

DANTE AND AQUINAS

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The great difference between Dante and those he meets in the Comedy is that he has a body. For poetic purposes, the souls he meets have to be visible and audible, in some way accessible to sense, or Dante could not be aware of them, let alone describe them to us. Virgil and Dante make the journey together, but only Dante makes footprints. Virgil's body is not like his. Only Dante casts a shadow, Virgil does not. These are souls; he is soul and body. The slain and buried Christ rises from his grave in the course of the poem, but resurrection, the recovery of their bodies, is still far off for the souls of the departed. In their present condition, they are not wholly their selves. That they can only be when once more they are soul and body.

Soul

1. Philosophy and the Soul

For us, the term "soul" will have immediate religious connotations: the soul is that the loss of which could not be compensated for by gaining the whole world. More specifically, Christ died to save our souls from sin. One adept in pagan, that is, pre-Christian philosophy, would find this odd and yet not so odd.

a. Plato

When Plato describes philosophizing as learning how to die he is not just striving for dramatic effect. Our lives should be a slow weaning from the things of this world insofar as these distract us from the really real. The material things around us come and go, they are evanescent, here today and gone tomorrow. But isn't that true of us as well? What reason could we have for thinking that death is not the end for us? Whence comes Socrates'

confidence when he is facing execution that death will free him for a better existence?

Seeing, hearing, tasting—the senses make us aware of things, but always of the singular, this color, that sound, this taste. They bear on singulars. Well, what else is there? Animals too see, hear, taste, and the like, but we are the animal that thinks. It is human thinking and its implications that provides the philosopher with his arguments on behalf of the immortality of the soul. We are also the animal that talks, and talk about thinking is always going to involve talk about talk, because talk is the expression of thinking.

There are proper names and there are common nouns... proper names direct our attention to this or that, what we can see or hear... But we don't have proper names for very many things. The things that have proper names seem to be either other humans or their pets. We have to add "this" or "that" to common names in order to tie them down to particular things. What do common nouns mean when they aren't tied down in this way?

We need an example. Take the oriole. You're not from Baltimore, but you are fascinated by orioles. There is an entry in your diary commemorating the first time you saw this glorious bird. You grow older, your fascination undiminished, and when you get to Notre Dame you have decided to major in birdology, but in your heart of hearts it is the oriole that has won you. You grow dumber by degrees and eventually end up on the faculty. It is better than working. And your passion remains the oriole. You have cages full of them in your lab, you have a few at home. You begin to write about the oriole. Eventually you write the definitive treatise on orioles. Your friends call you Mr. Oriole, Brooks Robinson, move over. The years pass, your hair thins and whitens, you have hearing aids you refuse to wear, you continue your research. The fifteenth edition of your masterpiece on the oriole—simply titled *The Oriole*—has appeared. A sticky-fingered grand daughter approaches your barcalounger. She is curious about your life's work, you are delighted, a conversation ensues. You tell her in dreamy tones of your studies, of all the orioles you have known. "Which one did you write about?" You chuckle. Well, the little darling is doubtless influenced by genes on the other side of the family. But you are patient. You explain to her that you have written about the oriole, not this one or that, but the species. Now, little Hortense has read *The Name of the Rose*. She prompts from you the admission that the first oriole you saw, and generations since have come and gone. With luck, there are many more orioles to come. How can what you have written apply to things that are no more or are not yet? Does your book apply only to the orioles now fluttering about in the world? A

Platonic mood comes over you, and you explain that these are but instances of the kind or species, and it is the species that you wrote of. And where is that? *Platonice loquendo*, “oriole” is a common noun that is tied down to this bird or that only by adding “this” or “that” to it. Without these demonstrative pronouns it is the proper name of an ideal entity that neither comes nor goes, is hatched or dies: unlike particular orioles it is really real, that is, changeless.

You wax enthusiastic. How did you know that the first oriole you saw was an oriole? Particular orioles cannot be the meaning of “oriole,” that meaning is not gathered from your experience of particular birds; it precedes it and enabled you to recognize them as instances of oriole. They come and go and do not affect or change that meaning. Your voice has become a murmur. “They remind us of what we already know; they enable us to remember the ideal entity.” Hortense leaves the room.

Something like this moved Plato to see learning as remembering. And, when the question as to life beyond death arises, he tends to speak of the soul’s existence prior to being incarcerated in the body where mind is clouded and forgets what it knew before. Learning is remembering. Philosophizing is learning how to die because it brings us remembrance of the Ideas with which our soul was acquainted in its pre-natal existence. In short, a proof for the immortality of the soul follows from the recognition that our intellectual knowledge bears on universals, and universals are taken to be warrants for saying that there exist immaterial and changeless things, Ideas.

b. Aristotle

Aristotle rejects this: universals are our means for knowing sensible particulars. “Oriole” doesn’t name something other than particulars, it names particulars in its own way, without mention of their singular features and peculiarities. But this is simply our way of knowing sensible particulars; it is no basis for saying that their natures—for what else does “oriole” express?—exists elsewhere.

For all that, thinking is the key to Aristotle’s own argument on behalf of the immortality of the soul. The human soul. Since there are souls other than human souls, Aristotle will locate the human soul among the others. “Soul” does not as such pick out something peculiar to humans.

So what is soul? We have seen earlier that soul is the substantial form of a physically organized body having life in potency. That is, it is that by which we first of all live, sense, move, desire and understand. These definitions are found in Book Two of *On the Soul*. Thomas Aquinas’s comments on the

passage are found in Selection 17.

The use of the term “form” alerts us to the fact that Aristotle is tying this consideration to what he has already said about change. Anything that results from a change is composed of matter and form. You and I know what that means, and what led him to say it. That initial analysis did not take into account the difference among physical things between those which are living and those which are not. When Aristotle takes up the question of living things, he has those previous analyses to rely upon.

When he asks what sight is, or hearing, or taste, he will rephrase the questions: what is going on when we come to see fuschia? That is, he will analyze sensation as a kind of becoming and invoke what he has already learned about becoming. Sight involves a capacity or potency that is realized when the activity or act of seeing occurs. From not seeing fuschia, we come to see fuschia. When you dye your tee-shirt fuschia, it becomes fuschia, a new countable instance of this color. But when you come to see fuschia, the result is not like that; the inventory of instances of fuschia in the world does not increase when you see that color. Now the new color of your tee-shirt can be called a form, for reasons that we have seen. Dyeing gives a new form to your tee shirt; before it was non-fuschia, now it is fuschia. So Aristotle suggests that, on an analogy with that, we speak of seeing as acquiring the form, but in a way different from the way a surface does.

This is heightened in the case of intellect or mind or understanding. . . . Surely Plato was right in noticing that our intellectual knowledge of orioles involves grasping their form in a universal way that drops out or abstracts from the singular characteristics of this oriole or that. It is his further claim that this proves the existence of an ideal or immaterial oriole that Aristotle balked at. The immateriality or universality of the form is something that happens to it because of our abstractive way of knowing. And this suggests to Aristotle a proof for the incorruptibility or immortality of such a soul as ours. A soul that has a capacity for an activity that is immaterial must itself be immaterial; but matter is the source of corruptibility; the soul is incorruptible. That in telegraphic form is Aristotle’s proof.

Plato tended to think of the soul as what we are, the body a mere prison from which we long to escape. For Aristotle, the conjunction of soul and body results in something one, not a group. The soul is to body as the impression is to the wax. How could the impression exist apart? Given that, Aristotle’s proof that the human soul is incorruptible is a solution that opens onto a great puzzle.

If the human soul survives death, it would seem to be in the strange condition of a form without its matter. . . there is enough Platonist in us to

think that wouldn't be so bad. The trouble is, if a human being or person is an embodied soul, soul and body, one thing, the soul after death is not a person, not a human being in the full sense. Thus, when Aristotle asks about the happiness of the departed and whether they are affected by what is going on on earth, particularly in their family, he finally has very little to say. The separated soul, the soul after death, is an opaque subject. This is odd, because if Aristotle's proof works, it is in the order of things that disembodied souls should exist. But Aristotle wisely refrains from saying anything much about them. On what basis would he speak of them?

The prospects are not good. Our thinking, while it may be an activity that does not intrinsically involve the bodily, is nonetheless derived from our sense experience. Our concepts are formed against the backdrop of sense images. With the loss of the body go the senses, memory too. How can the separated human soul think? How could it remember if it has no memory?

2. Resurrection

"If Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain." St. Paul means that Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of ours. Without the soul's reunion with the body, the future for the Christian would be a bewildering thing. But with faith in the resurrection, with the recovery of body, the human being is reconstituted in his integrity: he is a person.

In part this means that, if death were the absolute end, life would be meaningless. Nonetheless, faith does not simply bear on the fact that some part of us, albeit the principal part, will continue to exist, but that we will. And we are a substantial unity of body and soul. It is the resurrection that promises that we, not just our soul, will enjoy eternal bliss. We can see here how silly it is to say that Thomas baptized Aristotle; if that is what he was up to doubtless he would have looked for some clue to resurrection in Aristotle. He doesn't because the resurrection of the body is a mystery of faith, a truth to which we give our assent because it has been revealed and which otherwise would be unknown to us.

When Thomas discusses the state of the soul after death and prior to the resurrection, he is always guided accordingly by what Scripture says or suggests on the matter. As a theologian, he is not interested in just telling a story, as Plato did when he spoke of the separated soul. Scripture provides the clues that Thomas seeks to read, on the assumption that whatever has been revealed is important and useful for us to know.

In the Summa, Ia, q. 89, Thomas asks about the knowledge separated souls can have. There are eight articles. [Titles link to translated text.]

1. Can the separated soul understand anything?
2. Can the separated soul understand separate (immaterial) substances?
3. Does the separated soul understand all natural things?
4. Does the separated soul know particulars?
5. Does the habit of science acquired here below remain in the separated soul?
6. Does the use (act) of science remain?
7. Does distance impede the separated soul's knowledge?
8. Do separated souls know what is going on here?

In the first article, Thomas argues that, since understanding is an immaterial act that does not involve body, separated souls should still have that.

The problem is that mind understands with reference to sense images. Thomas's argument is complicated and proceeds through various stages, arriving at resolutions which then pose new problems. Suffice it to say that the upshot is this: God infuses knowledge in the separated soul somewhat as he does into the intellects of angels. But the resultant knowledge is a confused and general one.

Since the intellect can know itself and it is a separated entity in this condition, it can also in a certain way know others, i.e. angels. [He makes it clear that he is not speaking of the knowledge of glory, that is the ultimate bliss.] But what about natural things, material things? The separated soul can understand singulars thanks to an infusion of them by God. [Notice the Scriptural basis in the *Sed contra*.]

Let us skip along to the final article. At first, the solution is disappointing to those with departed loved ones. Naturally speaking, the separated souls don't know what's going on below. But souls in heaven and prior to their resurrection know all things in knowing God.

Dante knows what Thomas knows, and thus finesses as a poet must the fact that separated souls cannot be seen or heard. He also finesses the question of what such souls can know of earthly happenings, although the question is settled differently in the different realms. In the Paradiso, the vision of God is the means of knowing whatever is known.

Let's take a look at Paradiso XIV.

Having listened to Thomas Aquinas in the Circle of the Sun, Dante and Beatrice meet Solomon and this wise man continues to be present to them as they move into Canto 14 where he will speak to them. Beatrice asks Solomon to explain to Dante his radiance before and after the Last Judgment "when you're restored to sight again."

Light is the dominant note of the Paradiso emanating from God to the blessed souls. Beatrice's question prompts a joyous dance of praise to the Trinity and when it subsides, Solomon speaks.

The radiance of the souls varies with the amount of grace they have received.

And when we put completeness on afresh
All the more gracious shall our person be
Reclothed in the holy and glorious flesh.

Reunited with the body, the soul's radiance and joy will be complete as the soul communicates the effects of grace to the glorified body. Then they will become visible to one another, mothers, sons, all they loved.

As the radiance and joy of the blessed will increase with reunion to their bodies, so the woe of hell to those souls there. (Inferno, vi, 103-8)

The glorious body has distinctive characteristics, as we can glean from those passages in which Christ, after his resurrection, appears to the apostles. He eats with them, but he passes through closed doors... See *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, 85-90.

From the point of view of natural philosophy, a body is as such corruptible, because it has in itself the principle of its ceasing to be; that is, its matter, actuated by its form, remains in potency to be actuated by other forms. It is this that is absent from the glorified body; the corruptible will take on incorruptibility (1 Cor 15.53).

Etc.