matter, that it even applies to the post-mortem state, where the soul according to Christian doctrine is separated from the body. A later disciple of Aquinas, Eustachius a Sancto Paulo (whom Descartes studied as a schoolboy) put it like this: "Separated souls are *not*, like angels, whole subjects that are totally and in every respect complete … A soul, even when separated, is always apt to inform the body and to be substantially united with it; but this is not true of an angel."[17] Eustachius is here clearly reflecting the standard Thomist line in saying that a separated human soul is not a complete and whole subject.

[17] Eustachius (1998, 91) (Part III, Third Part, Treatise 4, Discourse 3, question 1).

According to Aquinas, a human soul is a *substantia incompleta*, an incomplete substance, a position summed up by another scholastic successor of Aquinas, Francisco Suarez. As Suarez put it, 'a soul, even if it is separated, is essentially a *part*, and has an incomplete essence, and hence is always an incomplete substance.'[18] Unlike an angel, a human soul always in principle needs union with the body that it 'informs' for its essential completion.

In the light of Maritain's critique of Descartes for the sin of 'angelism', it is interesting to note in defence of Descartes that he explicitly repudiated any such position, and went so far as to underline the point by drawing a sharp distinction between the way we human beings experience the environment, and its effects on our bodies, and the way that an angel would, if it happened to be making use of a physical body. In a letter to one of his correspondents in 1642, Descartes observed:

> If an angel were in a human body, it would not have sensations as we do, but would simply perceive the motions which are caused by external objects, and in this way would differ from a real human being. (*Si angelus corpori humano inesset, non sentiret ut nos, sed tantum perciperet motus qui causarentur ab objectis externis, & per hoc a vero homine distingueretur*).[19]

A genuine human (*verus homo*): the phrase is a striking one, and it echoes the French phrase which Descartes had employed in the *Discourse* several years earlier. To make a real human being, more is needed than the 'lodging' of a soul in the machine of the body, like a helmsman in his ship: 'the soul must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have … feelings and appetites like ours, and so to constitute *a real human being* [*et ainsi composer un vrai homme*].[20] A human is no mere soul making use of a body, no mere pilot

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[18] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Part I, Qu. 75, art. 4 and Part I, Qu. 118, art. 2. Compare Francisco Suarez, *Metaphysical Disputations* [*Disputationes metaphysicae*, 1597], Disp. 33, sectn 1, §11: *anima etiamsi sit separata est pars … essentialis, habetque incompletam essentiam … et ideo semper est substantia incompleta*. ('A soul, even if it is separated, is essentially a *part*, and has an incomplete essence, and hence is always an incomplete substance.')

[19] Letter to Regius, January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

[20] 'Next [after describing the machine of the body] I described the rational soul, and showed that, unlike the other things of which I had spoken, it cannot be derived in any way from the potentiality of matter, but must be specially created. And I showed how it is not sufficient for it to be lodged in the human body like a helmsman in his ship, except perhaps to move its limbs, but that it must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have, besides this power of movement, feelings and appetites like ours, and so to constitute *a real*

lodged in the corporeal ship, but a genuine entity in its own right. It is an entity, moreover, with properties, including sensory states, emotions and passions, which are not reducible either to modes of extension, or to pure modes of thought.[21] And like Aquinas,[22] Descartes attributes these sensory and emotional states to the human being, the natural compound of soul and body.

Just a quick parenthesis here. The argument from phenomenology that I have just been canvassing covers items like sensations, passions, and emotions, all of which bear the signature of our embodiment; but it does not seem to apply to rational understanding. There is 'something it is like', in Thomas Nagel's celebrated phrase (Nagel, 1979), to smell a rose, or taste coffee, or be frightened or anxious, but the activities of the intellect are for the most part phenomenologically 'colourless', as it were. There is nothing particular that it is 'like' to entertain the proposition that Paris is the capital of France; there is no special phenomenological 'feel' or 'flavour' involved in reflecting on the properties of an isosceles triangle. One may perhaps feel tired or drained after many hours of mental concentration, and this is perhaps some faint indication that intellectual activity has a metabolic cost in terms of physical energy, but other than this, intellection, unlike the other conscious states I have mentioned, does not carry with it any characteristic phenomenological signature or stamp of embodiment. And this, I conjecture, may have reinforced the tendency found right through from Aristotle, to Aquinas, to Descartes, to exempt the intellect from the bodily involvement they took to apply to all the other cases.

But putting the problematic status of the intellect to one side, and returning to our main thread, the crucial point for present purposes is that Descartes was sufficiently faithful to the Thomistic tradition in which he had been educated to avoid taking his mind-body dualism to the point of angelism. He retained at least enough allegiance to the doctrine of the human being as a genuine compound to avoid the extreme 'ghost in the machine' position with which he is so often charged. There may be tensions in his position, but he always stops short of the extreme thesis (the 'hyper-Cartesian' thesis, as I have called it (Cottingham 2021, 21 – 29)) of thinkers like Richard Swinburne, for whom we are merely 'souls who control bodies'.

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human being.' [… *il est besoin qu'elle soit jointe et unie plus étroitement avec lui pour avoir ... des sentiments et des appétits semblables aux nôtres, et ainsi composer un vrai homme.*] (*Discourse,* Part v, AT VI 59: CSM I 141 (emphasis supplied). Descartes is here referring back to his earlier work in the *Traité de l'homme.*

[21] See further Cottingham (1986, Ch, 5) and Cottingham (2008, Ch. 9).

[22] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Part I, Qu. 75, art. 5.

In short, we can see Descartes constantly striving to come to terms with our essential humanity as embodied creatures, notwithstanding his official identification of the "I" with something essentially incorporeal. Perhaps all this shows is that Descartes's thinking is beset with tensions, and that Swinburne should be credited with biting the bullet and eliminating the tensions by denying our essential humanity. But many may feel, as I do, that this last step involves paying too a high price in departing from the strong pre-philosophical intuition that we are essentially human. In this respect we might say that Swinburne's dualism is in a certain way 'hyper-Cartesian' – more determinedly dualistic than Descartes himself was quite prepared to be.

I should add in fairness that Swinburne does concede 'how important for human life it is that we should have a body', but one of the reasons he gives for saying this seems to me to reveal just how stark is his denial that we are essentially human. He says that the principal advantage of having a body is that it allows for our having 'a public presence': 'there is some place where other people can get hold of us, and we can get hold of them' (Swinburne, 2019, p. 84) – almost as if the body was like a mobile phone, enabling us to keep in contact with other people. Swinburne's underlying conception of my relation to my body here is a *purely instrumental one*, as indeed is already suggested by his initial description of us as 'souls who control bodies'. The body, on this view, is something that is useful to me in enabling me to do certain things (by providing a location where people can make contact with me and interact with me and so on), but it is no part of what I essentially am. By contrast, the actual historical Descartes, although parting company with Aquinas by identifying the 'I' with the soul, nevertheless did his utmost to preserve the Thomistic commitment to our essential humanity as embodied creatures.

IV. The Moral Dimension – The Role of the Passions

Let me turn finally and briefly to moral dimension of the doctrine of the human being as compound. It is an ancient idea, going back to St Augustine (and indeed with biblical roots) that human beings are some kind of intermediate entity, lower than the angels but higher than the beasts.[23] The rationale for this intermediate status is that we share rationality with the angels who are

[23] *Homo medium quiddam est inter pecora et angelos…inferior angelis, superior pecoribus, habens cum pecoribus mortalitatem, rationem vero cum angelis, animal rationale mortale*. Augustine of Hippo, *On the City of God* [*De civitate Dei, c.* 420], Bk IX, Ch. 13. Compare Psalms 8:5 (for the angels) and Genesis 1:26 (for the animals).

incorporeal (back to the Aristotelian notion of the rational soul as something immaterial, 'exempt' from the composition of form and matter), while we share physicality with the beasts. But what is the significance of this compound status for morality and the conduct of life?

Moral virtue, as Aristotle aptly observed, involves not just our actions but our feelings or passions,[24] and for Aquinas, as for Descartes, passions in the strict sense always involve some sort of bodily change.[25] How exactly this affects our conduct when we go astray according to Aquinas is a highly complex matter which there is no space to unravel in full here. But let me isolate three elements of what I take to be Aquinas position. First, as Eleonore Stump has underlined in several of her recent writings, Aquinas is committed to the idea of an objective standard of goodness to which, at least in its rudiments, no human being can be indifferent (Stump, 2018, p. 126). Second, Aquinas holds that all voluntary action is aimed at what we take to be good in some way (Davies, 2014, p. 204). How then can sin arise? One might have expected, given these two premises, that all action would be governed by a calm and unwavering volition to pursue what is good. But at this point, the effects of our intimate involvement with the body come into play. Because of our compound nature, we are subject to *emotions* or *passions* which are not calm volitions, but are charged with bodily disturbance: we feel 'churned up', excited, angry, fearful, and all these excitations, which Aquinas often calls 'vehement' or 'inordinate', have a distorting effect on our rational perception of the good. As Aquinas puts it, 'Every sin consists in the pursuit of some passing good that is inordinately desired.'[26] Or in more detail:

> In the operations of the soul, a certain attention is requisite, and if this be closely fixed on one thing, less attention is given to another. In this way, by a kind of distraction, when the movement of the sensitive appetite is enforced in respect of any passion whatever, the proper movement of the rational appetite or will must, of necessity, become remiss or altogether impeded.[27]

In the archetypal narrative of human temptation, in Genesis, we can see a clear instance of this process, where Eve focuses on the fact that the forbidden fruit

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[24] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. II.

[25] 'Anger, joy, and passions of a like nature are always accompanied by a change in the body.' Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Part I, Qu. 75, art. 3, ad 3. See Pasnau (2002, 241 – 242).

[26] *Omnis actus peccati procedit ex aliquo inordinato appetitu alicujus temporalis boni*; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Ia IIae, Qu. 77, art. 4, Blackfriars translation, cited in Davies (2014, 204).

[27] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Ia IIae, Qu. 77.

is 'good to taste and delightful to look at', and the disturbances of desire cause her to attend to these lesser goods, to the point where she is distracted from the far greater good of obeying the commandments of God.

There is much in this analysis that retains its force, I think, as an all too depressingly accurate commentary on the human condition, even for those who reject categories like 'sin', and have abandoned the theological framework in which the concept of sin is located. For it is an undoubted fact of human nature that we are often led to turn away from a clearly perceived good when we are disturbed by the specious allure of some lesser good, whose transient or evanescent value we come to see only when it is too late. Writing nearly four hundred years after Aquinas, but very much following in his footsteps, Descartes summed the matter up succinctly in his own treatise entitled, *The Passions of the Soul*, the last work he published before his ill-fated trip to Sweden, where he died of pneumonia aged fifty-three:

> Often passion makes us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are; then, when we have taken much trouble to acquire them, and in the process lost the chance of possessing other more genuine goods, possession of them brings home to us their defects; and thence arise dissatisfaction, regret and remorse.[28]

Descartes, to be sure, is writing in a much more 'scientifically' oriented context (as we should now term it), and his remedies for the harmful effects of the passions involve a careful study of their physiological basis in the nervous system, and a kind of stimulus-response conditioning programme for retraining them – reconfiguring the relevant psycho-physical links, so that the working of the passions is brought more closely into line with our rational perception of the good.

But for all the differences of emphasis, Descartes's thinking about the human condition still bears the unmistakeable imprint of the Thomistic philosophy he had imbibed as a schoolboy at the Jesuit College of La Flèche. The common link is seen in the recurring theme of Descartes's conception of human nature as a union of mind and body, with the special and distinctive attributes that arise from this union, namely sensations, emotions and passions, that are neither clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect, nor the mechanistic jostling of physical

[28] Letter of 1 September 1645 (AT IV 284 – 285: CSMK 264). Descartes goes on to say that the passions often 'represent the goods to which they tend with greater splendour than they deserve and they make us imagine pleasure to be much greater before we possess them than our subsequent experiences show them to be.'

particles, but obscure and inherently confused impressions arising from the mysterious union of mind and body. The recognition of our compound nature was, for Descartes, as it had been much earlier for Aquinas, a vital step in understanding the human predicament, and in coming to terms with the fact that humans so often go astray in their pursuit of the good.

Let me end with a final observation. Descartes is often deeply mistrusted by traditionally-minded Catholic educators as a subversive thinker and a herald of the secular Enlightenment, but in my view this is profoundly mistaken. For although Descartes's mechanistic and mathematically based physics ushered in a new type of explanation, far removed from the scholastic apparatus of substantial forms and real qualities, his metaphysical framework was one that always, like that of Aquinas, puts God centre stage. Moreover, as I have endeavoured to show, his analysis of the human condition was, like that of Aquinas, heavily dependent on the notion of man as a composite being. I believe the parallels go deeper still, for Descartes's entire philosophy, like that of Aquinas, is predicated on a fundamental belief in the 'natural light' of reason, implanted in every human soul, which, when properly used, enables us to discern objective truth and objective goodness.[29] It is a vision which, I believe, we still need today, and without which the very enterprise of philosophical inquiry would collapse before it could ever get off the ground. But that is a story for another day.[30]

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[29] See further Cottingham (2022). For Aquinas on the light of natural reason as disclosing the truth, see *Summa theologiae* Part I, Qu. 12, art. 11, ad 3: *ipsum lumen naturale rationis participatio quaedam est divini luminis*. And for the natural light as disclosing goodness as well as truth, see IaIIae Qu. 91, art. 2: 'the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil …is nothing else than an imprint on us of the divine light.' Descartes speaks of the *lux rationis* or 'the light of reason' in the *Rules for the Direction of Our Native Intelligence* [*Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, *c*. 1628] (AT X 368: CSM I 14); in the *Meditations*, he speaks of the God-given *lumen naturale*, 'the natural light' (e.g. AT VII 40: CSM II 28), which enables us to discern reasons of truth and of goodness (*ratio veri et boni ratio,* AT VII 58: CSM II 40).

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