

AQUINAS'S VIEWS ON MIND AND SOUL: ECHOES OF PLATONISM

PATRICK QUINN

All Hallows College
Department of Philosophy
Grace Park Road, Drumcondra
Dublin 9, Ireland
mrpquinn@eircom.net

St. Thomas's views on the human soul and mind are shaped by Platonic as well as Aristotelian influences. His account of the human soul as the substantial principle and form of human life quickly becomes translated into a definition of the soul as an intelligent substance that exists on the boundary line of bodily and non-bodily substances as though it were on the horizon of time and eternity, according to *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book 11, Chapter 81. The human being as a whole is also described in this way in *Summa Theologica* 1.77.2. This "boundary" image of the human being allows St. Thomas in *Summa Theologica* 1.89.1 to account for how knowledge can occur in the absence of the body after death. It also enables Aquinas to explain in other texts how religious ecstasy can occur in life before death in that the sensory powers are supernaturally suspended to free the mind to see God. Thus non-bodily based knowledge before or after death with all the important implications involved are philosophically accounted for, at least up to a point, by Platonism. This is not to deny Aquinas's Aristotelianism but simply to note the existential importance of Platonic insights in his thinking also, especially when St. Thomas attempts to philosophically present his views on how knowledge occurs in human beings in the absence of the senses

1. AQUINAS, PLATONISM AND ARISTOTLE

In certain significant respects, Aquinas's account of the human soul and his concept of mind, owe a great deal more to Platonism than to Aristotelian thought. This may seem surprising, perhaps even unacceptable, to some orthodox Thomists who might prefer to believe that Aquinas's Christian theological approach rests almost exclusively,

at least from a philosophical point of view, on an Aristotelian basis. Consequently, there are efforts to reject any perceived attempts to suggest that there are significant traces of Platonism in Aquinas's thinking.¹ This approach, I would suggest, represents a rather narrow interpretation of St. Thomas's views and one that does not do justice to the richness in his writings. His thinking, which was undoubtedly formed within the Christian tradition of his predecessors, was also indebted, not only to Aristotle, but to a whole range of other non-Christian thinkers and traditions. These include, not just the Platonic tradition which is evident, for example, in Aquinas's commentaries on the writings of Pseudo-Denys, but also eminent thinkers from the Jewish tradition, like Moses Maimonides, and such Islamic philosophers as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and especially Ibn Rushd (Averroes), even if the latter views are sometimes represented by Aquinas as ones which he thinks he must reject in part or in whole in order to put forward his own claims on the relevant issues for debate.²

In point of fact, the Platonism, which St. Thomas inherited and employed (often in an implicit way) in his thinking, has contributed immeasurably to the enhancement and vitality of his approach, which is evident in his treatment of the human soul and mind. This holds true even when, at times, the Aristotelianism and Platonism that inform his understanding of these issues appear to sit uneasily with each other during his efforts to analyse the nature and activities of the human soul, mind and body.

It is interesting to examine how Aquinas proceeded, especially in the context of the kind of extraordinary existential conditions which he believed to be possible, such as, for instance, the survival of the soul independently of the body and the unusual implications of this for mental activity.

2. *SUMMA THEOLOGICA PART I, QUESTION 89 ARTICLE 1*

It is fair to say that *S.T.I.89.1* represents in essence St. Thomas's efforts from a philosophical and theological point of view to deal with an issue that is central to his concept of the human soul and mind, namely, the independence and non-bodily existence of soul and mind in the

¹ One interesting account on Aquinas's Platonism is contained in *The Platonic heritage of Thomism* by Arthur Little (Golden Eagle Books, Dublin, 1949).

² For a brief discussion of the influences on Aquinas, see Patrick Quinn, *Aquinas, Platonism and the knowledge of God*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1996, pp. 1–5.

absence of the human body. The significance here is that for Aquinas, Christian theologian and philosopher, the post-mortem existence of a personal nature for every human being is a matter of belief. It is here that Aristotle and Aquinas notably diverge in their thinking in that for the former, human life ends with death whereas for Aquinas, the point of human life is life after death and what this implies for better or worse. The problem therefore for Aquinas is how to use Aristotelian philosophy to explore these issues, which is where *S.T.I.89.1* becomes important. In fact, the failure of the text to provide an Aristotelian solution for the immortality of soul and mind, makes way for Aquinas's use of Platonism in order to explain how the post-mortem existence and activity of soul and mind is to be understood. Indeed, Aquinas admits to meeting with resistance from an Aristotelian point of view when he tries to resolve the post-mortem status of the human soul and its intelligent behaviour and this leads him, without explicitly saying so, to a Platonic solution.

The question posed by Article 1 is whether the human soul can have any understanding or knowledge when it is separated from the body. The major difficulty of which Aquinas is well aware is that since our knowledge is naturally acquired from our physical and sensory experiences, this must surely mean that since death puts an end to our physical way of functioning, no future knowledge or intelligent activity can then be possible. This is the Aristotelian point of view, as Aquinas repeats a number of times in the course of Article 1. He acknowledges that the independent existence and intelligent activity of the soul in the absence of the body is not a problem for those who are Platonists because they regard the relationship between soul and body as an accidental rather than essential relationship e.g., as in Plato's *Phaedo's* illustrations of the sailor in a boat or the man wearing a cloak or the prisoner in jail. This means that when the relationship between soul and body is dissolved by death, the soul returns to its true nature and functions much more effectively from an intelligent point of view. But that also means, according to Aquinas, that the union of soul and body is not for the good of the soul since the body (as an intelligent body) would then have a more enhanced status than the soul in life before death and the soul's position would be correspondingly weakened since its intelligent activity would not be as effective when embodied as when disembodied. That wouldn't make sense, according to St. Thomas, since the soul has primacy of status compared with the body because it is the body's substantial form.

Having struggled to explain (unsuccessfully) how Aristotelianism might offer some solution to the problem of how the soul could function intelligently in the absence of the body, Aquinas introduces a new element into the discussion in Article 1. This involves a claim by him to the effect that the soul has one way of being when embodied and another way of being when disembodied although its nature remains the same throughout. This is a contentious proposition, certainly from an Aristotelian point of view, although Aquinas introduces it in *S.T.I. 89.1* as a matter of fact. He might argue, however, that he has discussed this issue elsewhere and has even established it as being true e.g., in *Summa Contra Gentiles Book II. Chs. 80 & 81*. In any case, this concept of the soul as being capable of functioning whether when embodied or disembodied has definite Platonic origins, not only in Plato's *Phaedo* but also in the writings of the great Neoplatonist Plotinus and in the work of Proclus.³ This is the concept of what might be described as the boundary soul.⁴

Aquinas is careful to add that, although the soul can function intelligently both when embodied and disembodied, its natural state is to be embodied since the relationship of union between body and soul is an essential and not accidental one (as Platonists might suggest). Nonetheless, there is also the underlying claim here by St. Thomas that the soul is an intelligent substance.

Aquinas goes on to provide the interesting illustration of a circle of light and enlightenment, at the centre of which is God, the source of light and at various distances from God along the radii from the centre are intelligent substances like the angelic intelligences while on the rim of the circle exist human intelligent beings. This illustration seems designed to show that the nearer intelligent beings are to God, the greater is their ability to function intelligently whereas, with our level of intelligence which naturally occurs in an embodied form, we are the furthest away from God and so will struggle to understand reality in a way that the more superior intelligences will not have to do since they have an immediate and intuitive grasp of what is real.

We are like the slow learners in a class where some of the more brilliant students can understand very quickly after being provided with a small number of examples, whereas we need many examples in order to grasp the point at issue. That is how God has designed reality, ac-

³ E.g., *Ennead IV.8.7* and Propositions 190 & 191 in Proclus, *The elements of theology* (*Second Edition*), trans. E.R. Dodds, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 167–169.

⁴ See Quinn (1996 : 52–65).

According to Aquinas, so it is natural for us to acquire knowledge from sensory-based data. Nevertheless, he concludes abruptly in the final sentence in the body of Article 1, the human soul can also acquire knowledge in another way, that is, presumably independently of the body. This will occur, he states in a reply to the 3rd objection, when the soul in the absence of the body will be assisted by means of Divine illumination to know reality in the same way as other intelligent (angelic) substances do though to a lesser degree in the case of the human soul.

It seems clear from this article that because of the inability to effectively solve how post-mortem intelligent activity could occur in the human soul by using an Aristotelian approach, Aquinas opts for a Platonic interpretation of how the soul could function in the absence of the body. The basis for such an account of how the soul can operate in an embodied or disembodied state originates in what might be described as the concept of a “boundary” soul.

3. *THE BOUNDARY IMAGE OF THE SOUL*⁵

The notion that the human soul and human existence lies between or at the interface of the physical temporal world and the realm of the non-physical and timeless domain has a long history in the Platonic tradition. Apart from Plato's own writings where the psyche is thus described, there is Philo's claim that the human being is on the “borderland between mortal and immortal nature [...] created at once mortal and immortal, mortal in respect of the body, but in respect of the mind immortal” (*De Opificio Mundi*, 135). There are similar references in Plotinus's *Enneads* such as this one in *Ennead IV.8.7*:

(the soul) occupies a middle rank among realities,
belonging to that divine part but being on the lowest
edge of the intelligible, and having a common boundary
with the perceptible nature.

Human beings, suggests Plotinus, have a split-level form of existence, midway between animality and divinity (*Enn. IV.8.7*). Christian writers like Gregory of Nyssa adopted this boundary or frontier image of the soul and of human life and similarly describe a split-level existence in which we belong to the visible world by our bodies and to the invisible

⁵ For a complete account of this, see Quinn (1996 : 25–65) above.

one by our souls. The human being thus serves as the connecting link between both worlds and stands at the summit of the visible one as the animal endowed with reason. Nemesius also claims that the human being is on the borderline between the bodily and spiritual realms as does Maximus of Chrysopolis who states that we were created to serve as the connecting link between the bodily and spiritual realms, and we participate in both, in the multiplicity of matter through our bodies while being united to God through our minds. In the Islamic tradition, Ibn Sina also puts forward a somewhat similar view in his concept of a two faced soul, facing towards the body and towards the realm of intelligibility.

4. *AQUINAS AND THE BOUNDARY IMAGE*

There are a number of similar references in Aquinas's writings such as the following two:

[...] the human soul [...] is on the boundary line of corporeal and incorporeal substances, as though it were on the horizon of eternity and time [...]
(*Summa Contra Gentiles Bk.II.Ch.81*)

[...] man is composed of a spiritual and corporeal nature, standing as it were on the boundaries of both [...]
(*SCG.IV.55*)

The human being and the soul in these and similar passages in Aquinas's writings enable him to account for the way in which knowledge could be acquired whether through human embodiment or in a disembodied way, as indicated in the account already discussed in *S.T.I.89.1*. The boundary image also serves the purpose of identifying human life as unique and provides a good basis, according to Aquinas, because of this uniqueness, for demonstrating Divine forgiveness and redemption in a cosmic context when God saw fit to assume the human way of life in Jesus Christ.⁶

The boundary concept does lead to certain conceptual difficulties with regard to how the relationship between the human soul and the human being is conceived and, apart from *S.T.I.89.1*, this is nowhere more evident than in one of Aquinas's earlier texts *De Ente et Essen-*

⁶ *Summa Contra Gentiles IV.55.*

tia (On Being and Essence). In this text, Aquinas analyses how the essences of things are to be understood in relation to the things themselves. When he comes to the analysis of composite or complex substances, Aquinas identifies the human being as a composite of matter and form. However, when he later examines separate substances (i.e., angelic substances), he regards the human soul as a simple substance somewhat similar to the latter, that is, the soul is an intelligent substance. The question that arises is how does one understand the relationship between the human soul as an intelligent simple substance in relation to its being the substantial form and life principle of the human being which is a composite substance composed of body and soul. It does seem that the only possible answer lies in some kind of Plotinian or Platonic concept of the soul as an intelligent substance that somehow resides in the complexity of the substance which is human and can have an independent existence after death.

5. RELIGIOUS ECSTASY⁷

Aquinas's Platonic tendencies also come into play when he tries to explain the ecstatic experience of St. Paul, described in *2 Cor. 12.1–6*, which St. Thomas agrees with the traditional Christian view that takes this to be an autobiographical account by Paul. The latter's account reads as follows:

I know of a man still in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was caught up—whether still in the body or out of it, I do not know; God knows—right into the seventh heaven. I do know, however, that this same person—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows—was caught up into paradise and heard things which must not and could not be put into human language.

This remarkable passage suggests to Aquinas an “out of body” experience of St. Paul's which Thomas then sets out to explain.⁸ What is intriguing about Aquinas's interpretation of this event lies in his analysis of what he thinks must have occurred to the sensory and intellectual powers during the process. St. Thomas suggests that since God can only be seen in a purely non-sensory way, Paul's sensory powers must have been supernaturally suspended in their ability to function. This

⁷ For a more extensive account, read Quinn (1996 : 66–80).

⁸ See *S.T.II-II.Q.175* and *De Veritate Q.13*.

freed Paul's mind up to concentrate in a more enhanced way on the vision of God, which was experienced during the event. The implication here once again is a Platonic one i.e., that the human mind functions much more effectively when freed from sensory input and experience.

The same view is set out in Aquinas's accounts of how God is seen after death in the beatific vision and in the resurrected state.⁹ Here is how Aquinas describes the vision of God in *Summa Contra Gentiles III.51*:

It would be impious to understand (this immediate vision of God) in a material way, and imagine a material face in the Godhead: since we have proved that God has no body. Nor is it possible to see God with a bodily face since the eyes of the body, which are situated in the face, can only see bodily things.

The way in which we see God, according to Aquinas in the same chapter, is as follows:

Wherefore if God's essence be seen at all, it must be that the intellect sees it in the divine essence itself; so that in that vision the divine essence is both the object and the medium of vision.

6. CONCLUSION

The supernatural vision of God in which Aquinas believes, can therefore apparently only be accounted for and up to a point by a Platonic explanation so it is not surprising for us to find that Aquinas adopts such an approach even if he is slow to admit it. His use of Platonism is therefore a logical outcome of his belief in the afterlife since any attempt to philosophically account for such a possibility in relation to the implications of this for human life and knowledge by Aristotelian philosophy would be futile. Aquinas's insistence on the harmony between faith and reason undoubtedly compelled him to seek explanations even for this highly speculative area of possible human experience, so it is no wonder that Platonism figures so large in his accounts of the issues involved.

St. Thomas himself was very aware of the limits of philosophical explanations, no matter how comprehensive the latter might seem to be and he points this out at the start of his *Summa Theologica* when he asks himself whether or not philosophy can tell the truth about reality (*S.T.I.1*). His answer is that more than human reason is needed for

this which implies a form of knowledge that goes beyond what philosophy has to offer. In such an over-all context, it is surely acceptable that Aquinas's Platonism features as an important partner to his Aristotelianism in exploring such important issues, especially if we are to admit that Aristotle himself must have been influenced by Plato to some extent given his long association with the latter. The value of what is called Neoplatonism, some of whose themes and approaches can be identified in at least some of the writings of Aquinas, is that it recognised common points of interest in the writings of both Plato and Aristotle and tried to emphasise their shared views, in a philosophical-religious context. If this is recognised, then the Platonism in Aquinas may also be valued for what it is, namely, as a philosophical attempt to compliment the limitations of Aristotelian thought when applied to at least some of the most important theological issues.