**The Unity of man, body and soul in St. Thomas Aquinas**

**A. Introduction**

1. Eschatological Problem

a. It is not unusual for eschatological works to place an opposition between the

resurrection and the immortality of the soul, as though these two were

irreconcilable views of man and his destiny.

b. There is only one alternative: Either adopt a Greek anthropology which is

supposed to separate the body from the soul or embrace a biblical anthropology

where man is a bodily person existing in an indissoluble unity.

2. This criticism of the notion of the soul is presented as a rejection of modern rationalism

which views man’s body and soul as two substances.

a. Thomas’ view presents a unified understanding of man that sacrifices neither the

essential link between the soul and body nor the primacy of the spiritual soul in

man.

**B. Platonic Inheritance from Patristic writers**

1. Thomas’ patristic sources given him a conception of man that is dualistic:

a. St. Augustine: Man is a rational soul making use of a mortal and earthly body. Man

is a soul making use of a body. The soul is a complete substance, a finished being

with a capacity to govern the body.

b. St. John Damascene: the soul is the living essence, simple, incorporeal, invisible in

its proper nature to bodily eyes, immortal, reasoning and intelligent, making use of

an organized body and being the source of the powers of life and growth,

sensation and generation.

2. Damascene’s platonic terms

a. The notion of the soul as an essence or substance with its own complete self-

existence.

b. Instrumentalism: the soul is an essence that makes use of a body.

3. For St. Thomas, Platonic philosophy is characterized by two features:

a. The soul is united to the body as a spiritual mover or pilot of a corporeal reality.

b. Man is not a whole composed of body and soul, but a soul that makes use of the

body.

4. St. Thomas rejects this view because of his Aristotelian hylomorphism:

a. The assertion that man is his soul eliminates matter and body from the definition

of man.

b. The instrumentalist notion of the relationship between soul and body is unable to

guarantee the essential character of the link between the two since the denial of

the substantial union between body and soul entails that the union can only be

accidental.

**C. Eclecticism of St. Thomas’ contemporaries**

1. Thomas’ contemporaries show man as a composite of two substances: one spiritual and

immortal, the other corporeal.

a. Each of these principles is treated as a substance in itself

b. For Bonaventure, the soul is not only a form, but a reality in itself. This is why it is

not only united to the body as the perfection of the body, but also as its mover.

2. Aristotle’s anthropology: The soul is the form of a natural body having life potentially

within it. But the formal substance is entelechy (ultimate actuality); therefore the soul is

the entelechy of a body of this nature.

a. The soul us the act of the living body. As form, the soul organizes the body and

enables it to execute its actions. Therefore the soul and the body are not two

different things.

b. It is unnecessary to ask whether the soul and the body are one. It is like asking

whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one. The soul is thus

inseparable from the body.

3. Problem for Christians

a. Can the soul survive the body that it informs? Aristotle did allow for a perishable

soul.

b. This is why Christians favored the platonic position, since it acknowledges the

soul’s heavenly origins and highlights its spiritual nature.

4. As a result, Thomas’ contemporaries preserve the Platonic notion that the soul is a

substance in itself.

a. Albert the Great: Considering the soul in itself, he adopts the position of Plato.

Considering the soul as the form of animation which it fulfills for the body, he

adopts the position of Aristotle.

**PART II: Unity of Human Person, Soul and Body**

**A. Intellective soul: substantial form of the human person**

**1.** When St. Thomas speaks of man’s soul, he calls it the intellective soul; it is the principle of

intellectual operation which we call the soul of man

a. The intellect which is the principle of intellectual operation is the form of the

human body. The principle by which we primarily understand, whether it be called

intellect or intellectual soul is the form of the body.

b. For St. Thomas, the principle of intellectual activity is the first principle of all

other activities: biological, sensitive, motive, etc.

c. The intellective soul is man’s soul substantial form, since it guarantees all the

animating functions of the human person.

2. Thomas distinguishes between the essence of the soul and its powers:

a. The soul’s essence is not the soul’s power to act. (know or will)

b. The intellect is the root of all man’s spiritual activities.

c. The intellective soul endowed with its powers appears as the spiritual principle that

accounts for all the activities of man as a whole.

3. The principle of a being’s activities is the form.

a. In this way the soul, the principle of the life of the body is the principle of all our

vital activities: Through the soul man develops physically, exercises the activity of

the senses and moves.

b. It is through the soul that man thinks and wills.

4. For Thomas, a Platonic anthropology cannot explain this common experience: When I am

thinking, I am a corporeal being who is thinking.

a. Thomas has recourse to our common experience of unity in acting. If body and

soul were two entities, the same man could not be considered the single subject of

these different actions. He must be one in his being, since a being acts in virtue of

what is.

b. The only way of accounting for this unity of being is to recognize that the

intellective soul is the substantial form of the body, since it properly belongs to

the form to communicate its being to matter.

c. The substantial form is what gives it its existence. The first activity of substantial

form is to communicate its own existence to matter.

5. The affirmation of the soul as the substantial form meets with substantial opposition:

a. The Franciscans taught a plurality of substantial forms in man. Their view is that

the animative and vegetative forms exist and fulfill their animating function even

when the intellectual soul is present.

b. It still does not escape dualism, since it weakens the ties between body and soul by

safeguarding their relationship through intermediate forms.

6. How does this approach address the death of Christ?

a. Death is the separation of the soul form the body. Then, can it be said that the

body in the tomb is still Christ’s body?

b. Some spoke in terms of a “form of corporeity” distinct from the soul, which

ensured the identity and continuity of the living Christ and his body in the tomb.

7. If no other substantial forms were present alongside the soul, the union of the spiritual

soul to the body would ultimately be accidental and man would no longer be one, because

his body would have another existence than that of his soul.

a. The intellective soul for St. Thomas is the only way of accounting for the unity of

man and the substantial relationship between soul and body.

**B. Man is neither body nor soul, but a composite of the two**

1. If man is a composite of soul and body, then identifying man with his soul is abolished.

Thomas avoids the Platonic model for two reasons:

a. Man in the generic human sense (humanity) is soul, while man as individual is

defined in terms of soul and body. The soul in this case would be the essence of

the human species, but the human individual would be constituted by a soul linked

to a body.

b. If, “I am my soul,” this would imply that all the actions of man would be

attributed only to the soul. Therefore our acts of sensation would be attributed

only to the soul.

2. For Thomas, the soul essentially needs a body. The act of sensing is the act of the man

composed of soul and body.

**C. It is good and necessary for the soul to be united to the Body**

1. Among intellectual beings, man holds the lowest place.

a. God knows all things through his essence

b. Angels know through objective images infused into them by God

c. For man, the human soul initially has no innate knowledge of things. It must

acquire knowledge by its own activity by mans of sensory experience.

2. The human soul is united to a human body because the very nature of the soul requires it.

a. Without the senses, the soul could not execute its most intimate activities.

3. Proposing a unified vision of man, the soul is restricted to the body not so much for the

sake of the body, but for the sake of the soul.

a. The body is made in view of the soul. Thus the natural body is a certain fullness of

the soul.

b. The body is that which situates the soul in the necessary relationship to the world.

The soul is completed by the body.

**D. The soul is a subsistent principle**

1. Form is act. As the soul is created, it includes composition: a composition of essence and

participated existence. The soul’s essence is not identical with its existence.

a. The soul is subsistent. In virtue of what it is by the creating action of God, the

soul possesses in itself something by which it remains in being.

2. The Thomistic Argument

a. The soul can know all corporeal objects to the extent that they are present to it.

The act of knowing is not limited to a bodily organ. The act of intellectual

knowledge is immaterial and it does not depend on a body. It is by itself that the

human intellect knows.

b. A being acts according to what it is. It is according to how it acts in such a way

that the act expresses being and reveals being. That which executes its operation

by itself, subsists also by itself.

c. Since the soul is self-subsistent, it has no principle of corruption in itself. The soul

is the form that possesses the ability to subsist in itself.

3. If the soul is granted self-subsistence, it is only in virtue of God’s creative action. It is a

gift of the creative wisdom of God.

a. The soul cannot draw its existence from material principles

b. The nature of the soul implies that it is directly produced and infused by God

alone, according to a special act of God’s providence.

c. This also means that man is made for a direct relationship with God.

**E. The Soul is a subsistent form, not a substance in the strict sense**

1. The soul is not a substance united to the substance of the body.

2. In order to be a substance, an individual that exists in and through itself, it must meet two

ontological conditions:

a. Subsist by itself

b. To be complete in its own species, it possesses everything that is required by the

nature of such a thing.

3. The soul fulfills the first condition, but not the second

a. The soul does not constitute the whole essence of the person, but is only the form

actuating the matter. It is one part of the whole that is man.

b. The complete substance is the human individual, not the soul. That is why the

soul is only a subsistent form, the form of man.

4. The soul possesses an independence of existence regarding matter, but not an

independence of essence

a. Man is not an incarnate spirit, but a hylomorphic composite.

**PART III**

**A. The Soul makes the Body a body**

1. Body can be understood in two ways

a. As a part of man distinct from the soul.

b. As a whole that possesses spatial dimensions in the same way we designate

corporeal beings.

2. The soul is the very nature of the body

a. All actuality derives from the form

b. If a body possessed any degree of actuality outside of form, it would derive its

actuality from outside the soul.

c. Thomas is opposed to a form of corporeity different from the intellective soul.

d. In the genesis of a tiny human being, the intellective soul intervenes at the end of

the embryonic process in order to take completely on itself the animating function

of the human composite

3. By the soul the body exists; by the soul the body is organized by the soul the body has life.

a. For St. Thomas, a corpse is no longer a body, properly speaking.

b. Regarding the relics of the Saints: We venerate relics in memory of a body that

was previously a temple of the Holy Spirit and will be conformed to Christ’s

glorious body in the Resurrection. This is because of the soul that was united to it

and that now stands in the presence of God in the Beatific Vision.

c. The body is not a thing, but an expressive arena of the soul.

**B. The Body Cannot be reduced to an Extension**

1. Since the soul is a form, it is in act, not potency

a. The soul is act and form in regard to its essence.

b. The operations of the soul are distinct from the soul’s essence

2. Corporeity has a two-fold interpretation

a. Corporeity can be considered in terms of accident (quantitative aspect of the body)

b. It can also be considered in terms of substantial determination of this corporeal

being, man. It is what makes the body to be a body.

3. Two conclusions:

a. The human body is not an organized machine that stands ready to receive the

breadth of life. Rather, that which receives life is matter.

b. It is on account of the soul that the human body is a human body and specifically

on account of its substantial union with the soul.

c. The corporeity of man is his intellective soul.

**C. Man’s corporeity is his Soul**

1. It is on account of the soul that the individual human being exists, and that he is endowed

with a body and that this body is a living one

a. Corporeity, as the substantial form in man, cannot be other than the rational soul.

2. The Resurrection of the Body

a. At the deepest level, corporeity is the substantial form of man, since it is from the

soul that the human body has all of its reality as body. The body has extension

because this is required by the soul.

b. Since the soul is by nature the form of the Body, it is permanently ordered to this

body. The material and quantitative elements that constitute the body constitute it

only in virtue of the soul.

c. The soul is defined in terms of its relationship to the body and the body is defined

by the soul.

d. The primary reason of being of a corporeal identity is not found in matter, but in

the soul of the human person.

3. The soul is the source of the essential properties of the human body

a. Man is not a spiritual being because he has a body, but he has a body because he is

spiritual. He is endowed with a body adapted to the demands of his spiritual

nature.

**PART IV: The Soul Separated from the Body and Resurrection**

**A. The Separated soul is deprived of the fullness of its person**

1. Thomas considers that the integrity of human nature is required in order for there to be a

human person.

a. Without a body, there can no longer be a person.

b. The separated soul is no longer a person because man is not his soul

2. In relation to Christ in the tomb

a. The body in the tomb remains the body of Christ in virtue of the action of the

Word, who does not abandon his body or soul. But the body of the dead Christ,

deprived of its union with the soul is no longer identified with his body.

3. The Existence of the separated soul is in a two-fold relation

a. A relation to the earthly existence in which the soul is united to the Body in the

dignity of a person.

b. A relation to the resurrection, since the general resurrection will restore to the

dead the human completeness of the person.

**B. A State contrary to Nature**

1. When the soul is separated from the body, it is situate in a state contrary to nature.

a. This concerns the soul. From the point of view of the body, death is natural since

the body is corruptible by nature, while the soul is both incorruptible and made

for union with the body.

b. The state of the separated soul is contrary to nature because the soul is a

subsistent form. The separated soul exists in a state of imperfection, deprived of

what its nature requires.

2. Man possesses a soul that situates him on the horizon between eternity and time.

a. The immortality of the soul implies its union with the body, since a perpetual

existence in a state contrary to nature is hardly thinkable

**C. The Immortality of the Soul in the Context of Resurrection**

1. The incorruptibility of the soul and the resurrection are mutually converging or coherent

truths about man.

a. The incorruptibility of the soul guarantees between the person living on earth and

the resurrected person.

b. The resurrection confirms and upholds the affirmation of the soul’s

incorruptibility.

2. The immortality of the soul seems to demand a future resurrection of bodies. There are

two aspects of the soul’s incorruptibility and the resurrection.

a. Faith in the resurrection is sustained by the truth of the incorruptibility of the soul,

which as form, persists in the expectation of its reunion with the body.

b. Faith in the resurrection upholds the soul’s incorruptibility, since it is difficult to

conceive of a soul remaining forever in a state contrary to nature.

3. The soul cannot reunite itself to the body on its own

a. The resurrection is a supernatural event.

**D. Man’s Perfect Beatitude requires his Integrity as a Composite of Body and**

**Soul**

1. Without the body, the soul exists in a state of imperfection and incompleteness. Yet the

Saints experience the supreme happiness of the vision of God immediately after death if

they do not need purification.

a. Just as grace presupposes nature, glory likewise presupposes nature. Perfection of

Beatitude cannot exist if perfection of nature is lacking.

2. The object of Beatitude is not the good of the Body, but the glorified vision of God.

a. Man’s happiness consists formally and essentially in the soul’s vision of God.

b. The attainment of full happiness requires the participation of the Body, since the

substantial union of soul and body belong to man’s very nature.

c. Without the bodily resurrection, man could never be totally happy.

3. The body enters into the fullness of beatitude by participating in the glory of the soul.

a. The bodily senses of the resurrected saints thus operate with a true bodily activity.

b. The senses will perceive God through the glorified world that will shine with

divine glory.

**Conclusion**

1. St. Thomas is able to defend two fundamental truths

a. The unity of man

b. The primacy of the soul: The privileges of the soul and man’s spiritual dignity

against every form of materialism.

2. Thomas shows that it is possible to uphold subsistence and incorruptibility of the soul

without making any concessions to dualism.

3. The existence of a separated soul makes it possible to discuss the resurrection coherently.