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# ANGEL IN “THE CARTESIAN THEATRE” - AQUINAS AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

In the contemporary discussion about the mind-body problem we can lately observe the growing interest in the “soul hypothesis”. Already in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the standard explanation of the mind faced multiple contradictions and unanswered questions, thus reductive materialism was no longer the only option. Therefore, the thesis of the existence of the soul started to be perceived as a real alternative answer of how to get across the “explanatory gap”. The arguments of those who defend the soul hypothesis are commonly called dualistic, and their position – dualism (Kim, 2000, p. 1–26)<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays, scholars of this kind are divided into two main types. Those who accept the existence of two different substances are called “substantial dualists”, but those who rather turn to different properties of two substances represent various types of “property dualism” (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 168– 170)<sup>2</sup>. The doctrine to which a dualist referred (especially in an early period) was the philosophy of Descartes. Even now, for those who want to defend the Soul Hypothesis the starting point is always more or less Cartesian. It seems to be the only choice and it is hard to get rid of, since

1 Where J. Kim well presents situation in contemporary discussion and the emergence of the soul hypothesis.

2 The brief explanation of various forms of dualism is presented by J. Westphal (2016, p. 25–52).

there is nothing to replace it. Thus, the common arguments against it are usually forged against the Cartesian based view of a human being. It is worth noticing that the very term “dualism” suggests that claims as to the existence of the soul are perceived as adding the substance of the soul to the substance of the body. The two substances view is so common that even those who argue as to the existence of the soul call Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas “dualists” (Baker, Goetz, 2011, p. 2)<sup>3</sup>. The term itself, of course, could have various meanings. It could be understood as a simple statement that besides of the body there is something else in a human being. But referring to Aristotle, St Thomas along with Descartes and Leibniz suggest that in this field their opinions are not essentially unlike, and differences concern only details (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 168)<sup>4</sup>.

Besides of those who seem to ignore the fundamental differences between Aquinas and Descartes, there is a growing number of scholars who realize that Aquinas’ approach to a human being is completely different because St Thomas himself put a stress on substantial unity of body and soul. First of all, discussions on the soul hypothesis in many ways seem to be treating medieval and ancient thinkers according to the contemporary conceptual framework, while the mind-body problem was not a medieval one. Peter King concludes that: “Medieval anticipations of practically everything else can be found, but not the mind-body problem. The answer must lie elsewhere”, and he suggests that the sources of the problem could be found in the early Modern distinction of primary and secondary qualities (King, 2007, p. 204). But still many thinkers see Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ view of a human being as the solution for the contemporary puzzle. For them the claim of the substantial unity of body and soul seems to be suitable to dispel the arguments against the soul hypothesis. Among the most recent thinkers we can point out Eduard Feser (2017, p. 54), who perceives incompatibility of St Thomas’ view with modern interpretations, but also suggests that Aquinas’ metaphysics could be a solution:

Aquinas’s position on the “hard problem of consciousness” is impossible to map on to the range of options typically considered by contemporary philosophers of mind. One reason for this is that, strictly speaking,

3 “As is well known, Aquinas’ approach was fundamentally Aristotelian. As he saw it, the soul-body distinction can be assimilated to the Aristotelian form – matter distinction. The soul is the form of a human being, and we loosely call its matter the body. But despite the soul-body dualism, the picture is in fact essentially different from what Dante described”.

4 “Many philosophers have agreed, developing various forms of mind-body dualism. Philosophical dualists such as Plato, Aquinas, and Descartes – and, more recently, Karl Popper, Richard Swinburne, and William Hasker – disagree about many details”.

Aquinas had no position on the issue, because there was in his day no awareness that any hard problem existed. That is not because Aquinas and other medieval Scholastics were overlooking some problematic phenomenon. Rather, it is because the relevant phenomenon became problematic only once early modern philosophers abandoned certain key Aristotelian metaphysical assumptions. The hard problem of consciousness, and the mind-body problem in general, are artifacts of this abandonment. If Aquinas has an implicit solution to the hard problem, then, it is this: restore the metaphysical assumptions in question, and the problem goes away.

As we can see Fester's point is very interesting, because he suggests that the whole mind-body problem is the product of certain metaphysical assumptions. Therefore, the return to metaphysics of Aquinas "would allow us to solve, or rather dissolve, the so called *hard problem*" (ibidem, p. 61). Such change of perspective is certainly very tempting, but it depends on treating St Thomas' metaphysics seriously, and admitting that such conception of one substance composed of body and soul is even possible, since such claim seems to contradict the contemporary view so strongly dependent on Cartesian dualism. Moreover, it seems to require a change in our perception of material substances in general (ibidem, p. 54).

To see why St Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics of a human being is so useful to deal with the mind-body problem we must underline its uniqueness. His arguments on substantial unity were not so common in the Middle Ages and most of the scholars perceived such as approach as too Aristotelian. Such a view, after the condemnation of 219 theses in 1277, was even perceived as dangerous because it was almost commonly accepted that following the Philosopher in his assumptions about substantial unity makes the argumentation on immortality of the soul impossible. The originality of Aquinas lays in the balance of simultaneous claims of substantial unity and his demonstration on immortality of the soul. So Aquinas' view of a human being can be called biological since his claims on the indispensable role of the body are so radical. St Thomas not only claims that the body is not bad and unimportant but he: "goes much farther than that, insisting not only that our bodies play a positive role in our lives, but that they are in fact essential to our continued existence" (Pasnau, 2012, p. 363)

For most of 13th-century scholars the soul was an independent substance. Aquinas, on the contrary, wants to be true to the Aristotelian view. That is why he claims that the soul, or the form without mater, cannot be understood as a substance. He argues that the nature of man is not a soul accidentally connected to the body, but the body must be treated as the integral part of the substance of man.

To the question: “Whether the soul is man?”, his answer is “Not” (ST I, q. 75, a. 4). The most important consequence of such claim is a different understanding of the sensual activity of man. While intellectual activity, according to Aquinas, can be performed without any change in the body (intellect and will do not have physical organs), sensual activity is always the activity of both the body and the soul. Aquinas concludes his demonstration by saying: “Since, then, sensation is an operation of man, but not proper to him, it is clear that man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body”. The opposite opinion, that the soul is man, leads to the necessary conclusion that sensual activity is the activity of the soul, which only uses the body as a tool. This was exactly the opinion of Plato with whom St Thomas disagree (ST I, q. 75, a. 4, co.)<sup>5</sup>. Aquinas elaborates on those claims demonstrating that the soul is connected with the body as its form, and he once again underlines refuting Plato’s conceptions: “...that it is one and the same man who is conscious both that he understands, and that he senses. But one cannot sense without a body: therefore the body must be some part of man” (ST I, q. 75, a. 1, co.)<sup>6</sup>.

Such metaphysical claims have their profound effect on how St Thomas understands the action of physical senses. Without going further into detail of his philosophical anthropology, we can briefly say that in order to sense man needs two inseparable elements: the power of the soul (*potentia animae* or *virtus animae*) and a physical organ (*organum*). Therefore, the act of sensing is not only the operation of the power but it must be accompanied by a physical change in the proper organ (*transmutatio, immutatio*)<sup>7</sup>.

In the writings of Aquinas one can find fragments which show how exactly he understands the role of the body in human perception. Probably the most interesting example comes surprisingly from the fragments of *Summa theologiae* in which St Thomas considers the nature of angels. Here we can also see a very interesting confrontation with Platonic/Cartesian dualism. Discussing Descartes’ philosophy Jacques Maritain (1929, p. 54– 81) claimed that he committed the sin of *angelism*. Analyzing how Descartes understood a certain and clear perception

5 “Cum igitur sentire sit quaedam operatio hominis, licet non propria, manifestum est quod homo non est anima tantum, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore. Plato vero, ponens sentire esse proprium animae, ponere potuit quod homo esset anima utens corpore”.

6 “...propter hoc quod ipse idem homo est qui percipit se et intelligere et sentire, sentire autem non est sine corpore, unde oportet corpus aliquam esse hominis partem.”

7 We must note that Aquinas claimed that more perfect senses (eg. “sight” – *visus*) could act without any physical change in an organ because they are more spiritual in their nature (“*Visus autem, quia est absque immutatione naturali et organi et obiecti, est maxime spiritualis, et perfectior inter omnes sensus, et communior*” ST I, q. 78, a. 3, co.). However, such claim can be explained by the lack of medical data on the nature of sight in the Middle Ages.

of metaphysical principles he found out that it resembled how Aquinas described the knowledge of angels. Although Maritain's opinions are formulated as an accusation, I think that they are true not only as regards the issue of knowledge and understanding. In my opinion, we can make the perspective wider and include here the problem of the soul-body relation in general. In the angelology of St Thomas we can find something of the Cartesian view of this relation in the description of how to understand an angel assuming a body. The difference between the angel in the assumed body and the soul of man is especially visible in the description of sensual perception.

Unlike his predecessors who claimed that the substance of angels must contain matter, Aquinas argues that there is no matter of any kind in the nature of angels (ST I, q. 50, a.1-2). Angels are intellectual forms without matter, which makes them metaphysically different from man who, as we have seen above, is both the form and the matter. Therefore, angels can have no sensual perception since they have no physical organ. Immateriality of angels makes it difficult to explain yet another question of the Bible: How is it possible for angels to assume the physical body. St Thomas does not take an easy way saying that such events of bodily apparitions of angels were merely hallucinations. Although some claimed that they cannot assume the body, such opinions, according to Aquinas, are contrary to the intent of the Holy Scripture. It is very unlikely that biblical meetings with angels were only imaginary because they were seen by many people at once, it happened for a long time, and they performed many bodily actions like talking, eating, drinking, etc. Therefore, St Thomas claims that angels can assume real physical bodies (ST I, q. 51, a. 2, co.). But how such assumption of the body can be explained, since earlier he claimed that angels do not have the bodies united with them naturally? (ST I, q. 51, a. 1, co.) It would certainly be easier to explain on the basis of polymorphism, the conviction originating from Jewish philosopher Ibn Gabirol (or even St Augustine himself), and commonly accepted in the 13th century (Wipel, 2012, p. 46). The polymorphic view postulated the existence of spiritual matter (*materia spiritualis*) and claimed that separated substances are composed of matter and form. Aquinas rejected the existence of spiritual matter polemizing thoroughly with Avicenna, and he demonstrated that an angel is not composed of spiritual matter and form, but rather of form and act of being (*ipsum esse*) (Stępień, 2015, p. 1–13). So an angel is a purely spiritual creature but he can assume the body to such extent that for men meeting angels in the assumed bodies they seemed to be like any other human being.

Without going into specific problems concerning how angels can influence matter, we can take what Aquinas says on embodied spiritual substances

as a description of unification of two different substances – spiritual and material. The assumed body is not alive in a proper sense, because such body cannot perform functions of life (*opera vitae*) (ST I, q. 51, a. 3, co.). Explaining further, Aquinas says that there are certain common aspects among operations. In case of speech this common aspect is the sound, which is produced by the vocal cords of the speaker. In case of walking this common aspect is movement which can also be produced by many causes. That is why biblical figures who met angels perceived them as eating, speaking and walking, but they did not do it in the same manner as the living man. Angels do not talk properly, “yet there is a semblance of speech, in so far as they fashion sounds in the air similar to human voices” (ST I, q. 51, a. 3, ad 4.).<sup>8</sup> They do not eat because in their case food was not converted into their substance (ST I, q. 51, a. 3, ad 5.)<sup>9</sup>. And, finally, since sensation is also a vital activity, “it can in no way be said that angels perceive through the organs of their assumed bodies” (ST I, q. 51, a. 3, ad 2.)<sup>10</sup>. Since they cannot use the sensual organs to perceive, how they possibly know what the assumed body is doing? In my opinion this situation resembles what the contemporary philosophers of mind call “the Cartesian theatre”. This term is used to dissolve the soul hypothesis, since the consequence of such view of the relation between body and soul, is the infinite multiplication of the inner spectators who observe sensual data displayed on the screen (Teliaferro, 2012, p. 31–33). Therefore, we can say that an angel in the assumed body is aware or sees what the body is doing. This is, of course, a simplification because to treat this case properly we must also point at multiple problems of how to understand angelic cognition, but in my opinion such simplification is plausible. Therefore, we can also use this model in a more general manner explaining all activities which angels do in the assumed body. As we shall see below, Aquinas uses the example of the pilot of a ship, but to make his example more contemporary we can compare the angel to the perfect car driver. He can direct the vehicle using the steering wheel, and make the car produce the sound using the horn, but the driver neither senses through the car the wheels contacting the road, nor feels the pain when the car is damaged in a crash. He is aware of all those things seeing the changes in the body like the spectator in “the Cartesian theatre”.

8 “Angeli proprie non loquantur per corpora assumpta, sed est aliquid simile locutioni, in quantum formant sonos in aere similes vocibus humanis”.

9 “...nec etiam comedere, proprie loquendo, Angelis convenit, quia comestio importat sumptionem cibi convertibilis in substantiam comedentis”.

10 “...nullo modo est dicendum quod Angeli per organa assumptorum corporum sentiant”.

Such a view of an angel assuming the body is, however, completely different to how Aquinas understands the activities of human soul. Like an angel, it is intellectual but also shares substance with the body. St Thomas faces here the problem of securing certain independence of the soul from the body because otherwise demonstration of immortality of the soul would be impossible. On the other hand, he does not sacrifice his biological approach to a human being (Pasnau, 2012, p. 363–365)<sup>11</sup>. We can observe how he deals with the problem at the beginning of *Questio disputata de anima*. Answering the question: “Can the Soul be a Form and a Particular Thing?” Aquinas explains: “For insofar as a soul possesses an operation which transcends material things, its very existence is raised above and does not depend on its body. But insofar as a soul by nature acquires its immaterial knowledge from what is material, it is clear that the fulfillment of its nature cannot be achieved apart from union with a body” (*Questiones disputatae de anima*, a. 1, co.)<sup>12</sup>. Because the soul can perform intellectual operations which are independent from the body, some philosophers came to a conclusion that it is a substance itself. Disagreeing with that statement Aquinas once again criticizes Plato and says that we cannot understand the soul-body relation that way:

For he held that the full nature of the species is in the soul, defining a human being not as something composed of soul and body but as a soul using a body, and thus the relation of the soul to its body is that of a sailor to his ship or of a clothed man to his garments. However this position cannot be maintained; for it is clear that that by which the body lives is its soul (*Questiones disputatae de anima*, a. 1, co.)<sup>13</sup>.

The view of Plato cannot be accepted because it cannot provide a satisfactory answer of how the soul makes the body alive, just like the pilot does not make the ship alive by steering it, and man does not make clothing alive when he puts it on and makes it move when he moves. This is exactly the case of an angel who assumes the body. But this does not mean that the soul dies with the body.

11 This is how Robert Pasnau calls the Aquinas approach to the corporal nature of man.

12 “In quantum enim habet operationem materialia transcendentem, esse suum est supra corpus elevatum, non dependens ex ipso; in quantum vero immaterialem cognitionem ex materiali est nata acquirere, manifestum est quod complementum suae speciei esse non potest absque corporis unione”.

13 “Ponebat enim totam naturam speciei in anima esse, dicens hominem non esse aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore, sed animam corpori advenientem; ut sit comparatio animae ad corpus sicut nautae ad navem, vel sicuti induti ad vestem. – Sed haec opinio stare non potest. Manifestum est enim id quo vivit corpus...”



Aquinas' arguments on immortality of the soul are based on the intellectual operations pointed above, which do not depend on bodily organs. The soul necessarily depends on them only when it performs vegetative and sensual operations. Therefore, the body and bodily organs are indispensable for acquiring any sensual data, feeling and eating.

One of the questions from *Questiones disputate de Veritate*, where St Thomas comments on the passions of the soul, seems to be especially interesting for further explanation of the role of bodily organs in the operations of the human soul. We must notice that passion is understood here in a broad sense. The Latin term *passio* means not only feeling (pain, or sadness), but can be ascribed to any situation when an active agent operates and changes the passive power of the soul. Therefore, we can speak of passions also when the passive sense acquires sensual data (e.g. hearing accepts sound) (ST I/II, q. 22, a. 1, co.). Aquinas explains that we can speak of passion in the proper sense when one form replaces the opposite one. Such situation can occur only in physical reality and thus for the passion in the proper sense a body is necessary (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 1, co.). He demonstrates that for a spiritual being no passion is possible, it can occur only in the soul connected to the body. Therefore, the body suffers substantially, the soul only accidentally (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 2, co.)<sup>14</sup>. Aquinas describes the relation as reciprocal, but the action occurs differently depending on direction. "For anything that is composed of matter and form suffers by reason of its matter just as it acts by reason of its form. Thus the passion begins with the matter and in a certain sense indirectly belongs to the form" (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 2, co.)<sup>15</sup>. So while moving the body the soul is principal and body moves accidentally, but when man suffers, the body is principal and the suffering in the soul is accidental. Therefore, when: "... the passion begins with the body and ends in the soul inasmuch as it is united to the body as its form. This is a bodily passion. Thus, when the body is injured, the union of the body with the soul is weakened; and so the soul, which is united to the body in its act of existing, suffers indirectly" (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 2, co.)<sup>16</sup>. Later Aquinas adds that in such case soul "suffers along with the body (*compatitur corpori*) suffering by a bodily passion" (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 3, co.). The role of the

14 "Illud ergo quod per se patitur passione propria, corpus est. Si ergo passio proprie dicta aliquo modo ad animam pertineat, hoc non est nisi secundum quod unitur corpori, et ita per accidens". See also: *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 3, co.

15 "Nam id quod est compositum ex materia et forma, sicut agit ratione formae, ira patitur ratione materiae: et ideo passio incipit a materia, et quodammodo per accidens pertinet ad formam".

16 "Ponebat enim totam naturam speciei in anima esse, dicens hominem non esse aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore, sed animam corpori advenientem; ut sit comparatio animae ad corpus sicut nautae ad navem, vel sicuti induti ad vestem. - Sed haec opinio stare non potest. Manifestum est enim id quo vivit corpus..."

body is so important that the entire process of cognition can be altered or disrupted because of the physical organ. St Thomas has no doubts that all sensual powers of the soul can be hindered when the organ is injured. But such situation can compromise the entire process of cognition, even the intellectual powers of the soul (which in itself do not operate thanks to bodily organs), since for St Thomas man can only acquire new data through the senses. He says:

But indirectly passion in this sense applies also to the powers which do not use bodily organs, the intellective powers, in so far as they receive something from the powers which do use organs. Thus it happens that when the organ of the imaginative power is injured, the operation of the intellect is also hampered because the intellect has a need for phantasms in its own operation (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 3, co.)<sup>17</sup>.

Therefore, we can generalize that a change in the bodily organ influences the entire perception of the physical world. The conclusion applies not only to the cognitive powers, but also to the appetitive ones, since the concupiscent and irascible powers, which produce passions (pleasure, pain, etc.) belong to the sensitive part of the soul.

Those statements of Aquinas show that he grants the body a more important role than any of his contemporary scholars. None of those who claimed that the soul is the substance itself would say that the soul cannot feel the changes in the body, cannot feel pain, or accept the sensual data, etc., but they rather would maintain that the soul feels and suffers in itself. The pain is real, but it is the pain of the soul, which is aware of a change in the body, because the soul is the primal principle of any human activity. We can say, using the modern language, that the self which feels is the soul in itself. What St Thomas suggests means that the pain is primary in the body, but secondary in the soul, since the soul feels along with the body, and through the body. Here the self which feels is composed of body and soul. Using once again the example of a car driver, which in this case is hardly appropriate, we would say that according to Aquinas the car and the driver are inseparable, and the driver would feel the pain in the bumper, when the car crashes, produces sound (speaks) by the horn and makes car move as his own body.

17 “Et hoc modo pertinet etiam ad potentias organis corporalibus non utentes, scilicet intellectivas, in quantum accipiunt a potentiis organis utentibus: unde contingit quod laeso organo virtutis imaginativae, intellectus operatio impeditur, propter hoc quod intellectus indiget phantasmatis in sua operatione”.

St Thomas Aquinas is certainly very consistent and draws the conclusion from his view of human nature to the last bit. He does not abandon the Aristotelian principle of the substantial unity of body and soul to save immortality of the soul. Instead, he takes the hard way of explaining how it is possible for the soul so deeply connected with the body to continue existing after death. Therefore, his view could be anti-reductionist and biological at the same time. Concluding, I must agree with Eduard Fester's opinion that accepting the Aquinas' view would certainly dissolve the mind-body problem, but it would be possible only through the acceptance of his metaphysical principles. Without it the conception of the one substance composed of soul and body will be unimaginable in our contemporary understanding of a human being.

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# ANGEL IN “THE CARTESIAN THEATRE” - AQUINAS AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

## SUMMARY

One of the solutions of the mind-body problem, which returns to the philosophical discussion on consciousness is the “soul hypothesis”. Existence of the soul can clear the “explanatory gap”, but it brings yet another problems in explanation of how consciousness works. The majority of those issues exist because of very specific understanding of the mind-body relations in Cartesian way as two separated substances. Some of the scholars propose to overlap the Cartesian approach by returning to the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas. This article shows that in the writings of Aquinas we can find exact analogy of the Cartesian view of the body-soul relations in the description of how immaterial angel assumes the body. For Aquinas angel exist and acts in assumed human body in the very same way as Descartes describes the soul acting in human body, and angel’s mode of perception is similar to what is usually called as “the Cartesian theatre”. For Aquinas angel in assumed body cannot perform any human action, it only pretends to perform it, because it operates bodily organs as the form, which is not united with this specific body. St Thomas explanation of the relation of body and soul in human being relies on the claim of unity of body and soul, which together are one substance. Such approach was even called biological, because of the stress on the role which body plays in human actions. Therefore Aquinas proposition could be perceived the way of overcoming the dualism and removing some of the dilemmas which are linked with “soul hypothesis” understood in traditional way.

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