

Reply to Prof. White’s Comments on “St. Thomas Aquinas’s Concept of a Person”

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In his thoughtful comments, Prof. White raises two questions. The first question concerns two texts (*ST* I.75.4.ad2 and *ST* I.29.1.ad5) in which Aquinas explains that human souls, even when separated, are not persons, since they are not hypostases but only parts (or, more precisely, forms) of hypostases. Now, as Prof. White observes, in numerous texts Aquinas talks as if separated human souls think, will, and in general engage in operations of intellect and will. This appears to pose a problem for my central thesis, which is that Aquinas holds that only persons can think, will, and, in general, engage in the operations of intellect and will. To solve this problem, Prof. White suggests that we might attribute to Aquinas a distinction between a loose sense of the term “person” and a strict sense of the term “person” and interpret Aquinas as holding that separated human souls are “persons” in the loose sense but not the strict sense. However, I don’t think we should attribute such a distinction to Aquinas since there is no textual evidence for it, whereas *there is* textual evidence for an alternative solution that is more congenial to the arguments of my paper.

In *ST* I.75.2.ad2, when clarifying the sense in which a human soul can be said to exist and act “on its own” (*per se*), Aquinas compares the soul to an eye and writes that, “One can say that the soul thinks (*intelligit*), just as [one can say] that the eye sees, but it is more proper to say that a human being thinks by means of his soul” (my translation). In other words, Aquinas allows that one can speak loosely of a human soul thinking, willing, and, in general, engaging in the operations of intellect and will, just as one can speak loosely of a human eye seeing (e.g., “my right eye can’t see well, but my left eye can see well”). But, Aquinas notes, such talk should be understood as an instance of *metonymy*: human eyes don’t literally see (they aren’t visually aware of anything); rather, one sees by means of one’s eyes. Similarly, human souls don’t literally think, will, etc.; rather, a human person thinks, wills, etc. *by means of* her soul. Thus, though Aquinas frequently talks as if separated human souls think, will, etc., in such texts he is using metonymy. If he were speaking more carefully, he would say that it is a disembodied human hypostasis or person that thinks, wills, etc., by means of its soul.¹

Prof. White’s second question asks why we should care about the scholarly debate over the proper interpretation of Aquinas’s views on the post-mortem survival of human persons. In response, I begin by noting that we all care about whether it is possible for us to survive our bodily deaths. In fact, many religions purport to offer a special kind of hope to their adherents by presenting eschatologies in which such post-mortem survival is not just possible but in fact something that will actually happen. In considering such religious beliefs, one might wonder whether the possibility of post-mortem

¹ For a similar argument, see Brower, 2014: 284-286.

survival of this kind requires adherence to some form of substance dualism, according to which we are wholly immaterial souls which only temporarily and contingently "inhabit" material bodies. One intriguing prospect of Aquinas's discussion of these matters is that, on the Survivalist interpretation, he purports to offer a view which (a) denies that we are wholly immaterial souls, (b) takes seriously our essential corporeality, including the dependence of much our mental lives on the functioning of our brains and bodies, and yet (c) allows for the possibility that we survive our bodily deaths. Careful study of the debate between Survivalist and Corruptionist interpretations of Aquinas can shed light on whether such a view is in the end a tenable one.²

² For further discussion, see Hauser, 2022.

References

- Brower, Jeffrey (2014). *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hauser, Christopher (2022). "Persons, Souls and Life After Death." William M.R. Simpson, Robert C. Koons, and James Orr (eds.). *Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics and the Theology of Nature* (245-266). New York: Routledge.