

ANTON PEGIS'S THOMISTIC THEORY OF MAN AS AN INCARNATE SPIRIT

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Anton Charles Pegis (1905-1978) was a colleague of Étienne Gilson in their work of the revival of Thomism. His death some twenty-five years ago ended a collaboration that extended over some forty years, and while Gilson's baton has been taken up by others, it is fitting that Pegis' work be remembered on this quarter century anniversary of his death, ironically in the same year as his *cher maître* Gilson.

Pegis was born in Milwaukee to the parents of Greek descent who provided their son with an education in the Greek language thus, as Fr. Armand Maurer says in his obituary, "giving him an invaluable tool for his future studies in philosophy."¹

Pegis received his B.A. from Marquette University in 1928 and his M.A. in 1929 while doing graduate work as well with the University of Chicago professors Paul Shorey on Plato and Aristotle, and Carl Buck on ancient Greek dialects. "These professors instilled in him a profound love of Greek literature and philosophy which remained throughout his life."²

In the fall of 1929 Pegis came to the newly founded Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, where he began his medieval research under the direction of Fr. Gerald B. Phelan and Etienne Gilson. He received his Ph. D. in 1931 from the University of Toronto and began teaching the same year at Marquette. His dissertation, *The Problem of the Soul in the Thirteenth Century*, was published in 1934 in the St. Michael's College series, *Mediaeval Studies*. In 1937, he joined the graduate faculty of Fordham University and in the mid-1940's he became a member of the staff of the now Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies teaching alternative two week sessions at Toronto and New York. He developed a three-year cycle teaching in the first year the "Greek Background to

¹ Maurer, *Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. XLI (1979), p. xvi "Anton Charles Pegis, (1903-1978)," xvii-xix. For the biographical material on Pegis I am indebted to Fr. Armand Maurer, C.S.B.'s obituary.

² *Ibid.*

Mediaeval Philosophy," then "early Background to Mediaeval Philosophy" which went to the end of the 12th century, then finally "Later Mediaeval Philosophy" which started with his introduction of Aristotle into the Latin West and went on to William of Ockham in the 14th century.

In 1946, Pegis was elected President of the Pontifical Institute succeeding Msgr. Phelan, who went to Notre Dame to found a Mediaeval Institute at South Bend. That year also he served as President of the American Catholic Philosophical Association; later, in 1975, he was awarded the Association's Aquinas Medal.

In 1952, he resigned as President of the Institute and returned to New York to head the Catholic textbook Division of Doubleday and its popular Image paperback series. Incidentally, one of the important books in this series was *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the Writings of Étienne Gilson*.³ In this collection, a number of papers and lectures scattered in various periodicals were brought together in one handy paperback.

When he retired from Toronto, Pegis undertook to help found an Institute for Thomistic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, until ill health led to Vernon Bourke of St. Louis University taking over. Bourke was also one of the early students of the Institute in the 1930's.

Perhaps, Pegis is best known as the editor of *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*,⁴ which made available to students the English version of the *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, and in the second volume the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III, and selections from Part II of *Summa Theologiae*. A couple of years later, Random House published in their Modern Library series *An Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*⁵ whose introductory essay by Pegis strikes me as one of the best essays on the

³ Pegis, *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the Writings of Étienne Gilson*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1957).

⁴ Pegis, *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York, New York: Random House, 1945).

⁵ Pegis, *An Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York, New York: Modern Library, 1947).

significance of Aquinas. In 1949, he edited *The Wisdom of Catholicism*:⁶ a collection of significant Catholic writings ranging from Ignatius of Antioch to contemporary writers such as Jacques Maritain, G.K. Chesterton, Christopher Dawson and, of course, Étienne Gilson.

A *Festschrift* edited by Fr. J. Reginald O'Donnell C.S.B, *Essays in Honor of Anton Charles Pegis*,⁷ contains a bibliography of the many essays, reviews, and books published by Pegis up to 1974.

In his dissertation,⁸ Pegis examined the theories of St. Bonaventure, St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas. He noted that all were attempting to understand the human person in the context where the Augustinian theory of man as a soul sent to rule the body was being confronted with the recently acquired view of man as a composite of the soul and body. This Aristotelian man was complicated by being accompanied by the interpretations of Avicenna, Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodesia.

What was at stake was to achieve an interpretation of man as a unity, as our experience of ourselves indicates, and at the same time account for the immortality of the soul, which the Platonic/Augustinian theory of man as a soul, does very easily. The theory of man as a composite of matter and form accounts for the unity of the person, but there was one great difficulty: all the Aristotelian interpretations of composites of matter and form involved these forms as "material forms" ceasing to be when the composite corrupts or, in our case, the person dies.

What Pegis emphasizes is Aquinas' originality in proposing that the human soul is a subsistent form conferring the act of existing on the body which it informs. God created the soul, the lowest of the Intelligences, needing sensation in order to fulfill its nature as a knower, as the life-giving soul of the human body.

⁶ *The Wisdom of Catholicism*, ed. A. Pegis, (New York, New York: Random House, 1949).

⁷ *In Honor of Anton Charles Pegis*, ed. J. Reginald O'Donnell, C.S.B. (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974).

⁸ Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Problems of the Soul in the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1934).

In his thesis, Pegis used the early writings of St. Thomas, *The Scriptum Super Sententiae*, the commentary on Peter Lombard's sentences, but more especially he used Book II of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, especially chapter 68: "How an Intellectual Substance can be the Form of the Body." As Aquinas says: "From the preceding arguments, then, we can conclude that an intellectual substance can be united to the body as its form."⁹ Then, reviewing alternative theories which he rejects, St. Thomas says:

It remains that the human soul is an intellectual substance united to the body as its form. This conclusion can be made evident as follows. The second requirement then follows from this, namely, that the form and the matter be joined together in the unity of one act of being ... the fact that an intellectual substance is subsistent does not stand in the way of its being the formal principle of the being of the matter, as communicating its own being to the matter. For it is not unfitting that the composite and its form should subsist in the same act of being, since the composite exists only by the form, and neither of them subsists apart from the other.¹⁰

St. Thomas returns to this theme later in his career when he comes to the *Disputed Questions on the Soul*, article one. Here he takes up the same question essentially when he asks: "Whether the Soul can be a Form and a Particular Thing?" The phrase "particular thing" is the translation of the Latin *hoc aliquid*, and as Aquinas says at the beginning of his response, "A particular thing' properly speaking designates an individual in the genus of substance." Thus he is asking again whether or not the human soul can be the form of the body, and also be a subsistent being, a being having its own act of existing (*esse*) which it confers on the body when it informs the body:

⁹ "How an Intellectual Substance Can Be the Form of the Body," *Summa Contra Gentiles*, also known as *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, translation by James F. Anderson (Hanover House, Garden City, New York, 1956), Book Two, p. 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 204.

... it is obvious that the soul is a reality which gives life to the body. Moreover, vital activity (*vivere*) is the act of existing of the living things.¹¹

Consequently the soul is that which gives the human body its act of existing. Now a form is of this nature. Therefore the soul is the form of the body.¹²

Later Aquinas adds:

For inasmuch as the human soul has an operation transcending the material order, its act of existing transcends the body and does not depend on the body ... consequently, if the human soul, ... has an act of existing which transcends the body and does not depend on it, obviously the soul is established on the boundary line dividing corporeal from separate substances.¹³

Here, Aquinas is breaking the new ground that Pegis extols as unique to the thirteenth-century discussion. He is affirming man is the lowest of the intellectual beings, a separate substance, an intelligence that requires a body in order to understand its proper object: the essences or natures of material things. This is the theme Pegis returns to in a series of articles and papers he authored throughout his teaching career.

After he became President and a professor at the Institute, he contributed an article, "Man as Nature and Spirit," to the Italian Dominican periodical *Doctor Communis* in which he put the Thomistic position as always in a historical context. He opened with this remark: "Three related Aristotelian doctrines have conspired to make the Thomistic notion of man the baffling novelty that it was in the 13th century and that it still is, seemingly in the 20th."¹⁴ The three doctrines to which Pegis is referring are: that the rational soul must be the sole and unique substantial form, if man is to be one being; secondly, that

¹¹ *The Soul*, A translation of St. Thomas Aquinas *De Anima* by John Patrick Rowan (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Company, 1949), p. 9.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Pegis, "Man as Nature and Spirit," *Doctor Communis* Vol. IV (1951): 52.

substantial forms are the cause of the being of the individual man (against the Platonic teaching that man is a system of participations in the hierarchy of forms); and thirdly that man's nature is part of an economy of operation and dynamic finality. But while this is Aristotle, the problem is how can the Christian view of man fit into the rest of Aristotle's system where the world is an eternal self-existing world and the best that man can hope for is a momentary fulfillment of his nature through the contemplation of the highest things? (*Ethics*, X, 7) or, as Pegis says: "How, then, can St. Thomas bottle the Augustinian man in an Aristotelian nature? How, more explicitly, can he say with Aristotle that man is endowed with a nature possessing a proportional causality and end, and with St. Augustine that man is a mind made in the divine image and for a divine destiny."¹⁵

This combination of St. Augustine and Aristotle is the insight that Pegis returns to in his historical analysis of Thomistic theory of the human person. The special quality of Aquinas' answer to the problem of explaining human immortality and maintaining the unity of the human person as a hylomorphic composite is the achievement of Aquinas that Pegis is seeking to recognize and communicate, believing this aspect of Thomism has not been appreciated in our time.

With St. Thomas following Aristotle, we can see what man is in his nature; with St. Thomas following St. Augustine we can see what he is in his history. With St. Thomas, the common disciple of both Aristotle and St. Augustine, we may say that man is an incarnate spirit not in order to lose himself in the world of matter, but in order to become by means of matter wholly mind and spirit He is incarnate spirit, an intellectual creature whose sight is abstractive and via sensibility and whose intellectual life is a journey through the world of sensible things.¹⁶

Pegis prefers to use the expression "incarnate spirit" and not "angel" since the human intelligence needs the body with its sense powers to know the material things of this world; whereas the knowledge of an angel is innate, intuitive and independent of things, as

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

Maritain brought out so well in his essay on Descartes in *Three Reformers*.¹⁷

In 1955, Pegis contributed an essay, "St. Thomas and the Unity of Man," to a collection of papers organized to honor the Reverend Charles A. Hart, professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of America, who had served for a long time as the secretary of the American Catholic Philosophical Association. In his opening paragraph wherein he says his topic will be St. Thomas' doctrine of the unity of man, he adds:

... In its intention, this Thomistic doctrine is disarmingly simple and straightforward; so much so, that it is a puzzle to understand why the doctrine found so little acceptance in St. Thomas' own day and since that day. What is even more puzzling, the Thomistic doctrine on the unity of man, which its author presents as Aristotelian, is unknown within the history of Aristotelianism before St. Thomas. To complicate matters still further, the Thomistic doctrine on the unity of man's nature is intended by its author to be an answer to a classic Aristotelian dilemma voiced in the twelfth century by the great Averroes.¹⁸

Thus Pegis has set the scene for the thrust of his essay, which is devoted largely to an examination of Averroes' understanding of Aristotle's *De Anima*. Without trying to give a précis of the paper, let us just recall that Averroes understood Aristotle's *De Anima*, III, 5 as involving one separate intelligence whereby all humans understand. St. Thomas counters by affirming each person has an intellectual soul which has its own act of existing and which it confers on the composite. As Pegis says:

... The soul is, therefore not a substance and a form, but a substance as a form, a substance whose spiritual nature is essentially suited to informing matter. And it is in the soul that

¹⁷ Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1932), p. 57.

¹⁸ Pegis, "St. Thomas and the Unity of Man," in *Progress in Philosophy, Philosophical Studies in Honor of Rev. Doctor Charles A. Hart* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1955), p. 153.

the reason for this union is to be found; whatever the human body is, this it is for the sake of, and in view of, the human soul. It is in the soul, therefore, that we must find St. Thomas' answer to our question.¹⁹

Here, Pegis goes on to review St. Thomas' position that the soul is a spirit, the lowest of the intellectual substances, and this spirit is an intelligence which needs a body in order to carry out its purpose as a knower of sensible things. This is an understanding of man of which Averroes, and even Aristotle, never dreamed. Pegis adds:

... Extraordinary as this Thomistic notion of man is in itself and in the history of Aristotelianism, what is more extraordinary is its nearness to St. Augustine.... Seen in the perspective of St. Augustine's doctrine, the Thomistic notion of man is not so astonishing as it might seem. Man is an intellect, an incarnate intellect, and this by nature. He is an intellect needing a long existence-- the 'longer way'-- in the world of matter in order to complete his intellectual nature.²⁰

In response to his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1952, Pegis presented a paper entitled "Some Permanent Contributions of Medieval Philosophy to the Notion of Man." Against the background of crisis posed to the Augustinian tradition confronted with the introduction of Aristotle's writings in the early 13th century, Pegis returned to this theme of Aquinas integrating the Augustinian man as a mind with the Aristotelian man as a composite of soul and body.

St. Thomas' acceptance of the Aristotelian definition of the human soul as part of the human composite did not involve an abandonment of the Augustinian notion of man as a soul using a body. On the contrary, St. Thomas undertook to show that the Aristotelian metaphysical psychology explained what man is, whereas the religious psychology of St. Augustine explained what man should become. Furthermore, these two notions so

¹⁹ Ibid., p.168.

²⁰ Ibid., p.172.

compliment one another that we begin to see in all its fullness the mystery of man's reality and life.²¹

Later, Pegis reiterates the essence of the Thomistic position when he says:

What is man? If it be true that he is a composite with a spiritual existence, then the only way to put our finger on his oneness in nature is to say he is an incarnate spirit because by nature the soul needs the completion, the growth, and the development which incarnation can give.²²

Later, Pegis continues: "The Thomistic man is an Aristotelian composite aiming to become an Augustinian mind; but in this becoming he aims not to divest himself of temporality, but by spiritualizing what is temporal in flesh and mortality, to save and eternalize time itself."²³

On the occasion of Gilson's seventy-fifth birthday (1959), a number of his North American students presented him with a tribute in gratitude for what he had given them as their teacher. The volume contains an essay by Pegis entitled: "Some Reflections on *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 56."²⁴ The title of the article is "In What Way an Intellectual Substance can be united to the Body?" As Pegis proceeds in his essay, he seems to be little concerned with a step-by-step analysis or exposition of what Aquinas answered. In fact, Aquinas presents and rejects a number of ways others have tried to give an answer, reserving his own answer to *SCG II*, 68 "How an Intellectual Substance can be the Form of the Body," the article which Pegis has repeatedly shown to be one of the crucial statements of Aquinas' theory of man.

²¹ Pegis, "Some Permanent Contributions of Medical Philosophy to The Notion of Man," translation of the Royal Society of Canada. Vol. XLVI, Series III (June, 1952), p. 71.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁴ *An Étienne Gilson Tribute, Presented by his North American Students with a Response by Étienne Gilson*, edited by Charles J. O'Neil (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1959), p.169.

What does Pegis do in his tribute to Gilson? While his article relates to his exposition of the Thomistic theory, this time he approaches it from a different direction. He is concerned to show how Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroes were attempting to grapple with the problems of the immateriality of the intellect and the unity of man. Again, this is not a reproduction of the content of the paper but an indication of how Pegis returned to this topic in what is for him a subject of central interest. In the course of this historical exposition it should be noted that Pegis brings in the contribution of Siger of Brabant and also the great sixteenth century Aristotelian, Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) who knew his St. Thomas but could not get over the fact that, on immortality, Aquinas was not as Aristotelian as he Pomponazzi, was. Pegis would, in a sense agree; the Aristotelian man of St. Thomas was hardly someone Aristotle would recognize.

... St Thomas, having created the philosophical notions that express with perfect adequacy the reality of the human person clothed these notions in the language of Aristotle. The result, being a true creation in its own order, was as new to Christian ears as it was unknown to the Aristotelians.²⁵

In 1962, Pegis was invited to Villanova University to give their annual St. Augustine lecture; this University, of course, was founded by members of the Order of St. Augustine and the purpose of the lecture series has been to keep alive the Augustinian tradition. It was a most appropriate invitation for Pegis, since it provided him with still another occasion to present his understanding of the Thomistic man as an incarnate spirit. Using as his title "At the Origins of the Thomistic Notion of Man," he once again reviewed the historical context of the crisis of the 13th century when the newly recovered writings of Aristotle challenged the Platonic view of man as developed by St. Augustine and those in the Augustinian tradition.

Here, again, Pegis brings out how St. Thomas used the hylomorphic theory of Aristotle to explain natural substance. "I refer to his unvarying teaching that the human's soul is joined to the body as substantial form to matter constituting a unitary being, with an essence

²⁵ Ibid., p.187.

that is as one in its integrity as the being whose essence it is one in its substantiality."²⁶ Then, having acknowledged Aquinas' debt to Aristotle's hylomorphic theory, Pegis proceeded to show how St. Thomas is still part of the Augustinian tradition by confirming man is a soul bringing its act of existing to be the act of existing of the composite.

... And this means that the soul is destined to be part of man, it also means that in the unity and concreteness of his being man is no more than the soul in the fullness of its nature—an incarnated spirit, whose unity is that he is wholly spirit but spirit involved in a discursive intellectual life on the horizon of matter, in rational motion within matter, and in a progressive approach to intellectual formation and spiritual unification.²⁷

Again, Pegis has stressed that using the language and principles of Aristotle, St. Thomas created a theory of man Aristotle would not recognize— a spiritual substance that is a substantial form of the body it makes to be human and to be alive and which needs its body to know and to choose along with its passions. But he is a being with a spiritual destiny transcending this life.

If St. Thomas made man a genuine composite it was not to bury the soul in the body, it was to express with deep loyalty and fuller adequacy, a notion dear to St. Augustine: the incarnate soul was a peculiar spirit that somehow needed to live in the world of matter and time in order to grow into its destiny.... To fill the Aristotelian bottle of matter and form with the life of the Augustinian wayfarer was certainly to create a new reality, the notions of man as an incarnated intelligence. This is a Thomistic creation which has no predecessor but which expresses in the language of metaphysics what St. Augustine has expressed in the language of history St. Augustine and St. Thomas are united at

²⁶ Pegis, *At The Origins of the Thomistic Notion of Man* (New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p.22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

this moment, and the Thomistic doctrine of man was born in this unity.²⁸

In 1967, a couple of years after Vatican II, St. Michael's College celebrated the centenary of the British North America Act, which brought Canada as we know today into existence, by holding an international conference of theologians and philosophers on the *Theology of Renewal*. The speakers ranged from some of the stars of Vatican II, such as Karl Rahner, M.D. Chenu, and Yves Congar to noted philosophers such as Gilson and Pegis. Pegis chose as the title of his talk "*The Notion of Man in the Context of Renewal*."²⁹

In his remarks, Pegis returned to what he has said before about how original Aquinas was to analyze man as a subsistent soul which was the substantial form of the body. Then, commenting on the problem this innovation presented to Aristotelianism, Pegis said: "His defense is as well known as it is astonishing. Giving to Aristotle the benefit of his own metaphysics, St. Thomas created that most remarkable of philosophers, the Christian Aristotle, and unless you read him carefully you can easily conclude from him that Aristotle held the doctrine of an individual immortal soul informing the human body and constituting man himself by their unity. The Thomistic Aristotle evidently held such a doctrine, and it is also a fact that the doctrine exactly suited the nature of the Christian man as a being composed of an incorruptible soul and an organic body."³⁰

Of course, Pegis continued stressing that the soul received an act of existence which it shared with the body; this act of existing the soul received from God at its creation. Pegis notes it can be argued that Aquinas' creation did not represent the Aristotle of history, but, at a particular time in history, St. Thomas gave his answer to a theological and philosophical problem involving personal immortality and the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁹ Pegis, "The Notion of Man in the Contest of Renewal," in *Renewal of Religious Thought*, Proceedings of the Congress on the Theology of Renewal of the Church Centenary of Canada, 1867-1967, edited by Laurence K. Shook, C.S.B. (Montreal, Canada: Palm Publishers, 1968).

³⁰ Ibid., pp.253-54.

unity of man (incidentally a problem Descartes was to face in the 17th century but failed to answer satisfactorily).³¹

At Cincinnati in 1975, Pegis was awarded the Aquinas Medal of the American Catholic Philosophical Association; he had been the president of the Association in 1946 and a leading participant in many of its meetings. In his response to the award, Pegis took the opportunity to reflect on his almost 50 years of studying St. Thomas and the status of Thomism at that time. He began by acknowledging some of his great friends and teachers. Amongst the former were Gerard Smith, S.J., of Marquette and Henry Veatch of Georgetown; among the latter were Fr. John F. McCormick, S.J., and Étienne Gilson. It was in Fr. McCormick's class in 1927 that he first encountered the writings of St. Thomas and it was at Toronto's Institute in 1929 that he met Gilson, who was to be the greatest living influence on his intellectual life.

There was a hint of sadness in his remarks as he recognized that the evaluation of Gilson had changed in recent years; Gilson had been hailed for his great scholarship as a historian of philosophy, but, after he came to identify himself as a Thomist and to insist that St. Thomas was first and last a theologian, and to be critical of those who were cutting and pasting pieces of his writings to create a Thomistic philosophy, his popularity suffered. With respect to the suggestion that Thomists should catch up with Heidegger, Pegis said: "...he rather thinks that Heidegger—or at least the Heideggerians—should catch up with the metaphysics of St. Thomas."³²

Pegis noted a falling off of enthusiasm for Aquinas even amongst his own graduate students, who, while appreciating St. Thomas, left the impression they should be working with contemporaries such as Husserl, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. He said he appreciated their concern but warned against attempts that have been made to

³¹ Cf. Colin F. Fowler, O.P., *Descartes on the Human Soul, Philosophy and the Demands of the Christian Doctrines* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

³² Pegis, "Medalist Address," *Philosophy and Civil Law. Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*. Vol. XLIX, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1975), pp. 228-237, p. 230.

“modernize” Aquinas as had been attempted before World War II in epistemology with Cartesian and Kantian forms of Thomistic epistemology. He granted that in recent years he, himself, had used Husserl along with Aquinas in the study of intentionality. He argued that if St. Thomas could not hold his own, it would be a dead Thomism. However, he concluded by affirming that the metaphysics of Aquinas was not dated, and indeed, was very much alive.

I find him living and ready to teach one how to think about philosophical problems. He is not here to do my thinking for me and, in this sense, I must do it for myself—I must risk my own life in the world of philosophy. At this moment, sensible as I am of the present occasion, I should like to say that St. Thomas has made my intellectual life a precious adventure. This is all the more reason for me to thank the Association for the generous gift.³³

And so one concludes that for Anton C. Pegis the Thomistic understanding of man as an “incarnate spirit” is a truth that transcends time.

³³ Ibid., p.237.