

Is the Soul the Form of the Body?

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Abstract. The idea of the soul, though once common in discussions of human nature, is rarely considered in contemporary philosophy. This reflects a general physicalist turn; but besides commitment to various forms of materialism there is the objection that the very idea of the soul is incoherent. The notion of soul considered here is a broadly Aristotelian-Thomistic one according to which it is both the form of a living human being and something subsistent on its own account. Having discussed the conceptual issues of how the soul may be conceived of, and set aside certain neo-Cartesian lines of response to materialism, an argument to the existence of a non-material principle is presented. Certain implications are then explored leading to the conclusion that it is possible for the intellectual soul to survive the death of the body.

I.

Anyone writing philosophically in the twenty-first century about the soul should feel difficulties arising from the predominance of broadly naturalistic styles of thought. By 'naturalism' I mean scientific materialism in its various forms conceived of as a general account of the nature of reality (exempting, perhaps, numbers, possibilities, and other abstract objects). Even in earlier times, however, when belief in spiritual beings was common among educated thinkers, philosophers and theologians often struggled with the idea of the human soul. This was for good reason, for believers in souls have generally wanted to view them as autonomous substantial entities, basic subjects of ontological predication; but the conceptual model for subjects in this sense is that of material objects. Souls in this way of thinking are like objects such as trees except that (a) they have a subjective nature, as centres of thought and perhaps action; and (b) they are immaterial.

Someone versed in recent philosophy of mind may immediately take up the question of how something that is an *object* can also be a *subject*; but while there may be an issue here, the move is too quick in supposing that 'object' in material object implies being objective in a way that is at odds with also being

a subject. At this point one can observe simply that as 'object' was introduced it was not meant to preclude any possibility, and besides it was suggested as being the *model* for the idea of souls, not asserting that souls are material objects. More likely to be unambiguously problematic is the idea that souls are *immaterial*. In fact I think that a commonly felt difficulty attends to both (a) and (b), for the first thing that comes to mind in thinking of an object is a more or less clearly bounded material item of the middle-sized dry goods sort. If someone were to say "but remember this is also a *subject*," one might accept that point but still struggle with the notion of an immaterial *thing*. Some sense of progress might come with loosening the boundaries, thinking of a forest or a cloud, then of a region, and next perhaps of a field defined in terms of some numerical value(s) holding at all points within it. Clearly, however, all of these are still physical: occupying space and expending or absorbing energy. In that respect a region or field is a sort of spread out material object.

So the difficulty of thinking of souls as objects is related to that of thinking of them as immaterial, and being told that they are not objects in any subjectivity-excluding sense does not help, for one is still looking for a model that will allow one to think of *immaterial* subjects. There is, of course, a contemporary way of introducing the idea of "things" that might seem promising in not being tied to the paradigm of material objects, which is via semantics. Consider the fundamental categories of entities that might be represented linguistically, these being identified via certain logically distinguishable classes of expressions: *properties* as the semantic values of one-place predicates, *relations* as those of multi-place predicates, *truth-values* as those of well-formed indicative sentences—and for singular terms? *Objects*. Here the idea of an object is simply that of a potential referent of a proper name, a demonstrative pronoun, or a uniquely-referring definite description; and one can get a sense of what the range of objects could be, therefore, by thinking of the variety of singular terms. The trouble now, however, is that 'object' in this usage is not any kind of sortal; its meaning is given by its logical-cum-semantic character; namely that while properties and relations are incomplete, e.g., 'is red,' 'is larger than,' etc., await semantic bearers, objects are referentially complete in themselves. Whatever its role in semantics this says nothing ontologically speaking about the kind of thing that an object is.

It is an illusion, therefore, to suppose we have given some definite general sense to thinking about souls by saying that they are the referents of certain true statements. For one thing, this does not tell us that souls exist or even that they can exist, for the term 'soul' may actually or necessarily lack reference. More to the point, however, it really does nothing to advance the effort to understand what souls are or might be. It only distracts from the earlier problem momentarily, for if someone asks whether souls might be per se referents of numerical

expressions it is pretty clear that we shall immediately reply that numbers are entirely different being abstract and non-actual, whereas souls are like living things, only immaterial.

II.

Here is where it might seem helpful to turn to the idea that the human soul is the form of the living human body. In Aristotle's famous definition: the soul is the first actuality [state] of a natural body that has life potentially (*De Anima* 412a15). This makes an intrinsic connection with life indicating that the soul is in one way or another the source of the life of an animate substance, making it to be just that. What gives life can be said to be a principle or source of life and perhaps to be itself alive. Were it not, a regress would ensue, but it is surely contingent that there is more than one *principia anima*, therefore a principle of life should itself be possessed of that which it provides to another; hence the soul is itself alive though its mode of existing may be non-organic. It might be added, however, that 'alive' applies analogically to a *principia anima* and to what it animates in as much as the former is the cause of the life of a living thing. On the other hand a 'principle of life' particularly as this arises from Aristotle's immediately preceding discussion sounds somewhat abstract, so perhaps it is after all possible to say that while souls cannot be likened to numbers, they can be likened to a sort of ordering or structure which is certainly some kind of reality.

Aristotle writes that it is natural bodies especially that are thought to be substances, and substances are composites of form and matter: principles of actuality and of potentiality, respectively. So the life of a living thing must be due to its form, hence this form is an animating principle. Just as this cannot be matter (for that is the source of potentiality), nor can it be a body, for a body is a substance and this principle is the form of a substance. This gives us the idea of the kind of thing a soul might be, namely a principle of organization and activity, and a sense in which it is necessarily non-material, as being the counterpart of matter. But does this help get us closer to the original idea that a soul is an immaterial subject of thought and action, and nearer to making sense of that idea?

Straight off there seems to be an equivocation in the claim that the soul is not material, between (a) Aristotle's abstract sense of its being necessarily a non-substantial compositional complement of matter, and (b) the concrete spiritual sense of its being an immaterial entity. Additionally in the Aristotelian scheme any form is non-material, even that of an inanimate material substance. How, if at all, then, might the gap be narrowed if not closed?

It needs to be shown that a form as such can be a kind of existing thing that could be the subject of its own activity, and it needs also to be shown that

among the activities of a human being are some that are not attributable to the living body. Given Aristotelianhylomorphism, every human activity is due to the soul, but clearly not every human activity is immaterial in the relevant sense, so it is yet possible that every activity is exercised wholly and exclusively through the human body. Breathing, digesting, and scratching are due to the soul, but all are entirely bodily, so why suppose that there is anything we do that is not corporeal? Or, to put it another way, why think there is any activity that is attributable to the soul alone as its proper and exclusive agent? Putting the question in the latter form is not intended to exclude the possibility that such activities might also be *expressed* through bodily activity, as in the case of vocal utterance understood not as a physiological operation but as intrinsically intelligible speech.

Many contemporary non-materialists are very taken with sensory consciousness as providing proof of the immateriality of mind and therefore, either by definition or by linking argument, that of the soul. I am doubtful about this, however, in part because the phenomenological structure of consciousness seems closely isomorphic with the dynamic structure of the sense-environment complex, which suggests that consciousness may be an organic function. Additionally, the intentional objects of consciousness seem to be empirical particulars (be they extra- or intra-bodily ones), and this suggests that they are related to bodily activities.¹ Related to these points is the general fact that the terms used to describe the operations and contents of consciousness seem to be conceptually connected to spatiality, to receptivity to the impact of the material environment, and to bodily conditions. Thus, states of consciousness may be described as being “bright” or “dark,” “saturated” or “spectral,” “warm” or “cold,” “muffled” or “distinct,” “unfocussed” or “clear,” as changing “slowly” or “rapidly,” as being “exhilarating” or “exhausting,” “releasing” or “confining,” and so on. In writing about intentionality Husserl and Sartre emphasize the exterior orientation of consciousness, but even states that might be thought to have an interior orientation deploy similar language: ‘light’ or ‘gloom,’ ‘stillness’ or ‘torment,’ ‘accretion’ or ‘separation,’ etc. While it might be suggested that this is due to the fact that consciousness as we experience it is embodied, this begs the question why should there not be acquaintance with aspects of pure non-dependent consciousness.

In seeking a candidate for this, or with the intent of advancing a further argument, someone might claim that states of consciousness are referred to a unitary and indivisible subject: the *self*, and that there is no material entity that might be a candidate for this, either the human body as a whole or some special

¹For further discussion of this and related matters, see John Haldane, “Kenny and Aquinas on the Metaphysics of Mind,” in *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, ed. John Cottingham and Peter Hacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

part of it. As it happens, however, some who have been impressed by the idea that we are aware of an indivisible unitary subject of consciousness have revived (knowingly or not) the idea proposed by some ancient authors that this might in fact be a thinking atom located somewhere in the brain.² “Atom” here is not the proton-neutron-electron aggregate of contemporary physics but an atom in the original sense of an indivisible material particle.

Independently of wondering what might be made of that explanation we should, however, be cautious about the claim that we are acquainted with a unitary subject of consciousness. ‘Acquainted’ is the operative word here, since the position I am considering is not one which holds this is inferred, inductively or deductively, or grasped by some rational insight, but that it is given to consciousness. Set against it is Hume’s observation in the *Treatise*:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. . . . I never can observe anything *but* the perception.³

So far as this may be advanced to show that there is no mental subject, it is circumventable in various ways, for example by showing, as Frederick Ferrier sought to do, that the concept of knowledge presupposes a *knower* as well as a known;⁴ or by arguing, as for example does Locke, from an account of mindedness as essentially involving mental activity to the conclusion that there must be a mental *agent*. Writing to Bishop Stillingfleet Locke observes:

First, we experiment [experience] in ourselves thinking. The idea of this action or mode of thinking is inconsistent with the idea of self-subsistence, and therefore has a necessary connection with a support or subject of inhesion: the idea of that support is what we call substance, and so from thinking experimented in us, we have a proof of a thinking substance in us, which is my sense of spirit.⁵

²See Roderick Chisholm, “On the Simplicity of the Soul,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 157–81.

³David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), bk. I, pt. iv, sec. vi.

⁴See James F. Ferrier, *Institutes of Metaphysics* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1875), sec. I, prop. IX “The Ego Per Se.” The text is reproduced with an introduction in the *Hume on Mind and Causality* issue of *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 5 (2007): 1–13.

⁵*The Works of John Locke*, vol. 3 (London: Rivington, 1824), 33. By ‘spirit’ Locke simply means thinking thing, and while believing it more likely that this is immaterial than that it is material, he remains neutral on the issue.

I will return to this mode of countering mental substance scepticism, but the point to be noted here is that Hume does provide a telling case against the position that the idea of the self is given through *experience* of a unitary mental subject. There is a 'linguistic-semantic' counterpart of the immediate consciousness argument which appeals to the use of the first person singular form in describing or self-ascribing states of consciousness, but it is hard to think that much can be got from a grammatical form and one that does not in all cases have an isolable pronomial element. It is apt here to recall Lichtenberg's comment on Descartes's quasi-grammatical derivation of *sum* from *cogito* (albeit in an inflected language):

We know only the existence of our sensations, representations and thoughts. One should say, 'it thinks', just as one says, 'it lightens'. It is already saying too much to say '*cogito*', as soon as one translates it as 'I think'. To assume the I, to postulate it, is a practical requirement.⁶

In Lichtenberg's usage 'it' is not functioning as a pronoun of reference but as a feature placer as in 'it is raining'; but even if first person consciousness is treated as properly self-referential, the earlier points—about environmental isomorphism, empirical particularity, and the material character of phenomenological concepts—suggest that the best candidate for a real subject of consciousness is the living human body.

III.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* Aquinas writes as follows:

The *type* of every act or operation is determined by an object. Every operation of the soul is the act of a potentiality, either active or passive. Now the objects of *passive* potentialities stand to these as the causal agents which bring each potentiality into its proper activity; and it is thus that visible objects, and indeed all sensible things, are related to sight and to the other senses. But the objects of the *active* capacities are related to these as the final terms attained by their activities; for in this case the object is what each of these activities effectively realizes. . . . Hence all the *objects* of the soul's activities are either causal agents or final terms; and in both respects they specify those activities. . . . We ought, therefore, to reach conclusions about objects before activities for the same reason as leads us to define activities before potencies. The "objects" in question are such things as sensible being and intelligible being, with respect to the sensitive

⁶Translated and discussed by Guenter Zoeller in "Lichtenberg and Kant on the Subject of Thinking," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 417–41.

and intellectual faculties respectively. . . . So we proceed from objects to acts, from acts to faculties, and from faculties to essence.⁷

There are several points to be got from this. First, some acts are induced by their objects while some cause their objects: seeing is *produced* by visibles, but intelligibles are *products* of intellection (compare this to the fact that stains are produced by *paint*, but portraits are produced by *painting*). In explaining any particular case of either sort we would need to add a distinction between immediate causes and background conditions, and elaborate on the role of the latter, but the general point, I believe, holds good. Second, the nature of an act is specified by the nature of its proper object, the nature of a power is indicated by its proper acts, and that of the agent by the nature of its proper powers.

The objects of intellection are conceptual universals. If one is drawn to Platonism one might say that they are mind-independent essences, but for Aristotle and Aquinas the intelligible natures of things are only potentially available for thought and need to be actualised as objects of conception. This requires Aristotle and Aquinas to provide a theory of concept formation of a broadly abductive sort, and that involves distinguishing two functions of mind: one abstractive-cum-productive, the other dispositive (hence *agent* and *patient* intellects, and *impressed* and *expressed* species). Whichever theory one favours, if we are to say that human beings are capable of conceptual thought, then we must allow that they are cognitively related to universals, which are non-empirical entities without spatial location (temporality at least in terms of origin is another issue and a more complex matter, given the productive account of concepts). In short, the intelligible objects of thought are non-material, not in the categorical form-as-complement-to matter sense but in the fundamental ontological sense of being immaterial entities. But given the objects-acts-powers-essence principle, it follows that the agent of intellection is itself of an immaterial nature.

The Platonist might well embrace this conclusion in the spirit of the affinity argument of the *Phaedo*, as showing that the soul is indeed an immaterial substance metaphysically complete and independent of any other kind of entity (save perhaps causally, if it is a created being). But that does not seem to be possible for one who also wants to follow Aristotle and Aquinas in saying that the soul does explanatory work as being the principle of life and source of activities of a living human being, for so conceived the soul-form is not a substance in that sense. How then to proceed?

⁷Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster, O.P., and Silvester Humphries, O.P. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), bk. II, lectio six, 208–9. I have compressed the passage for convenience.

IV.

Such is the genius of Aristotle's general hylomorphism in seeming to allow itself to be applied across a wide range of otherwise quite diverse things, so prestigious historically was his presentation of it, including the oft repeated examples of matter (stuff) and shape, as in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, and so pervasively have such illustrations been deployed in recent analytical metaphysics in order to distinguish between identity, composition and constitution,⁸ that insufficient thought has been given to how else the relation of *form* to *substance* (not 'matter') might be understood. While the examples of bronze statues and spheres have heuristic value, they ill prepare one for thinking about the way in which, on Aristotle's own account, the nature of living substances is said to be due to their form (actualising some quantity of matter). 'Form' by this point is not altogether semantically disconnected from 'shape,' but if we are to wonder about the latter it should be in terms of the question: how would a body have to be composed?—of what stuff? in what arrangement?—in order to be a vehicle or site of a certain kind of *life*. For Aristotle the nature of a multi-level form is determined from above not generated from below. Sentience is not a function of metabolism, rather the manner in which a sentient creature exchanges matter with its environment and absorbs and uses appropriated matter is a function of its sentient nature.

Here, therefore, is reason to resist a version of emergentism according to which higher powers are ontologically *generated* by lower ones, though they may be developmentally emergent in the sense that they only come to be realized in second actuality, exercised per se, once a degree of lower-level elaboration has been achieved. Considering the life of an animal as a whole, one may regard it for present purposes as a single comprehensive activity. This is the actualisation of a potentiality; but an act can never exceed the power of which it is an exercise. Accordingly, that potentiality was present from the moment the animal came into being, not in the trivial logical sense that it was necessarily possible that the animal have such a life, but in the metaphysically charged sense that the intrinsic ontological conditions of that possibility were actually present *ab initio*.

So what we might say is that to understand the life of a living thing you need to understand the way in which a certain active principle is operating in and through an organism. This formative cause, moreover, is an individual determined in its particularity by its associated body of which it is an immanent principle: not, I am assuming, antecedently existing but rather coming into being

⁸See David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967); Allan Gibbard, "Contingent Identity," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 4 (1975): 187–221; Judith J. Thomson, "The Statue and the Clay," *Noûs* 32 (1998), 149–73, and related essays in *Material Constitution: A Reader*, ed. Michael C. Rea (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

simultaneous with it at conception, or at whatever may be the counterpart in the case of non-sexually reproduced kinds.⁹ Assuming that the argument from intellection is persuasive, then we can say that it belongs to the nature of this individualized principle to engage in intellectual activity and that this is not a *per se* bodily operation, though it may deploy its body as a medium of expression, as in writing or speaking. These latter activities, inasmuch as they involve language, provide enormous resources for the development of intellectual life, and without them it is not clear quite what the activity of pure thought might amount to. So, from the point of view of an individual principle of intellectual activity, it is good to inform a body and to live through it, but it is not essential.

The idea of the “soul” as it has come to us through the synthesis of Graeco-Roman-Judaeo-Christian philosophical and religious traditions is a bit like that of a “center” as it might be mentioned in a variety of historical texts and narratives as somewhere through which routes and activities pass, which itself is or has some form of governance and control, and from which emanate decisions, policies, and initiatives. Reading of “the center” one might wonder whether it was in fact a sovereign or an administrative city or a co-ordinated arrangement of civic, commercial, and planning functions, or something different again. ‘The soul’ and ‘the center’ seem similarly ambiguous between agents, organized structures, and roles.

But there is an order of priority here: for roles remain unoccupied unless there are agents and organized structures require producers. This points to the primacy of agency and to thinking of the soul (or “the center”) as something that operates in the material order appropriating it to its own ends. But if some of the activities of the soul or of the center do not themselves require a material order, then they could operate apart, and what has an activity is an agent and is to that degree a subsistent subject.

Therefore the intellectual principle itself, which we call the mind or the intellect, has an operation on its own (“*per se*”) in which the body does not share. But nothing can operate on its own unless it subsists on its own. . . . It follows, then, that the human soul, which is called the intellect or mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent.¹⁰

⁹Beginning to be at conception does not of course mean being produced through the process of conception. If the soul is a spiritual principle, then it cannot be the product of purely material processes, hence its origins and the fact of its coming into being as the form of a particular body call for explanation. See John Haldane, “An Embarrassing Question about Reproduction,” *Philosophical Psychology* 5 (1992): 427–31; and for further discussion of the metaphysics of human conception, see John Haldane and Patrick Lee, “Aquinas on Human Ensoulment,” *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 253–76.

¹⁰Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 75, a. 2, translated as *The Treatise on Human Nature* by Alfred J. Fredoso (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2010), 5.

This raises the question of what it means to speak of the separate “subsistence” of the soul. The expression a ‘this something’ (*hoc aliquid*) is applied paradigmatically to a substance, i.e., something that (a) does not exist inhering in something else, as does a true property (*proprium*) or contingent feature; and (b) has a complete nature of its own. By extension, however, the parts of substances might also be said to exist: either natural parts, e.g., organs of a body, or metaphysical components. But insofar as each may be able to exist separately, it will be incomplete in species, i.e., it cannot be defined save by reference to something else, namely the relevant substance. So we would have to say of an integral part that it is, say, a human-heart, or of a metaphysical part that it is a human-soul. An integral, natural part of a substance does not have an autonomous activity apart from its proper substance, but if a form(al) component has its own activity, which is independent of the substance composite, then it is a “this something,” but because of its dependent nature not a *full* substance.

Here there emerges a picture of the soul as both form of a living human body and also as something capable of subsisting on its own account. Part of what it contributes to the life of the human being depends upon the body, but not all; and upon the death of the human being this residual agency may endure, perhaps more in bereavement than in celebration. Freed from fixation on elementary expositions of hylomorphism one may consider that there is certainly no contradiction in the idea that that which is definitionally non-material (*form*) may also be immaterial as intellectual subject (*soul*). Further questions remain, however:

- (1) What, if any, is the form of the soul’s knowledge of itself?
- (2) How is the soul individuated in the absence of the body it informed?
- (3) What does its life consist in once separated from that body?
- (4) In what sense and to what extent is it a subject?

V.

In thinking about knowledge of the soul, it is necessary to distinguish such knowledge as it is arrived at by a living human being, and such knowledge as may be had by a separated intellect. In the same passages of the *De Anima Commentary* Aquinas writes:

A thing is knowable only in the degree that it is actual; hence our intellectual power attains to self-knowledge only through possessing an intelligible object in a concept, and not by directly intuiting its own essence. This is why the process of self-knowledge has to start from the exterior things whence the mind draws the intelligible concepts in which it perceives

itself; so we proceed from objects to acts, from acts to faculties, and from faculties to essence.¹¹

This contrasts directly with the broad tradition that proceeds from Plato and Plotinus through Augustine to Descartes and continues among contemporary neo-Cartesians according to which a thinker knows its mind directly by an act of “insight,” or on account of the mind’s nature being transparent or self-intimating. Of course it will necessarily be the case that this knowledge is given in an act of thought, but one of the points of contrast is that it is not an inference based on some abduction from logically prior acts. If one tries to think what this knowledge might involve, it is hard to avoid perceptual analogies (such as understanding what yellow is by seeing it), but these take us back to the bodily character of consciousness. More abstractly, however, this way of thinking about knowledge of mind relates knowledge of the *nature* of the thinker to that of its *operations*, according to the mode of demonstration *a priori* or *propter quid*. By contrast Aquinas tells us that it must be *propter quia*, i.e., from effects to cause or source. I am with him but would add that we too easily assume from awareness of the occurrence of a thought that one knows that it is one’s own. If telepathy or mediumship were possible, then it is imaginable that one registered the occurrence of a thought but was uncertain as to whose thought it was. This is perplexing, but it has a solution if there are some first-order thoughts whose logical form is not ‘being aware of someone’s thinking that *p*,’ but ‘being aware of thinking that *p*.’¹² Even so it would require an inference to proceed to the conclusion that one’s nature was that of a thinker. So far as a disembodied intellect/soul is concerned it would only be able to conclude this much, for unlike the substantially-integrated soul it would be unaware of such human activities as washing one’s face or typing at a keyboard, each of which carries rich anthropological implications.

As regards individuation, since many minds may form and dwell upon the concept triangle or trilateral (and the possibility of conceptually distinguishing between these intelligible objects, in the absence of any difference in causal powers, is itself an instance of the argument that thought is not a material process¹³), one may wonder what distinguishes them as diverse minds. This is more of a problem for the Platonist/Cartesian than for the Thomistic Aristotelian since the latter holds that such ideas are produced by a process of concept-formation, and this will have involved, in the case of distinct individuals, diverse routes through material particulars towards general natures. In short the individuation is

¹¹ *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, 209.

¹² See John Haldane, “(I am) Thinking,” *Ratio* 16 (2003): 124–39.

¹³ See John Haldane, “Naturalism and the Problem of Intentionality,” *Inquiry* 32 (1989): 305–22.

causal-historical. Additionally there is the broad metaphysical point that a subsistent separated soul is a quasi-substance of a kind whose general definition refers to human nature, the particularization of which refers to an individual human life.

Concerning the life of the separated intellect, absent Divine provision it seems largely unappealing to such as relish sense and sensibility. Theological edifiers speak of participating in “the life of the Divine,” but it is a challenge to articulate conceptually what this might involve and impossible to give it phenomenological substance. As I said, however, if this sort of living form was of a sort configured to take charge of and act through a body, then it would hope to do so again. It is on this account that Aquinas was able to harmonize reason and revelation in writing in his commentary to Paul’s *First Letter to the Corinthians* that “it is clear that the soul is naturally united to the body and is departed from it, contrary to its nature and *per accidens*. Hence the soul devoid of its body is imperfect, as long as it is without the body.”¹⁴ One might try to make something of the argument that since the soul is naturally incomplete it is required/owed/ due that it should be reunited to a body; but again absent Providence this is a hope without metaphysical warrant. After all there is nothing philosophically problematic in the idea that departed souls live radically etiolated lives. Only religious tradition encourages the idea that they are part of an interactive community of the like-minded.

Certainly, what I have argued for excludes a rich phenomenology of post-mortem existence. Aquinas speaks of God providing separated souls with phantasms in order that imagination, memory, and other normally bodily modes of psyche should continue, but it is appropriate to ask how God might achieve this in the absence of the subjects having bodies. Mere appeals to divine omnipotence will not suffice to turn back scepticism, since the point is not evidential but conceptual. Furthermore the problem is not just that it is hard to make sense of disembodied consciousness but that sensory states often provide a medium and occasions for abstract thought. Without them it is unclear what might establish a cognitive perspective on reality.

With or without Divine support the metaphysically-normal condition of a separated Aristotelian/Thomistic soul seems spare, and it is hard to see how there could be much that would constitute creaturely subjectivity as that is normally understood. On the other hand, in conceiving of the separated form/soul as a principle of being, and as an abstract thinker rather than a concrete conscious subject, another ancient idea comes into view, namely that separated souls are god-like and similarly obscurely conceivable. Famously, Aquinas’s arguments

¹⁴See Aquinas, *Commentary On the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P., <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm#151>.

for the existence of God proceed a posteriori from effects to cause(s) and arrive at relational characterizations of God as cause of this or that effect. Similarly one might describe the separated soul essentially (if partially) as an intellectual agent, and say that every other credible predication is grounded in its effects. What that leaves us with, however, is an agnosticism about the nature of (our) souls. Assuming, however, as the purely philosophical arguments imply, that the separated soul has no natural commerce with the empirical world, then an interesting possibility suggests itself. If change is the measure of time in the determinative (metaphysical) and evidential (epistemological) senses, then a soul whose life is confined to contemplating universal natures, which are at least (from such a “frozen” soul’s perspective) themselves unchanging, can expect to have no metric or sense of time’s passing. That being so, it cannot be said to be consciously awaiting the prospect of Divinely provided re-embodiment. Indeed, I cannot see that phenomenologically speaking there is anything it is subjectively like to be a separated soul, which itself prompts the thought that from the point of view of any such being there is no experiential post-mortem gap.¹⁵ So far as consciousness is concerned the transition from ending one embodied life to beginning another is instantaneous, giving rather abstract support to the mythic idea that death is falling into dreamless sleep then to awaken onto another day. We shall see, or not, as the case may be.

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¹⁵This possibility may suggest the position sometimes referred to as ‘psychopannychism’ or ‘soul sleep.’ See Bryan Ball, *The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestly* (Cambridge: Clarke & Co., 2008).