

Commentary on Christopher Hauser’s “St. Thomas Aquinas’s Concept of a Person”

David A White*

Professor Hauser has given a very well-focused examination of, as he says, a *historical* question—what Thomas Aquinas thought about persons, particularly *human* persons. The first four pages of his paper treat this question. Hauser classifies a person as a kind of *hypostasis* (a subsistent individual who has a rational nature and is also *complete* in its nature or kind). He notes that having a rational nature necessarily involves having rational powers—two in particular, the power of *intellect* (which allows us to formulate concepts of universals or kinds) and the power of *will* (which allows us to make evaluative judgements and to act on them). He concludes this section with an affirmation of what he calls the Central Thesis, namely, that “Aquinas maintains that there are some kinds of actions that only persons can engage in”, where those actions involve intellect and/or will.

In the rest of the paper, Hauser considers the implications of the correctness of his Central Thesis for two ongoing debates in current Anglo-American philosophy of religion—the first, concerning Aquinas’ view of the interim state

* Adjunct Professor, Department of Philosophy, The University of Scranton

(the time between the death of a human person and the general resurrection of the body) and the second, concerning the coherence of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation (that the second person of the Divine Trinity takes on (or assumes) a human nature and becomes a human being—Jesus Christ).

It is quite welcome that in speaking to these current debates, Hauser is determined to precisely understand Aquinas's own views on the relevant points before moving on to the modern debate. Too often, current participants in present-day debates misconstrue or distort the views of historical figures, whether *opposing* them, or more interestingly, *defending* them. Hauser's modesty in the present paper is also welcome. He acknowledges that there are a number of connected questions that he will note, but not address.

There are, however, some questions concerning what Hauser says about Aquinas and the Interim State. He explains that the current debate centers on two opposing camps—the *Corruptionists* (who think that, after death, but before the general resurrection of the body, a human being ceases to be a person but remains a soul) and the *Survivalists* (who think that, after death, but before the general resurrection of the body, a human being ceases to have a human body but remains a person). Hauser argues that the Corruptionist camp departs from Aquinas's conceptions in their understanding of what is at stake in current debates and that the Survivalist camp stays closer to Aquinas's views.

However, there is a text, which Hauser references several times (his footnotes 1 and 5), where Aquinas seems uncomfortable in calling a human soul, all by itself, a *person*. Someone answers, in the affirmative, as to whether or not the soul is man (in *ST*, I. 75.4) with the following reason:

Objection 2: Further, the human soul is a substance. But it is not a universal substance. Therefore it is a particular substance. Therefore it is a "hypostasis" or a person; and it can only be a human person. Therefore the soul is man; for a human person is a man.

Aquinas responds:

Reply to Objection 2: Not every particular substance is a hypostasis or a person, but that which has the complete nature of its species. Hence a hand, or a foot, is not called a hypostasis, or a person; **nor, likewise, is the soul alone so called, since it is a part of the human species.** (my emphasis)

However, Hauser correctly notes that the separated soul, after death and before the general resurrection, exercises both its powers of intellect and of will. Given this text, and at least one other¹, one wonders whether a distinction should be made between a loose and extended sense (or use) of the Latin word *persona* to describe the separated soul alone, and a strict and restricted

¹ Hauser refers, in his footnote 16, to another text in the *Summa Theologica*, where Aquinas considers a reason for denying that Boethius's definition of person, as "an individual substance of a rational nature," is correct and then gives his reply:

Objection 5: Further, the separated soul is an individual substance of the rational nature; but it is not a person. Therefore person is not properly defined as above.

Reply to Objection 5: The soul is a part of the human species; and so, although it may exist in a separate state, yet since it ever retains its nature of *unibility* [inclination to unite with a body], it cannot be called an individual substance, which is the hypostasis or first substance, as neither can the hand nor any other part of man; **thus neither the definition nor the name of person belongs to it.** (my emphases and characterization of unibility) (*ST*, I.29.1 ad. 5)

sense (or use), where *persona* denotes the whole person (immortal soul and resurrected body taken together)?

The second question is prompted by a set of illuminating remarks in another context, a book on the philosophy of art by the late Stanley Cavell. In the first chapter of his book, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cavell says, in responding to Leo Tolstoy's controversial answer to the question "What is Art?",

An answer I used to give myself was: Tolstoy is asking himself not about the nature of art, but about the nature of the importance of art. It was when I came to see that these are not separate questions—that the answer to the question "What is the importance of art?" is grammatically related to, or is a way of answering, the question "What is art?"—that I came to an understanding of what Tolstoy was talking about, and came to comprehend further ranges in my caring about art.²

These points can be generalized and appropriated, particularly Cavell's connection of *importance*, *caring*, and *value*. For if something is important to us, if we care about it, then are we not dealing here also with its value? And can't we ask, about a topic, not only "What is the nature of _____?" but also "What is the nature of the importance of _____?" Thereby, we discover, as Cavell says, further ranges of our caring about _____. And further aspects of its value.

² Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 1979: 3-4.

Let's focus on Hauser's intervention into the debate between Corruptionists and Survivalists concerning Aquinas's views on the Person and the Interim State. The second question here is this: "what is the nature of the *importance* of this debate?", particularly for those of us who aren't theologians, but philosophers, and for those of us persons who aren't, as well as those of us persons who are, part of the same religious tradition as Aquinas. So, here's a two-part version of the second question: namely, "what is the nature of the importance of this debate", why this particular debate *matters*—to Hauser as a *philosopher* and a *person*?

