

Soul, Substance, and Intellect In A Thomistic Approach by James Chastek at Just Thomism

The Mode Of Analysis Proper To The Discussion Of The Soul

The Importance Of The Mode Of Analysis

Intellectual Soul

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Part 1A:

Soul: The Comment That Turned Into A Post

From: <https://thomism.wordpress.com/2008/08/08/the-comment-that-turned-into-a-post/>

P. Boire wrote on one of my old posts:

"I'm engaged in a few debates with a few people on the Amazon site of Richard Dawkins. I was fortunate to have been able to enjoy some philosophical education at an undergrad level, and hope you might direct me to some available sites with good explanations of the idea of the human soul..."

Thanks beaucoup. I end up at your site quite often in my cybertravels and always enjoy your efforts. The response soon grew too large, so I'll post it here:

Websites on the soul? That's easy. There are none. Not even ones that mention it much in passing.

The present science of life, which analyzes living beings into their basic living component parts, and which largely takes living things as given, has no need for the soul. Nothing that Dawkins actually understands (modern zoology) could be assisted much by speaking of the soul. Such realities are superfluous to him. When one divides up the animal by dissection and/or microscopic and chemical analysis, the idea of the soul need never arise. Everything the soul explains is already taken for granted in such a division. As far as Dawkins is concerned- or any modern biologist- the soul need be nothing more than the organization of a living body. "Soul" in this sense is a vague idea that the biologist must replace with distinct ideas.

One finds soul by a different kind of analysis than the division of the body into parts. One comes to an idea of soul by asking "is the living body living because it is a body?" Does it live merely because it has extension, mass, chemical composition, etc? Not at all, for then anything with these properties would be alive- like a stone. We need something in addition to mere bodily existence to have life- and this "something more" is called the soul.

For Dawkins and biology, this "something more" need only be a certain organization and composition. This is fine, and no one denies that this is necessary. Even though plants and animals have this "something more" it is completely destroyed with the death of the plant or animal. The question that you ask, no doubt, is whether the human soul is "something more" than a body precisely by being a spirit, as opposed to the mere animals or plants, whose soul must pass away.

Yes, it is. But we need a way of discovering this, and it is a difficult proof. Spirits are by definition not given in experience directly, and so we can only argue to them by something that is directly experienced by us. For Aristotle and St. Thomas, this thing directly experienced is the universal that we know, and the general object of our mind, i.e. the nature of material or bodily things. These arguments require great meditation and contemplation- and they can be easily sniped at by vulgar minds. I don't say this to dissuade you from learning the arguments, they are beautiful and any amount of understanding we can attain of them is good. I only say this because I want you to know that when you run into objections that shake you, you need to be aware that all these objections have already been refuted before. You probably already know this, but it doesn't hurt to say it again.

Henri Grenier's manual "thomistic philosophy, volume II" on natural philosophy might give you a good summary of the arguments, and the common objections, but it would be better to meditate on St. Thomas's arguments in the Summa Contra Gentiles or the Compendium theology. This will give you a first look at the proofs. But I stress that these arguments require meditation and contemplation.

The key thing to see, which makes any study of the soul very difficult, is that the soul is a *form*. The distinction between form and matter requires a different kind of analysis than is found in modern sciences. The mode of analysis proper to modern sciences cannot find soul. It would be as silly as trying to find the soul by dissection, or by using a telescope. Again, just as the soul is not the term of an experimental or physical division or analysis, neither is the soul a hypothetical entity. Hypotheses are superfluous to the initial study of soul, or in general to the distinction between form and matter.

A rigorous, scientific understanding of the soul requires a careful reading of Aristotle's *Physics* Book one and two and *De Anima*. Don't rush, and don't read it with a polemical atmosphere in your soul, but as a disciple listening to the master. The translation you use is not important, but

Glen Coughlin's translation of the physics is the most faithful and his appendices and introduction serve to help modern readers understand the distinctive nature and power of Aristotle's way of proceeding scientifically. It helps to keep in mind while reading the initial texts: "why are natural things composites of matter and form?" Why is this absolutely necessary? Only after you see this can you see the reality of soul.

All these things take time, but it is time well spent. I doubt that they will be seen as anything other than nonsense by the Dawkins crowd. Trying to explain the truth of the soul to them would be like trying to explain polymer chemistry to a fifteenth century alchemist, or etiquette to the average high-school loudmouth jerk. There is simply too much prerequisite knowledge to make up for. There is also a problem of disposition. In my experience, the best spoken theists understand best atheist arguments very well, and present them carefully and faithfully; but I have never met an atheist who understood the best theist arguments carefully and fully. *Never*. If you have the calling to speak to the Dawkins crowd, you must answer the call, but remember that the full truth is always revealed only to relatively few who seek truth and wisdom faithfully and as disciples of the great masters. The Dawkins's have always been with us. Five years from now they will be replaced by some new fad that feeds on death. They are nothing more or less than the world which is already passing away. At times it seems clear that they don't even want to refute other arguments, they just want to suck people into an argument that itself will drag everyone down to death. They want us to speak like them: at one time ironic, condescending, and spiteful, and at another time with a false modesty that feeds on ignorance, tepidity, sloth, and death.

But I'm being preachy now, and am probably only saying things you understand on a more visceral level than I do.

Part 1B:

The Mode Of Analysis Proper To The Discussion Of The Soul

From: <https://thomism.wordpress.com/2008/08/10/the-mode-of-analysis-proper-to-the-discussion-of-the-soul/>

The easiest mistake one can make about the soul is thinking that he has to prove its existence. In all the vast history of the study of the soul, no one has *ever* proved its existence, nor even tried. This is not because they forgot about basics, but such a proof is unnecessary. The soul is whatever a living being has while living, and what it lacks when it is dead. That's it. If this is brain activity, then brain activity is soul; if this is some kind of organization, then organization is soul; if this is some spirit in the body, then that's soul. If it is some combination of these things, then soul is whatever is first and most causal among them. Regardless of whether you think that a human body is nothing but so much meat and matter or whether you think we are only spirits caged in a body, it is ridiculous to ask whether the soul exists. It manifests a failure to understand what one is talking about. If you think that speaking about "the human soul" is too prejudicial toward the "spiritual" idea of man, too bad. You can't hold a conversation hostage because of your inability to understand a term.

The reason why speaking of the soul seems awkward to us is it is a sort of question that we no longer ask, and it requires a mode of analysis that has fallen into disuse. We only need a terms like soul if we are trying to get a fundamental understanding of the *definition* of life. Not every kind of analysis of living things requires a definition of life- for it suffices that scientists have a general agreement about the things that are living. If "life" means nothing but a collection of some vast, agreed upon multitude of living things, then the need for a definition of life never arises. This vast multitude, of course, requires that we understand something fundamental about what makes living things living- and ideas like "soul" belong to a mode of analysis that tries to make this fundamental understanding of life more concrete. Our initial look at a running squirrel and a running faucet makes it clear that the one is living while the other is not. What is it that we see in this initial look? There are no doubt times when we will be unable to figure out whether something is living or not, but all this irrelevant to getting a clearer look at what we are seeing when we say that one thing is living, and another is not.

The ancients and medievals were very interested in the analysis of fundamental concepts as fundamental- we don't seek to analyze things in this way. This is why a word like "soul" strikes us as arcane or scientifically primitive. We have the same initial awareness of the difference between a live animal and a dead one, but we choose to analyze the phenomenon in terms of basic living units, measurable electrical activities, etc; but the ancients wanted to take a closer look at the *general idea* of life. We want to explain the common experience in terms of a more specialized experience: an experiment, a metrical reading, a microscopic analysis; but the ancients and medievals wanted to explain the common experience as common. While staying at the level of common experience, the medievals and ancients sought to move from a confused idea to a distinct idea.

These two modes of analysis are in one way incredibly close, for they both start from the common experience of living and non-living things. This "common experience" is more like a multitude than a unity, but we manage to draw together just enough unity to coin the word "life" as opposed to "non-living". The Modern scientist is content with an agreed upon multitude with minimal unity which he then tries to grasp in in the distinct parts of the living things, but the ancients sought to make that unity itself more distinct. In analyzing things in this way, the ancients needed a word like "soul", the modern biologist has less need of it, for he immediately wants to analyze things by a specialized experience.

Part 2:

Soul Part II- The Importance Of The Mode Of Analysis.

From: <https://thomism.wordpress.com/2008/08/09/soul-part-ii-the-importance-of-the-mode-of-analysis/>

The idea of soul arises when we notice that some bodies are alive, and others are not. Our judgment of what is alive and what is not is far from infallible, but it remains that among the physical things we know, some are alive, and others are not. Words like "soul" were first imposed from primitive theories of what made a living thing alive: early words for soul simply meant "breath"; although it is unclear if they thought that breath was really soul or if it was more the clearest sign of whatever soul was. Theories about the soul quickly became more precise. The Greeks had a vast multitude of opinions about what makes something living- the best of which was that the soul was some kind of organization in a body which involved the mixture of various elements in the right proportion.

Aristotle was the first to show that while all the Greek theories of the soul had some truth, all of them failed to preserve the truth of the first things that we know about soul. Since the only reason we speak about the soul is because some bodies are living and others are not, then the soul must consist *first of all* in some *difference* from body. But while the soul is different from a body, at the same time it can only be understood in relation to a body. Asking how the soul stands to the body is like asking how "three sided" stands to "figure" in a triangle. If triangles were alive, "three sided" would be their soul, for that is what makes it different from all other figures. If an ax were alive, then its soul would be whatever made it different from all other tools. The same is true for the parts of living bodies. An eye is only alive because it is able to see, and an ability to see is what makes it different from all other organs.

But even though soul is constituted by its difference from body, at the same time it is not clear how different it is from body. There is also the difficulty that the same thing might be different from something else in many different ways: if we ask how romance novels are different from reference books we will get one answer from the authors, another answer from the bookbinder, another answer from the marketing consultant, and another from the bookseller. Each of these explanations are in their own way complete, and they explain the whole book. This is how the scientist can completely explain soul in terms of chemical combinations and organic composition, and at the same time he can still allow for another completely different *totally complete* account of the soul. One gets a complete answer of how a book gets made regardless of whether he asks the author or the bookbinder. Both answers are complete, though they are totally different from one another. Our modern scientists who deny the spiritual existence of the soul because they can account for human life without it are no different than a bookbinder who denies the existence of writing style or syntax because he can account for the whole book without mentioning them at all. In a sense he is right. He *can* completely account for the book without once invoking syntax or grammar. For that matter, the marketer, bookseller, and distributor don't need speak of syntax and grammar in order to give their own complete account of a book. Their way of analyzing a book into its relevant parts does not need to include this. Another way of seeing this is to recognize that Ockham's razor only applies within a given mode of analysis. Just because you can give a total explanation of something without X doesn't mean that X does not exist, or even that it is not necessary- all it means is that it's irrelevant to your mode of analysis. The question then arises: what mode of analysis yields the necessity of the spiritual soul of man? The spiritual soul of man is understood totally in relation to body- for spirit means nothing more than non-bodily substantial existence- but what mode of analysis comes to the conclusion that man's soul is different from his body by being itself a subsistent spirit?

Part 3:

Intellectual Soul

From: <https://thomism.wordpress.com/2012/04/06/intellectual-soul-iii-conclusion/>

The problem of separability is part of a larger problem: what is soul supposed to explain?

For Thomists, the answer is simple: soul explains a living body as opposed to non-living one. We see some living body jumping around, looking at things, responding to the world, etc. and then, some time later, it is inert, cold, lacking all vital functions, etc. Something has changed. What was it? The word soul is the name a research program for what the thing once had, then lost. It is a placeholder or datum in search of a theory.

But anyone who teaches the ancient theory of the soul has heard the immediate objection to all this – "if that's true, then you are saying that animals and plants have souls." The objection is dismissed as a failure to understand soul as a research program into the difference between the living and the non-living. But can we dismiss the objection that easily? If everyone sees it as problematic to speak of plant souls, this indicates that we want *soul* to do something else than merely explain the difference between life and non-life. In fact, "soul" is already at work in *other* research programs – it is supposed to explain what is unique to human beings (hence the objection of about "plant souls") or some mysterious principle of dignity (hence the FAQ's like "does an embryo have a soul?" or "does a clone have a soul?", that students continually ask.)

This dual-track research program is inevitable. We cannot help understanding life in terms of our own life, but our own life is most known to us *not* as opposed to non-life, but in our self-reflection, our intellectual puzzling about life, our sense that there is something inviolable and dignified in this sort of activity, etc.. Our life is our *cogito*, or at least some other action equally noble: *credo, ago, duco, amo, adoro*. We want soul to work in two different research programs and can't assume both research programs converge on the same principle.

So this is our first response to the problem of separability: our consideration of soul – even soul considered as principle of life – must divide on two tracks: one which seeks to discover what is noble or dignified about human beings, another which seeks to determine what is somehow common between humans and less noble and less dignified things. Along the first track, life is found in separability; considered on the second track, life is found in inseparability. But there is no assumption that these two tracks are converging on a single reality, at least not in the normal sense of a single reality.

And, just to remove all doubt, I'm explicitly and directly contradicting St. Thomas's claim that we must locate the intellect as a part or power of the soul so far as soul explains life as opposed to non-life.

(NB 4.20.2022: I said that last line before I was clear on the nature and importance of transcendence, by which a higher entity contains all the perfections of a lower one in a higher manner.)

Part 4:

Soul As Substantial Principle

From: <https://thomism.wordpress.com/2022/04/19/soul-as-substantial-principle-2/>

- A principle of life has to explain vital motion: heartbeats, digestion, etc.
- An accident of a body (like right order of parts) cannot explain vital motion.
- What explains life cannot be an accident of a body.

Only the second premise is controversial. What is the sense? What impediment is there to thinking that to put the parts in the right place suffices to make them alive? Arrange some molecules me-wise and you'd have all my actions, right?

But the question that interests Aristotle is not whether living-wise arranged parts would be the living thing, but whether the accident of arrangement is a sufficient principle to explain the vital activity. If so, vital activity cannot arise from the substance of the thing, and so there is no essential difference between the living and non-living. This means either that the substance of everything is non-living, living, or is something transcending their difference. No one entertains the last option and the second is unpalatable, but the first is contradictory, i.e. to assert that the substance of a living thing is non-living (NB that this contradiction would remain even if one saw life as emerging from non-living matter.) Common sense and modus tollens gives us the claim that vital activity belongs to the substance of the thing, and that therefore no accident suffices to explain it. While it is true that if you had the accident of me-arranged atoms you would have me, all this means is that if you had something ontologically consequent it would require its ontological antecedent, which is self-evident anyway.

Aristotle's point goes deeper, however, since he seems to deny that the principle of any natural motion can be entirely in the accidental order. If so, we couldn't infer from the natural action of a thing to the sort of substance it was, e.g. we could learn nothing about the nature of fire by knowing it was hot, or about water by knowing it froze at 0°C. The attempt to avoid what Aristotle means by a soul in the name of a science unified with physics, and which therefore claims all differences between the living and the non-living are accidental, ends up cutting off one of the essential principles of a realist physics, namely the ability to conclude from the action of any entity to a fact about its substance.

End.

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