

# **Thomistic Philosophical Anthropology: An Aristotelian - Thomistic Project**

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## **Abstract:**

As a philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas was emphatically Aristotelian who made an effective synthesis of Aristotelian thought and the perspective of Christian faith. His view on man and human nature is called ‘Thomistic Philosophical Anthropology’. It is Christian anthropology which views man essentially as a wholistic being composed of body and soul. Studying St. Thomas’s dependence on Aristotle is very vast and involves a lengthy research. Hence in this article references are made only to the Aristotelian roots that are found in the Thomistic philosophical anthropology. With the Aristotelian thoughts and with his own original insights, St. Thomas, using ontological principles and the Christian faith, was able to build a systematic and theoretical foundation for the concept of the soul and eventually for the human being. The human being is a complete substance comprised of matter and spirit. The substantial union, or the basic unity of the body with the soul, becomes the first affirmation in the hylomorphism of Aristotle. This substantial union of matter and form in the human reality resists all types of reductionism, whether materialistic or spiritualistic. By the body a human being has everything that is in the material world and by the soul it has access to divinity and eternity. It is this integral nature and wholeness that makes the human being, a being open to God, to the world, to fellow human beings and to all the possibilities of life. This wholistic approach is provided by the Thomistic philosophical anthropology, which is an Aristotelian - Thomistic project.

**Key Words:** Wholistic, Ontological, Substantial Union, Reductionism, Hylomorphism, Transcendence

## **Introduction**

St. Thomas Aquinas’s views on man and human nature can be called ‘Thomistic Philosophical Anthropology’. It is a Christian anthropology which views man essentially as a wholistic being composed of body and soul or of matter and form. As a philosopher, St. Thomas was emphatically Aristotelian, who made an effective synthesis of Aristotelian thought and the perspective of Christian faith. He followed his mentor St. Albert the Great to study Aristotle and to Christianize Aristotelian ideas. Therefore, we can say that Aristotle was, in a way, baptized by St. Thomas. Studying St. Thomas’s dependence on Aristotle is very vast and involves a lengthy research. Hence in this article references are made only to the Aristotelian roots that are found in the Thomistic philosophical anthropology. In other words, it is a study of how Aristotle’s anthropological notions were used by St. Thomas to fit into his own philosophical anthropology.

## **Aristotelian Hylomorphism: Body and Soul as Matter and Form**

According to Aristotle, there are many substances in the cosmic creation. They are inorganic bodies, vegetation, animals and human beings, when they are listed in a

hierarchical order. These are all substances. He differentiated the category of substance into three: matter, form and the composite (συνθετή) of matter and form.<sup>1</sup> Further, he divided them into living and non-living. Living substances have life, self-nutrition, growth and decay.<sup>2</sup> In the third category of substances, that is the composite of matter and form, the living body and the soul relate to each other as matter and form. This is customarily referred to as Aristotle's hylomorphic analysis of body and soul. The hylomorphic doctrine states that every natural body is an admixture of matter and form. By form, Aristotle understood the universal aspect of a thing, the essential unity shared by all things of the same type; whereas matter is that which confers particularity and uniqueness. These two are the inseparable aspects of the individual thing.<sup>3</sup> In the human being, the soul is the form and actualization and the body is the matter which is in potency.

### **Thomistic Adoption and Clarification of Aristotelian Hylomorphism**

Adopting Aristotelian hylomorphism, St. Thomas stated that the human being, like other natural bodies is composed of matter and form. Matter is the body and the form is the soul.

At the outset, St. Thomas rejected the position of Plato who asserted that the soul was not united to the body as form to matter, but only as mover to movable, in other words the soul can be said to be in the body as a sailor is in a ship. Plato conferred upon matter an existence apart from form and regarded form as an addition or accidental determination of matter. If Plato's theory is correct, the union of body and soul in the human being becomes partial and accidental; and further St. Thomas shows that the human being would not be a natural and sensible being if the Platonic position is accepted. But the soul is neither a material nor a sensible thing. The soul is not a body and it is also not composed of matter and form, but it is a form.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, by basing himself on Aristotle, St. Thomas affirmed that man was not a soul alone which uses the body, but a being composed of both body and soul.<sup>5</sup>

When clarifying the hylomorphism of Aristotle, St. Thomas makes it clear that the soul is not a material form, but a substantial form.<sup>6</sup> The affirmation of the soul as a substantial form was necessary for St. Thomas to bring out a wholistic anthropology, that is, to declare the totality, individuality and subsistence of human beings.

### **St. Thomas' Affirmation: Soul as the Substantial Form**

St. Thomas' thought follows Aristotle in many aspects and sometimes goes beyond him. At certain points Aristotle's thinking did not - and could not - be harmonized with the

Christian thinking of St. Thomas. For example, the hylomorphic perspective of Aristotle made it difficult for St. Thomas to arrive at the immortality of the human soul. Thus Aristotle's notion of the human being as a substantial composite of body and soul and the interpretation by Averroes of Aristotle made the immortality of the human soul a problem. In the explanation of Aristotle with regard to the soul as the form of the body and man as a hylomorphic union who is composed of body and soul as matter and form, the question of immortality of the soul becomes a problem. According to Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle's works, the hylomorphic perspective of man and the immortality of the soul are not comprehensible; this interpretation gives rise to a question, how the soul could continue to exist after the death of the body, since it could only have existence in its own body?<sup>7</sup>

In order to resolve this issue, St. Thomas went further and by making use of the other Aristotelian categories of essence and existence, together with the categories of matter and form, he was able to consider the soul as a complete substance with its own act of being. Thus, for him the soul was not a mere form in line with Aristotelian concepts, but a substantial form. "The difference between the accidental form and the substantial form is that whereas the former does not make a thing simply be, but only makes it be in this or that mode – the substantial form gives it simple being."<sup>8</sup> "We must not think, therefore, of the soul and body as though the body had its own form making it a body, to which a soul is superadded, making it a living body; but rather that the body gets both its being and its life from the soul."<sup>9</sup>

For Plato and his followers the soul was a substance and its substantiality was identical with human reality itself. But for St. Thomas, the soul, as such, is a complete substance, because it is gifted with its own act of being, but it is not identified with the very substantiality of man who is also a body.

In the creatures below the human being, the substantial form is always extracted from the potentiality of the matter like the accidental forms. (For example the shape of a table). But in the human being, the substantial form, which is the spiritual soul, is completely above material conditions. Therefore, the human soul has no potentiality of matter.<sup>10</sup> Since the soul is the substantial form of the body, one human being differs from another, because, the particular body and its substantial form are intimately connected to make a particular human being a person and an individual. This is an advance made by St. Thomas, that is, while clarifying the hylomorphism of Aristotle, he also conceived of the human being as an individual and a person who is not just a combination of matter and form as stated in Aristotle. Each human being is gifted with an individual rational soul. By this individual

rational soul, the human being becomes this person or that one, in another word, an individual person. “Although human souls are forms in their entirety, nevertheless they are forms individuated in bodies, and are multiplied numerically because of the multiplication of bodies.”<sup>11</sup>

Further, for St. Thomas, the human soul, though it is a substantial form, is as dependent upon the body and vice versa. The human being is a substance with a substantial unity of body and soul. St. Thomas’ development of the hylomorphism of Aristotle was made in such a manner that without the soul, the body would have no form and without the body, the soul would not have its required organs of sense for gaining knowledge. From the epistemological point of view, the soul is naturally united to the body for its operations.<sup>12</sup> The angels are pure intelligence and have no body,<sup>13</sup> but human beings, though they are rational creatures, become human beings only when unified as body and soul.

### **The Union and Correspondence of the Body and the Soul**

A wholistic concept of human nature can be firmly built only on a solid explanation of how these two divergent realities (body and soul) correspond and are united with each other. It has been noted by many philosophers, from antiquity until now, that a sufficient explanation for the union of body and soul would be a difficult task as these two belong to different and opposing spheres: the body to the material and the soul to the spiritual.<sup>14</sup>

The union of body and soul can be thought of as a human soul essentially constituting a being with a living human body.<sup>15</sup> Before considering the relationship of the body to the soul, a brief overview of the two antithetical solutions to this problem is necessary. For Plato in the human being, soul is a complete substance and the body is also a complete substance. Both have their separate identities and therefore are contingently and accidentally united in this world. In other words the soul is imprisoned in the body<sup>16</sup> temporally and its liberation from the body is necessary. This makes the soul of man an extra-superior reality with contempt for the body as its slave.

Contrary to Plato, for Aristotle, when taking the human being as a whole, the body and the soul are two incomplete substances and together they make up a complete substance, man. Therefore man is essentially body and soul. There is an essential or substantial union between these two elements that makes up the human being.

### **The Thomistic Development of Aristotelian Substantial Union**

The concept of the substantial form of the soul, which was developed by St. Thomas, also serves as the basis for the substantial union of the body and the soul. The substantial union between them is caused by the fact that the soul, by its own act of being, also maintains the being of the body. Thus the substantial form of the soul plays a key role in the union of the body and the soul.<sup>17</sup>

Since the soul is substantial it can be called subsistent. But the soul alone is not a human being. Plato's views made the human body something evil in which the soul is imprisoned. But St. Thomas basing on Aristotle says that the body is good because it is made of matter. Like everything else belonging to the realm of creatures, matter is also good and created by God.<sup>18</sup> It is possible to discern a radical optimism in Thomistic doctrine because it presents the universe as the one that is created out of God's goodness and perfection. Therefore the body is not a slave to the soul. The union of body and soul is no chastisement of the soul but a salutary bond through which the human soul will reach its full perfection.<sup>19</sup>

Each human being has his or her own unique soul. This soul confers the vegetative, sensitive and intellectual operations. So, the human soul is *formally* spiritual and *virtually* vegetal or sentient.<sup>20</sup> This soul is united to the body immediately and substantially; there is no connecting link between the two.<sup>21</sup> Thus the union of the body and the soul is not detrimental; their union is something natural, beneficial and substantial when the human being is taken as a whole.

### **The Human Being: A Substantial Union of Matter and Form**

The human being is a composite of body and soul which means every human being has his or her own soul and body. Now the difficulty is, how can the two essentially different realities, one being corporeal and the other being intellectual, which belong to diverse genera and diverse modes of being, make up a single substance?

For St. Thomas the above question would be relevant if that single act of being, that is the soul, belonged in the same way to the matter as to the intellectual substance. But the soul is not a part of the body. It belongs to the intellectual substance as its principle, and is in keeping with its very own nature. Nothing, therefore, prevents an intellectual substance from being the body's form, which is the human soul.<sup>22</sup> Further, the soul is united as a form to the body, and this union is direct.<sup>23</sup>

St. Thomas' concept of the body-soul relationship, maintains the identity, superiority and individuality of the soul while it also asserts the dignity, complementarity and necessity of the body. The hylomorphic structure of human nature makes evident the singularity of the

human being. Through the substantial union of body and soul, a human being becomes a third category of substance: a human being is not only a body, therefore not a matter or mineral or inorganic being; a human being is not only a soul, therefore not an angel or spirit; but a human being is of both, therefore it is a composite substance. It is in a privileged position for embracing both matter and spirit and being a special category of creature.

### **Conclusion and Appraisal**

The anthropology of St. Thomas is unique because he had the integral concept of man. In his analysis, he saw the human being as a whole, not as a being that is divided, or not as one who has some aspect dominating the other. At the same time he did not diminish the greatness and the uniqueness of the human soul because the soul is that which gives meaning and value to human beings. The synthesis that he made from the Aristotelian conceptions established a healthy view of man. It is something remarkable in St. Thomas. This human being is an integer which comprises all that is possible in the universe. Since it comprises both matter and spirit in its make-up all the created realities are somehow fused within its being.<sup>24</sup> With Democritus it can be said that human reality is properly called a micro-cosmos and a miniature universe.<sup>25</sup>

This substantial union of matter and form in the human reality resists all types of reductionism, whether materialistic or spiritualistic. Therefore human transcendence of all forms of reductionism is brought out clearly by this notion of the substantial union of body and soul. By the body a human being has everything that is in the material world and by the soul it has access to divinity and eternity. It is this integral nature and wholeness that makes the human being, a being open to God, to the world, to fellow human beings and to all the possibilities of life. This wholistic approach is provided by the Thomistic philosophical anthropology.

### **End Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul*, 2.1.412a 6 - 9, in *The Complete works of Aristotle*, (The Revised Oxford Translation), Jonathan Barnes, ed., 2 vols. vol. I, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1984, 657.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.1.412a 13-16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.1.412a1- 412b9.

<sup>4</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *The Soul, A Translation of St. Thomas Aquinas' De anima*, trans., John Patrick Rowan, Herder Book Co., London 1951, VI, res. 70-72. (This work is cited as *QDA*.)

<sup>5</sup> "Impossibile est igitur hominem et animal esse animam utentem corpore, non autem aliquid ex corpore et anima compositum". THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, Liber II, Capitulum 57, (Leoninae Text), Desclée & C. Herder, Romae 1934, 152.

- <sup>6</sup> S. VANNI ROVIGHI, (1981), *Uomo e natura: Appunti per una antropologia filosofica*, Vita e pensiero, Milano, 176.
- <sup>7</sup> ROBERT E. BRENNAN, (1952), *Thomistic Psychology: A Philosophic Analysis of the Nature of Man*, Macmillan, New York, 321-322.
- <sup>8</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Aristotle's De Anima in the Version of William of Moerbeke and the Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans., K. Foster and S. Humphries, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London 1951, § 224, 170. (This work is cited as *In DA*.)
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, § 225, 170.
- <sup>10</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *QDA*, VI, res. 70.
- <sup>11</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *QDA*, VI, ad. 4, 76.
- <sup>12</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *QDA*, VIII, res. 98.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, res. 84.
- <sup>14</sup> David Hume asks aptly: "Is there any principle in all of nature more mysterious than the union of soul with body: by which a supposed spiritual substance acquires such an influence over a material one, that the most refined thought is able to actuate the grossest matter?" Cfr. DAVID HUME, (1975), *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, VII, 1, L. A. Selby - Bigge et al., ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 169.
- <sup>15</sup> HENRI RENARD, (1955), *The Philosophy of Man*, The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, 22.
- <sup>16</sup> PLATO, *Phaedrus*, 82e, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, E. Hamilton & H. Cairns, eds., (Bollingen Series LXXI), Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1987, 66.
- <sup>17</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *QDA*, VIII, ad. 2, 102.
- <sup>18</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province, American Edition, 3 vols. vol. I, Benzler Brothers, New York 1948, Ia, q.66, a.1. (This work is cited as *ST*.)
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Ia, q.76, a.1.
- <sup>20</sup> *Idem.*, *QDA*, XI, res. 142.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, res. 113.
- <sup>22</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, 68, 167.
- <sup>23</sup> *Idem.*, *QDA*, IX, res. 113.
- <sup>24</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST*, Ia, q.75, a.4, res. 366.
- <sup>25</sup> GREGORY VLASTOS, 'Ethics and Physics in Democritus', in *The Philosophical Review*, 54(1945)6, 578-592.

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