

Response to William Hasker's "The Dialectic of Soul and Body"

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I.

William Hasker's discussion of the Thomistic doctrine of the soul does not engage directly with Aquinas's writings but draws upon two recent sources: first, an exposition of Thomas's position provided by Eleonore Stump;¹ and second, the presentation of a view by J. P. Moreland (and S. B. Rae), which he reports Moreland describing as "Thomistic substance dualism."² While I am not concerned to engage in detailed exegesis or defence of Thomas's writings, I do wish to address an issue that Hasker raises as problematic for Thomas's own position and for any other that would maintain his broad account of the role of the rational soul in determining the form of human life. In his discussion of Aquinas's account Hasker presents three objections:

(1) this Thomistic view fails to convincingly integrate human beings with the rest of nature; (2) the work actually done by the human soul, following Aquinas's theory, is surprisingly limited; and (3) the case for including such souls in our system, as opposed to thinking of human beings as composed of matter and nothing else, is quite weak.

Having elaborated on these points, he then considers Moreland's view, which he believes "is arguably more coherent internally than the original Thomistic version" and "clearly overcomes all three of the objections urged against it." This modern account, however, he takes to be subject to two other objections: first, that it is committed to vitalism; and second, that it cannot be reconciled with any plausible version of evolutionary theory. Finally, he presents his own preferred

¹Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²J. P. Moreland and S. B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

alternative: “The human soul, we shall say, is *emergent* from the living, functioning, human body, in particular from the human brain and nervous system.”

I shall not discuss Moreland’s view *per se*, but Hasker’s characterization of it suggests something that may be closer to the spirit of Aquinas’s position than Hasker seems to appreciate. The best way of showing this is by responding directly to his criticisms of the historical Thomist theory of which he writes that it “already postulates a pretty wide gap between human beings and the rest of animate creation.”

II.

The central idea is that for Aquinas the human soul is quite unlike the souls of non-rational animals and hence there is no significant biological overlap, but this is at odds with what we know about human and animal life and development. Put another way, if the development of human fetuses prior to the acquisition of rational capacities is due, as St. Thomas seems to say, to the presence of a non-rational formative principle (the sensitive soul) of the same kind as that responsible for non-rational development in other animals, then the role of the rational soul in forming human life is developmentally late and causally limited.

These objections are related to a still widespread interpretation of the Thomistic account of conception and embryological formation which fails to distinguish between the empirical and abstract metaphysical aspects of Aquinas’s view.³ Following Aristotle’s *De Generatione Animalium*, Aquinas held that in sexual reproduction the male contributes a formative power (*virtus formativa*) while the female provides inanimate matter for this to work on, thereby producing first vegetative then sensitive life, at which point the product is apt for the reception of an infused rational soul. Evidently Aquinas was wrong about the empirical facts; but his metaphysics of nature can be reapplied to what we now know of them. He writes:

It belongs to the natural order that a thing is gradually brought from potency to act; and therefore in those things which are generated we find at first each is imperfect and afterwards is perfected.⁴

We know that male and female gametes are fused at conception, producing a new entity that begins a process of self-development. The regularity of

³For detailed discussion of these issues, see John Haldane and Patrick Lee, “Aquinas on Human Ensoulment,” *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 255–78; Robert Pasnau, “Souls and the Beginning of Life,” *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 521–31; and John Haldane and Patrick Lee, “Rational Souls and the Beginning of Life,” *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 532–40.

⁴*Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 119, a.2.

this occurrence and its trajectory are not passive effects of an external agent but due to an immanent cause: the embryo itself, and more specifically its DNA genes whose sequence guides the organism's development *in utero* and thereafter throughout its life. However, since in the case of a human being that life involves *intellect* (conception, judgement, and reasoning), and since it is argued that intellect is not a material activity, it must be concluded that an intellectual principle is present. Aquinas argues that matter must be aptly disposed for the reception of this rational form, and given his false embryological beliefs, that could not be until quite far along in embryological development. Disposing of those beliefs, however, what remains is the metaphysical requirement of material organization sufficient for the development of organs required to sustain the activities proper to human mental life; and that organization is present from conception, long before the organs themselves develop. In short, the rational soul can be infused at conception.

Moreover, Aquinas is explicit in rejecting the view of some of his contemporaries that there are three "souls" in human beings corresponding to *vegetative*, *sensitive*, and *rational* functions, and he insists that where higher principles are present they subsume the operations of lower ones. He writes:

a man's soul, which is rational, sentient, and vegetal, is substantially one only. This is a consequence of the argument concerning the order of substantial forms, namely, that no substantial form is united to matter through the medium of another, but that a more perfect form gives to matter whatever an inferior form does, and something over and above. Hence the rational soul gives to the human body everything that the sentient soul gives to the brute and the vegetative soul gives to the plant, and something over and above. For this reason the soul in man is both vegetal, sentient, and rational.⁵

One implication of this is that the presence of the rational soul directs organic and functional development in ways that eventually manifest themselves differently in rational and non-rational animals. We know that in human beings biological functions are subject to intellectual direction, as when we choose what and when to eat and drink in accord with a diet, or engage in or abstain from sexual activity in accord with moral or other values, or direct sight and vocalization towards reading and dialectic. Since the rational teleology of these functions is continuous with earlier stages of development of one and the same

⁵*Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima* a. 11, respondeo; trans. J. P. Rowan as *The Soul* (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1949), 144. For discussion of the general context, see John Haldane, "Soul and Body in Medieval Philosophy," in *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. R. Pasnau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 293–304.

animal we have reason to suppose not only that the rational soul can be present from conception but that it is so.

III.

This conclusion addresses the first and second of Hasker's objections to the Thomistic account. The human soul shares with animal souls certain functions, and at the earliest stages of development the exercise and effects of these are alike, so the 'work' of the soul is not only at the exclusively intellectual level, but at the same time it progressively directs these functions to ends proper to the distinctively rational form of human life. It also indicates how Aquinas's (corrected) account is like Moreland's (in Hasker's account of it) in maintaining that the infusion of the human soul occurs at conception and is involved in the development and functioning of biological organs. Where it differs is in maintaining that immaterial subsistent souls are not common to all animals but only to rational ones: human beings (and any other rational species, if there are such). So in one respect Aquinas's account lies between those of Moreland and Hasker: rejecting the former's claim that immaterial souls are required for all animal formation, and Hasker's that they are not required for any (since for him the human rational soul is an *effect* not a *cause* of development).

Hasker's last objection to the traditional Thomistic account is that its case for the existent of a subsistent immaterial soul is weak because it rests only on the argument from conceptuality to the effect that there is no organ of intellectual thought, and that this is (a) implausible given what we know about the brain, and (b) neglectful of other arguments for the immateriality of mind: from consciousness, intentionality, teleology, the desire for truth, and the unity-of-consciousness.

Since I previously discussed the Thomistic argument against thought being a material activity and expressed skepticism about arguments from phenomenal consciousness, let me now just point to the fact that the arguments from intentionality, teleology, and truth, far from being additional, can be seen as presupposing the Thomist rational soul, for *it* is the cause of the formation and exercise of concepts which are integral to hyper-intensionality, to truth-aptness, and to abductive, deductive, and inductive reasoning.⁶ As regards 'the unity of consciousness' it depends what this means, but if it extends, as it should, to the unity of judgements, then we may derive it transcendently as a condition of the possibility of, for example, practical reasoning, and further conclude from

⁶For argumentation from hyper-intensionality to immateriality and to the existence of a "Prime Thinker" (*et hoc dicimus deum*), see John Haldane, "Atheism and Theism" and "Further Reflections," in J. J. C. Smart and J. J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 76–150 and 221–50.

the immateriality of conceptually-informed reasoning that the subject which provides such unity must itself be immaterial.

IV.

Finally, what of vitalism, biological evolution, and emergence? Hasker is troubled by what he reads as Moreland's tendency to postulate an entity in living things additional to their matter. Whatever about Moreland's views the Thomist (traditional and/or "analytical") will caution against ambiguity in the term 'entity' and against the tendency to reification. To say, for example, that the presence of a bird is a final cause of a cat's leaping is not to posit an entity either in birds or in cats but to describe a certain relationship. Similarly, to say that certain dispositions of matter are for-the-sake-of moving blood, and that for-the-sake-of oxidation, and that . . . for-the-sake-of the flourishing of the animal is to recognize the presence and operation of life, not as determined by but as determining matter.

Hasker worries that recognizing an immaterial cause as formative in human development and activity is incompatible with evolutionary theory, and favours instead the idea that material causation is sufficient for the emergence of an immaterial substantial mind. Regarding the latter I would say that, on the contrary, no material cause can be sufficient for an immaterial effect; and with respect to evolutionary theory I think that the existence of immaterial minds, on which we are agreed, gives reason to doubt the assumption that mind can be a product of natural evolution alone. Here there are allies even among those who repudiate the supernatural:⁷ the descent of man from matter is by no means the only viable option in the dialectic of soul and body.

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⁷See Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and for discussion see John Haldane, "Realism, Mind and Evolution," *Philosophical Investigations* 36.2 (2013): 97–113.