

AQUINAS AND BURIDAN ON THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SOUL AND ITS POWERS: ON THE INTERMEDIARY NATURE OF PROPERTIES

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Introduction

Thomas Aquinas and John Buridan agree on many points about the human soul, which is in contrast to the usual wide divergence of opinion among medieval thinkers. The two disagree, however, on one key question, namely, whether the essence of the soul is distinct from the soul's powers. This question arises from the fact that the soul performs two different functions: vivifying the various powers of a living body associated with specific organs and unifying the whole body through its substance. Buridan says that the powers and the substance of the soul are the same while Aquinas says they are not. Further, Buridan challenges Aquinas' account with two objections, one a more general issue of Aquinas' metaphorical language and the other a more substantial objection that questions Aquinas' understanding of the relationship of the powers of the soul to its essence.

In this paper, I will argue that Aquinas' account both provides good reasons for the distinction of the soul and its powers and can successfully respond to Buridan's objections by means of Aquinas' theory of properties. I will first outline some context of this question and briefly present Buridan's view of the essence of the soul's identity with its powers and Aquinas' account of their real distinction. In the second section, I will present two objections to Aquinas' account which are offered by Buridan and supported by a more recent commentator of Aquinas, Adam Wood. Next, I will analyze Aquinas' understanding of the distinction between the soul and its powers in order to clarify how his account is able to answer the objections leveled against it by Buridan and Wood. I will there argue that Aquinas' account can not only counter these objections, but, through his theory of

properties (*propria*) as intermediaries between essence and accident, Aquinas can show how the powers of the soul are “rooted” in the essence of the soul yet distinct from it in such a way that each power is able to exert its unique causal role. I will conclude with some reflections on the significance of Aquinas’ thought on properties as important intermediaries between the substance and accidents.

1. Distinctions and General Accounts of the Soul

General and Specific Powers of the Soul

Before analyzing Buridan and Aquinas’ specific objections and responses, it is necessary to outline their general approaches to the soul and to clarify a twofold meaning of the term ‘powers’. This dual meaning is grounded in the original source of medieval discussions on the soul: Aristotle’s *De Anima*. This work first gives a common account of the soul as the first actuality of an organic body, which is applicable to all living beings. Aristotle then proceeds to give an account of the different kinds or “powers” of souls, beginning with the nutritive soul embodied in plants, moving to the sensitive souls of animals, and finally to the rational souls of humans. “In this,” says Aristotle, “[considerations] about shapes and about the soul are similar. For among shapes and the ensouled, the prior always is in the subsequent in potency, as the triangle is in the square, the nutritive in the sensitive.”¹ Thus, these general powers of soul build upon each other so that the sensitive soul incorporates the powers of the nutritive soul into its own higher way of vivifying.² These general kinds or powers of souls which are the unifying substantial forms should not be confused with the second

¹ Aristotle, *De Anima or About the Soul*, trans. Glen Coughlin, (South Bend Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2020), II.3 414b30

² The *De Anima* is unique in its attempt to give a unified account of the hierarchy of all living beings in both their physical and intellectual aspects, in contrast to previous accounts of the soul exclusively concerning the intellectual powers, and many medieval accounts build upon this interesting aspect of the *De Anima*. For an analysis of medieval account of the soul following this unified treatment of both the material and mental functions of life see Gyula Klima, “The Trivia of Materialism, Dualism and Hylomorphism: Some Pointers from John Buridan and Others,” in *Questions on the Soul by John Buridan and Others: a Companion to John Buridan’s Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Gyula Klima (Switzerland: Springer international Publishing, 2017), pp. 45-62. For a treatment focusing specifically on Aquinas’ account see Gyula Klima, “Aquinas’ Balancing Act: Balancing the Soul Between the Realms of Matter and Pure Spirit” in *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter*, Volume 21, Issue 1, Dec 2018, p. 29-48.

meaning of the term associated with the specific powers of the soul (also called parts). These specific powers actualize the various organs and enable the soul to act in specialized ways. These two different uses of the term serve as the ground for Buridan's distinction between primary and instrumental powers. The further question arising from this distinction is whether (and how) this one essence of the soul, which incorporates the lower kinds of soul (e.g., the nutritive soul) into its unified mode of vivifying, can be distinct from the specific and localized powers of the soul (e.g., the nutritive power associated with the digestive organs).³ It is within this question that Buridan's objections and Aquinas' account of properties take shape. Before analyzing these objections and responses, let me first put Buridan's and Aquinas' general accounts of the soul in context.

Buridan and Aquinas' General Accounts of the Soul

Aquinas and Buridan hold very similar theories about the soul, despite the major difference in their semantic frameworks: Aquinas worked in the realist tradition, and Buridan in the nominalist. According to both of their analyses of Aristotle's text, the different general powers of souls do not constitute different souls or substantial forms within one individual. Rather the highest power of the soul constitutes one unified soul in which all of the other powers are united and ordered within that individual.⁴ So, the human soul is an essentially rational substantial form, which incorporates the

³ As Adam Wood notes in his own paper, "Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul," this question is brought to further importance when the success of its attempts is analyzed in a negative light: what does a lack of a meaningful account of the powers lead to? This is exactly the charge that the early modern period brought against its medieval heritage, namely, that the medieval accounts simply multiplied explanatory terms without giving any real grounded account of how they are explanatory. Moliere's doctor and Descartes' occult powers are vivid instances of this charge of lacking any real grounded explanation. These accusations that the accounts of the soul lack any scientific reality led to the rejection of the soul as a scientific principle. In addition to my main thesis the following analysis may serve as an attempt to highlight and defend the philosophical rigor of the medieval accounts of the powers of the soul in their own terms.

⁴ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, Q.76, A.4., ed. John Mortensen and Alarcón Enrique, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012) and John Buridan, ed. Gyula Klima (et al. eds.) *Questions on Aristotle's 'On the Soul' by John Buridan*: Latin edition with an annotated English translation, (Springer: Cham Switzerland, 2021), II, q.4; III, q.17. (Further references to Buridan's questions on the soul will be made below as "*Questions on DA.*")

(general) sensitive and nutritive powers of the soul into its rational mode of life. The different substantial forms of soul, as either intellectual, sensitive, or nutritive, determine the mode of life of the whole organism. Further, in contrast to the many pluralist interpretations among scholastics, they both hold that the soul is the only substantial form of the body. The body does not have its own substantial form but is en-formed and shares the same act of being with the essence of the soul. Finally, Aquinas and Buridan both hold that the soul vivifies the entire body through being present in every part.⁵ This is an important issue for a discussion of the powers of the soul, since this unifying activity of the general power of the soul through being present in each part of the body seems to be distinct from the localized work of the specific powers of the soul in different organs.

Buridan's key claim in his account of the soul is that this distinction between the general and specific powers of the soul is only conceptual. He takes the instrumental powers of the soul, which account for the specific operations like sensation or growth, to be in reality the same as the substance of the soul. He states:

In an improper sense we do grant that in a human being there are several powers of the soul, in the sense that the soul is capable of carrying out several diverse operations, and we impose on it different names, which we say differ with regard to the different concepts respective to these different operations. Thus, we say that the intellectual, sensitive, and vegetative soul differ conceptually because these names signify the same thing according to different concepts.⁶

For Buridan the powers differ from the essence of the soul only in the way we conceive them. He posits that the powers need not be distinct in the proper sense, just as "if someone is a father of several children, he does not have to be several fathers; and if something is diverse from several things, it does not, on that account, have to be several diversities."⁷

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a Q.76 A.8; *Disputed Question on the De Anima* Q.10. For Buridan this is a more complex issue: for humans, the soul is spread evenly throughout the body; for animals and plants, the soul is spread evenly part-by-part throughout the organisms to which they belong. But in both cases the soul vivifies the body by being in each part, thus unifying it. For reference to humans and animals and plants respectively see his *Question on DA* II, q.7; III, q. 4 and *Question on DA* II, q. 7, n. 17-18.

⁶ Buridan, *Questions on DA*, II.5 n. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Buridan then clarifies what he means by distinguishing between instrumental and primary powers. He puts forward this further conclusion, saying, “<Some> powers of the soul are distinct from the soul and from each other.”⁸ These distinctions come about through an analysis of active powers which “receive their proper denominations from their activities, so that everything that is active with regard to nutrition is a nutritive power, and everything that is active with regard to heat is a heating power.”⁹ He goes on to say that the soul, as the principal agent of nutrition, sensation, locomotion, and thought, nevertheless, uses the cooperation of “natural heat and several dispositions of the soul or the body” as “instrumental agents” for effecting these life functions, just “as the blacksmith uses fire and a hammer.”¹⁰ However, these dispositional tools or instruments are clearly distinct from each other and from the soul itself.¹¹ Buridan concludes that the “whole question, therefore, is solved in terms of the distinction between principal and instrumental or dispositive powers.”¹² This resolution of the question indicates that the primary powers of the soul, which are identical with the essence of the soul, play the more general vivifying and unifying role, but that they must use the instrumental powers, which are the specific

⁸ Ibid., n. 23. Note that the translator inserted the “some” which begins this quote, which is not present in the Latin, since Buridan is clearly referring to only the instrumental and not the primary powers of the soul. See: “*Potentiae animae sunt distinctae ab anima et a se invicem.*”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ As Buridan says, “Therefore, these dispositions, which the soul uses as instruments for nourishing, are instrumental nutritive powers, and they differ from the nutritive soul. And in the same way the dispositions for sensing are instrumental sensitive powers, and they differ from the sensitive soul. And since the dispositions for nourishing are other than the dispositions for sensing — indeed, there are others for seeing and others for hearing — then, speaking of the instrumental powers that are called powers of the soul because they are the instruments of the soul, it is obvious that these powers differ from the soul and from each other.” Buridan, *Questions on DA*, II.5 n. 24.

¹² Buridan concludes: “And thus, it is clear that the first thesis [that the soul is the same as its powers] and this one are not in conflict. For they are subcontraries, and they are true together. But the first thesis is understood to concern the principal powers of the soul, namely the principles by which vital operations are carried out. The second thesis, however, is understood to concern the instrumental powers that the soul uses and needs for carrying out its operations. The whole question, therefore, is solved in terms of the distinction between principal and instrumental or dispositive powers.” Buridan, *Questions on DA*, II.5 n. 25.

accidents and dispositions of the body, distinct from the essence of the soul, to actually accomplish this task.¹³

In contrast to Buridan, Aquinas holds that the essence of the soul and its powers are not just distinct conceptually but rather are distinct in their way of being. He claims that the essence of the soul plays the unifying role, saying,

The soul by its very essence is the form of the body, and it exists as such in each part of the body . . . because the perfection of the species comes from the soul in virtue of its very essence. Consequently, the whole soul exists in each part of the body according to the whole of its specific perfection.¹⁴

¹³ Applying this distinction to the specific powers of sight a potential objection arises which argues that the different powers, such as sight and digestion, must be distinct, because otherwise the same organ, the eye, will somehow have both the operations of seeing and digestion. Buridan can respond to this by saying that in terms of the primary powers, it's true that the power of sight is just as much in the whole of the animal or in any part, such as the stomach, as it is in the eye, but in terms of the instrumental powers, sight is only in the eyes, since the other parts of the body lack the bodily dispositions necessary to actualize this specific power. Thus, there is no contradiction because the instrumental powers are distinct from the soul, related only as a hammer is related to a craftsman, while the primary powers of the soul are properly speaking the only powers, and are identical with the soul itself. Adam Wood notes that an "odd consequence" follows from this view of soul's principal powers being present throughout the body of an animate being, because if the soul is present in every part of the living beings, then the entire being is somehow qualitatively uniform. "For instance, every quantitative bit of a horse is itself a horse. Properly speaking . . . 'horse' turns out to be a mass-noun like 'water' or 'air' rather than the count-noun we generally treat it to be." This oddity is something Aquinas specifically uses his thesis of the real distinction between the soul and its powers to avoid (see *Summa Theologiae* 1a. Q.76 A.8 ad 3 and *Disputed Questions on Spiritual Creatures* 4). This might be one additional advantage, although not necessarily a conclusive argument, in favor of Aquinas' position. See Adam Wood, "Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul," in *Questions on the Soul by John Buridan and Others: a Companion to John Buridan's Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Gyula Klima (Switzerland: Springer international Publishing, 2017), pp. 77-94, 84. For more on Buridan's uniformity view, see Calvin Normore, "Buridan on the Metaphysics of the Soul," in *Questions on the Soul by John Buridan and Others: a Companion to John Buridan's Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Gyula Klima (Switzerland: Springer international Publishing, 2017), pp. 63-76.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the De Anima*, trans. by John Patrick Rowan, (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine) Originally published by B. Herder Book Company, 1949. <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~QDeAn>,

The essence of the soul serves a unifying role in vivifying the entire body in each of its parts. As Klima argues, the soul's act is the act of the composite substance and so is in the whole as a whole.¹⁵ Additionally, there are localized powers (or parts) of the soul.¹⁶ Aquinas says:

However, if totality is taken so far as the soul's active and passive powers are concerned, then the whole soul does not exist in each part of the body. Nor, if we speak of the soul of man, does the whole soul [according to the totality of its powers] exist in the whole body. . . . However, with respect to those operations which the soul exercises through bodily organs, the soul's active and passive powers as a whole exist in the whole body, although not in each part of the body, because different parts of the body are proportioned to different operations of the soul. Consequently, with respect to any one power, the soul exists only in that part of the body which takes care of the operations exercised by that particular part.¹⁷

This account of the powers is a stronger reading than Buridan's primary and instrumental powers. For Aquinas, powers are not only conceptually distinct from the essence of the soul, vivifying the body as a whole, but rather are truly distinct from the essence of the soul itself.

Aquinas offers a variety of arguments for why the soul must be distinct from its powers. But several of his most prominent arguments rely on semantic premises which Buridan, a nominalist, would not accept. For instance, Aquinas argues in several places that for all beings other than God, essences must be distinct from act. So, for created souls, the essence must be distinct from the powers which enable the distinct acts of the soul in the body.¹⁸ However, these kinds of arguments, relying on unshared metaphysical commitments, are not the most effective means of engaging in disagreement with those within different semantic frameworks. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on a less common argument from Aquinas' early *Sentences* commentary, which argues from the more general

Q.10 Respondeo. Some amendments to this translation have been made where necessary for both clarity and meaning.

¹⁵ Klima, "Aquinas' Balancing Act" 34-35.

¹⁶ Aquinas identifies the parts of the soul with the powers of the soul and these are distinct from the generic kinds of soul. See Aquinas, *Commentary on the De Anima*, trans. by Kenelm Foster, O.P. and Sylvester Humphries, (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine), <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~DeAn>, Lecture 5.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on DA*, Q.10, Respondeo.

¹⁸ See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a Q.77 A.1 Respondeo. However, Buridan rejects the distinction between essence and act due to his nominalist principles.

scientific principle that a “proper and immediate effect must be proportionate to its cause.”¹⁹ He argues that the effect of unifying and generally vivifying the whole body and the effect of vivifying the specific bodily organs to their specific perfections constitute a real difference. Because a real difference in effects points to a real difference in their corresponding causes, these unifying and localized acts of the soul point to a real and not merely conceptual distinction between the soul’s essence and its powers. Adam Wood, in his analysis of this argument from the *Sentences*, says,

One and the same thing cannot in the same respect *both* confer a single substantial act of being *and* perfect diverse parts of the body in diverse ways. So, the powers whereby the soul configures diverse organs for their diverse operations must be distinct from the essence or substance of the soul itself.²⁰

Essentially, Aquinas is arguing that if the two effects which we are accounting for, namely the unified life of one organism and the diverse actions associated with different organs, are too different to reasonably be accounted for by one principle, if in fact they have opposing qualities of specifying vs. unifying, then it seems scientifically viable to claim that there are two really distinct causes of these distinct effects.

Having given a summary of Aquinas and Buridan’s arguments for the conceptual or real distinction of the powers and substance of the soul, I will now proceed to two objections leveled against Aquinas’ account by both Buridan and Adam Wood, before turning to Aquinas’ responding account of properties as intermediary accidents.

2. Two Objections to Aquinas’ Distinction of the Soul from its Powers

The first objection against Aquinas’ account touches on the general difficulty in interpreting and justifying his occasional use of metaphorical language. Although this objection is not explicitly offered by Buridan, others in his tradition, like Ockham, make this claim generally, and more modern contributors, like Adam Wood, do raise it against Aquinas’ theory specifically.²¹ This general concern over metaphorical and imprecise

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences* I Dis. 3, Q. 4, A. 2. Respondeo.

²⁰ Adam Wood, “Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul” pg. 84.

²¹ See William of Ockham. *Reportatio* 2.20 in *Opera Theologica* 5:440. In G. Gál and R. Wood (eds.), (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1981).

language arises because Aquinas uses figurative language to describe the powers as “rooted” or “flowing from the essence” of the soul. Wood in his commentary on Aquinas’ account uses these instances to argue that a lack of precise and meaningful terms means that Aquinas cannot philosophically justify the distinction and relation between the soul and its powers.²² If Aquinas’ account can only describe the relationship of the powers to the soul by relying on metaphorical language, then it does not seem to be a valid philosophical grounding of a real distinction.

Beyond the problem of using metaphorical language to describe the powers of the soul, Buridan raises a second objection to Aquinas’ account of the accidental nature of the powers. The argument against Aquinas appears in a concise form in Buridan’s 15th objection:

Again, if a potency <or power> were an accident of the soul, then the soul would be in potency toward it, since a subject is in potency toward all its accidents. Therefore, the soul is either in potency toward such a potency <or power> on its own, and then, by the same token, we could have said this from the beginning, or it is in potency toward such a potency <or power> by means of another power, and thus we would have to go to infinity, which is unacceptable.²³

Here Buridan argues that if the powers of the soul are taken to be accidents, but the powers act via the substance of the soul on other accidents, then Aquinas has set himself up for a chain of accidents infinitely acting from one to the next.²⁴ Buridan is claiming that Aquinas has no good reason to posit that the powers as accidents play a mediating role from the substance of the soul to other accidents. Wood seconds this objection, saying,

If it’s true that the soul directly causes some accidental forms, namely its powers, then Aquinas owes us some account of why it cannot cause any and

²² Wood, “Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul,” pp. 77-94.

²³ Buridan, *Questions on DA*, II.5 n. 15.

²⁴ An alternate interpretation of the objection is elaborated on in the footnote of the translation of the *Questions on the DA* pg. 73, edited by Gyula Klima. This version argues from the receptive or residential characteristic of the powers to argue, like this interpretation based on the accidental property, that the powers of the soul are superfluous principles of the same nature. For the purposes of this paper, we will be focusing on the first version of the argument relying on the accidental nature of the powers of the soul, although I would argue that Aquinas’ account can respond to either interpretation.

all of a living thing's accidental characteristics directly, without the mediation of powers that are themselves in a category of accident.²⁵

Buridan and Wood's claim is that Aquinas' account supplies superfluous principles of the same nature to account for an effect. If the powers are accidental forms coming from the essence of the soul and they act as accidents on other accidental forms of the body, then this is a redundancy of accidents and the powers should simply be combined with the soul itself. This challenge is only reinforced by the problem Aquinas seems to face because he uses metaphorical language in his explanation of the nature of the soul's powers, since inaccurate or non-scientific language on such a subtle matter will only continue to mire him in the difficulty of accounting for how the powers can be a proper mediation between accidents and essence.

On the other hand, Buridan's account, by identifying the powers with the essence of the soul, seems to avoid these difficulties entirely because, unlike Aquinas', his account can offer parsimony of principles. If the powers of the soul are in reality the same as the essence of the soul, then the principles needed to account for various effects are reduced and simplified, and most importantly, the theory does not need to explain the relationship between them. However, Aquinas' account needs to provide an adequate schema for understanding the specific relationship and different modes of being through which the powers relate to the substance of the soul as accidents, somehow acting from the substance to other accidents. And such an account, due to the conceptual difficulty involved with having any sure sensory knowledge about the soul or its powers, can easily lend itself to metaphorical and philosophically unacceptable language; but such language can likewise easily lead us into philosophical dead ends, where the use of metaphorical language traps and limits what the account aims to give.

It is worth noting that, despite his objections, Wood ends up siding with Aquinas, not Buridan. Wood argues that Aquinas does give an adequate argument for why the essence of the soul must be distinct from its powers, but also that Aquinas fails to give as rigorous an account of the nature of the powers as accidents. Wood's approach is based squarely on his method of evaluating Aquinas and Buridan's accounts of the soul as to their scientific viability. He argues that Aquinas' theory is better than Buridan's, despite its apparent inadequacy in his account of the accidental nature of the powers of the soul, because Buridan's account offers superfluous powers, namely the

²⁵ Wood, "Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul," 82.

primary ones, which don't give a causal account of life over and above the instrumental power's explanations.²⁶ Nevertheless, according to Wood, Aquinas' account, while avoiding Buridan's mistake, still fails on its own terms in giving a scientifically rigorous account of the nature of the powers in non-metaphorical language. But, as I will argue in the next section, Wood's claim that Aquinas' account is lacking a rigorous explanation of how the powers of the soul can be intermediary accidents between the soul's substance and the bodily accidents points to an oversight in scholarship on Aquinas rather than something missing in Aquinas' own account. I will show this by outlining Aquinas' account of properties as intermediate accidents in order to show that he can consistently hold to the distinction between the soul and its powers.

3. Aquinas' Response: On the Intermediary Nature of Properties

In this section I will respond to the two objections posed against Aquinas, namely, his metaphorical language and his problematic account of how the soul relates to the powers as accidents. I think that these two charges can be fruitfully responded to in tandem by more closely analyzing what Aquinas does say about the relationship of the soul to its powers. I claim that in this analysis we will find that his language is not overly metaphorical. Likewise, I will show that Aquinas has a nuanced and philosophically viable account of properties of the soul which can effectively account for the mediation between the essence of the soul and the accidents of the body.

Aquinas claims that the powers of the soul are not just conceptually distinct but are different in reality, and that they are an effect of the essence since they "flow from" or are "rooted" in it.²⁷ He says,

Although all powers of the soul are rooted in its essence, yet each part of the body is informed by the soul in the manner befitting each. Therefore,

²⁶ As Wood says, "What I want to claim, though, is that in general these are the *only* psychological powers Buridan should have endorsed. This is because of the fourth premise I mentioned above, namely that for at least a wide range of the soul's powers we shouldn't include them in our ontology at all unless we can explain how they function." Wood, "Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul," 89.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on DA*, Q.10, Reply Obj. 13.

different powers of the soul exist in different parts of the body. But it is not necessary that all of the soul's powers exist in each part of the body.²⁸

Aquinas argues for this conclusion that the soul is distinct from its powers by first defining a power as “nothing but a thing's principle of operation, whether it be an action or a passion.”²⁹ From here he makes a distinction between the principle of operation and the subject acting, saying: “Indeed, a principle is not the subject acting or undergoing an action, but that by which an agent acts or a patient undergoes an action; just as the art of building is a power in the builder who builds by means of that power.”³⁰ From here he argues directly against an account like that of Buridan, which maintains that the soul is its primary powers and that the essence of the soul is the immediate principle of all its operations. Aquinas says:

Now this opinion cannot be maintained. First, indeed, because anything whatever that acts, acts according as it is in act. . . It is for this reason that every agent produces an effect similar to itself. Wherefore, the principle by which an agent acts must be known from its effects, for both must conform. . . Therefore, when an effect does not result from the substantial mode of existing of the one acting, it is impossible that the principle by which such an effect is brought about belong in any way to the essence itself of the thing acting.³¹

This is the general principle on which Aquinas relies to draw his conclusions, namely, that “every form has by nature a certain trend or tendency whence proceed its activities or operations” and that the diverse operations are both different from each other and from the essence of the soul itself.³² Aquinas continues to specify this general principle in the argument concerning the soul:

Now it is evident that the powers of the soul, whether active or passive, are [not] spoken of directly with respect to something substantial, but with respect to something accidental. Similarly, to be understanding or sensing actually, is not a substantial mode of existing, but an accidental one to which the intellect and sense are directed. . . Wherefore an action of this kind, like that of other natural agents, is performed by a substance through the medium of an accidental principle. Hence it is evident that the essence of the soul is not the immediate principle of its operations, but that it operates through

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., Question 12, Respondeo.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Aquinas, *Commentary on DA*, II Lect. 5.

accidental principles. Consequently, the powers of the soul are not the essence itself of the soul but are *properties* of it.³³

The key principle on which Aquinas is relying on here is that accidental acts and powers cannot come about from a substantial mode of existing; but rather substantial acts come out of the essential or substantial mode of existing, and accidental acts result from accidental modes of existence.³⁴ Tied with this key premise, Aquinas points out that the “powers of the soul, whether active or passive, are not spoken of directly with respect to something substantial, but with respect to something accidental.”³⁵ This is the reason why the accidental powers of the soul cannot be the same as the essence, because they cause different kinds of acts. The powers are accidents, rooted in or flowing from the essence itself.

With this argument Aquinas can respond to one of Buridan’s claims, namely, that “if someone is a father of several children, he does not have to be several fathers.”³⁶ Buridan seems to be saying that since the father is clearly one, but enacts distinct effects, namely different children, we can similarly say that the soul is one although it enacts the different effects of digestion and thought, and we need only conceptually distinguish the different powers by which the soul does this. Aquinas can respond to this by saying that the analogy Buridan is posing fails to accurately portray the type of distinction between the acts of the soul. This is because a father, as generator, has different children with the same kind of act, reproduction, and consequently has the same formal relationship to the materially different effects. What Buridan’s argument is overlooking is that the

³³ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on DA*, Q.12, Respondeo. Note that this passage has been amended (in brackets) to avoid the standing mistranslation. See Latin: “*Manifestum est autem quod potentiae animae, sive sint activae sive passivae, non dicuntur directe per respectum ad aliquid substantiale, sed ad aliquid accidentale: et esse intelligens vel sentiens actu non est esse substantiale sed accidentale, ad quod ordinatur intellectus et sensus, et similiter esse magnum vel parvum, ad quod ordinatur vis augmentativa; generativa vero potentia et nutritiva ordinantur quidem ad substantiam producendam vel conservandam, sed per transmutationem materiae, unde talis actio, sicut et aliorum agentium naturalium, fit a substantia mediante principio accidentali. Manifestum est igitur quod ipsa essentia animae non est principium immediatum suarum operationum, sed operatur mediantibus principiis accidentalibus. Unde potentiae animae non sunt ipsa essentia animae, sed proprietates eius.*”

³⁴ Since Buridan accepts accidental qualities into his ontology, he has no clear semantic or metaphysical reason to deny this.

³⁵ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on DA*, Q.12, Respondeo.

³⁶ Buridan, *Questions on DA*, II.5 n. 22.

analogy of a father begetting formally similar children as effects completely fails to express the radical formal differences in the *types* of effect the soul is meant to enact in its powers. Aquinas expressly applies this argument to the powers of the soul:

This is also evident from the very diversity of the soul's actions, which differ generically and cannot be attributed to one immediate principle; because some are actions, and some are passions and are distinguished by other differences of this sort which must be attributed to different principles. Consequently, since the essence of the soul is one principle, it cannot be the immediate principle of all its actions but must have many different powers corresponding to its different actions; for a power is said to be reciprocally related to its act. Hence there must be a diversity of powers in accordance with the diversity of operations.³⁷

The differences in the types of actions and passions of the powers of the soul are so radical that Aquinas sees the need for a real distinction to account for the different effects. Aquinas might reply to Buridan's objection to his metaphorical language by retorting that Buridan's father metaphor fails to adequately distinguish the different acts of the soul.

Buridan might go on to reply that, even after valid arguments showing the distinction of the powers from the essence of the soul, Aquinas must still explain and justify the relationship of the two distinct entities in precise philosophical (non-metaphorical) terms. And to do this, Aquinas must explain how the powers of the soul are accidents acting upon other accidents since the question still stands: what further role could these intermediaries play if they are of the same nature as the recipients of their action? As noted, some current Aquinas scholarship seconds these objections, pointing either to a lack in Aquinas' work or to a need to further analyze Aquinas' account. I argue below that Aquinas himself does provide a complete explanatory account of the intermediary position the powers play between the essence and the accidents because he is able to explain what he means when he says that the powers are accidents flowing from the essence of the soul and mediating from the soul to other accidents through his theory of properties.

Aquinas has several divisions of accident which are helpful in understanding his account of the nature of properties. He first divides accidents in terms of species and individuals. The first type of accident is that which is caused by the principles of the individual. This can be broken into two kinds: separable and inseparable. Inseparable accidents have a naturally permanent cause in

³⁷ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on DA*, Q.12, Respondeo.

their subject (e.g., eye color, or male vs. female) whereas separable accidentals do not (e.g., sitting vs. walking, being tan vs. being pale). Second there are “proper accidentals” or properties (*propria*), which are caused by the principles of the species (e.g., risibility in man). Aquinas says, “Now the powers of the soul are accidents in the sense of properties (*proprietates*). Therefore, although the essence of the soul is understood without them, still the existence of the soul is neither possible nor intelligible without them.”³⁸ Establishing that the powers of the soul are within the category of property or proper accident shows that they play a more significant explanatory role than separable accidentals like freckles. This suggests that there is some justification for why one type of accident mediates to lesser kinds of accidents.

But Buridan might object here that it is not necessary to posit an additional species of accidents to act on lower accidents; rather, the soul can just act directly on the lower accidents. Aquinas can respond to this with his specifically intermediary account of the position for the powers of the soul as proper accidentals. First, he qualifies that there are two ways to take the term accident. If we take accident as opposed to substance

then there can be no medium between substance and accident; because they are divided by affirmation and negation, that is, according to existence in a subject, and non-existence in a subject. In this sense, as the power of the soul is not its essence, it must be an accident; and it belongs to the second species of quality.³⁹

But in another sense the powers of the soul are properly intermediary between substance and accidentals. In this sense, accident is a “natural or essential property” which

does not belong to the essence of a thing but is caused by the essential principles of the species; wherefore, it is a medium between the essence and accident thus understood. In this sense the powers of the soul may be said to be a medium between substance and accident, as being natural properties of the soul.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Reply to Obj. 7.

³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* 1a Q.77 A.1 Reply Obj. 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

This second sense identifies accidents as one of the five universals which do not signify what is common to the nine accidents but rather “the accidental relationship of a predicate to a subject.”⁴¹ He argues further:

Taking accident in this sense, then, there is something intermediate between substance and accident, that is, between a substantial predicate and an accidental predicate; and this is a property. A property is like a substantial predicate, inasmuch as it is caused by the essential principles of a species; and consequently, a property is demonstrated as belonging to a subject through a definition that signifies the essence. But it is like an accidental predicate in this sense, that it is neither the essence of a thing, nor a part of the essence, but something outside of the essence itself. Whereas it differs from an accidental predicate, because an accidental predicate is not caused by the essential principles of a species, but it accrues to an individual thing as a property accrues to a species, yet sometimes separably, and sometimes inseparably. So, then, the powers of the soul are intermediate between the essence of the soul and an accident, as natural or essential properties, that is, as properties that are a natural consequence of the essence of the soul.⁴²

Thus, the powers are not simple accidents which reside in the soul and through which the soul acts on other accidents; but rather they are intermediary powers resulting from the essence and designed to act on the accidents of the body via the soul’s essential power.⁴³

This is not the same as how Buridan differentiates between principal and instrumental powers because Buridan identifies the principal powers as one and the same as the essence of the soul, while the instrumental powers play the specific explanatory role. In Aquinas’ account, the soul’s powers are intimately tied to the soul because they are a result of the essence of the soul, a result of the specific act and mode of being of that act vivifying a body. Yet they are still not identical to the essence but are an effect of it,

⁴¹ Ibid. These five universals or “predicable” are enumerated by Porphyry in his *Isagoge* as genus, species, difference, property and accident. Porphyry, *Isagoge* (IV).

⁴² Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on DA*, Q.12, Respondeo.

⁴³ A simple statement of the case is this: “It must be said that the powers of the soul can be called essential properties, not because they are essential parts, but because they are caused by the essence; and in this respect they are not differentiated from “accident” that is common to the nine categories; but they are differentiated from “accident” that is an accidental predicate which is not caused by the specific nature.” Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Spiritual Creatures* trans. by Mary C. Fitzpatrick and John J. Wellmuth, (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine). Originally published by Marquette University Press 1949 A.11, Reply Obj. 5.

ordered to vivifying the soul in its different parts. So, they are essential properties because they “flow from the essence” (i.e., are caused by the essence in a non-metaphorical sense), but they are not parts of the essence.⁴⁴ This account can, with the philosophical specificity that is appropriate to an inquiry in which one has almost no sensory experience of the object, account for the relationship between the soul and its powers, as essence to essential property. And as we have outlined, this account gives philosophical reasons for why the powers of the soul can act from the essence to the accidents, without causing a regress of accidental agents, because of the intermediary nature of properties between essence and accidents. And Aquinas accomplishes this without merely metaphorical language since the language of “rooted” and “flowing” is grounded in the philosophical account of properties as intermediary accidental effects of the essence. Aquinas’ account not only can sustain his position against the objections of Buridan and Wood, but, as we have seen, it can also offer critiques of Buridan’s account on its own terms.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered the question of the distinction of the soul from its powers, in order to defend Aquinas’ account from the two objections posited against him by Buridan and more recently by Adam Wood. I tried to show certain strengths in Aquinas’ position that the essence of the soul, which unifies and en-forms the entire body as a whole, is really distinct from the localized powers of the soul which vivify the unique organs in their specific roles in the body. Aquinas’ key premise follows his epistemological method of tracing the (difficult to know) nature of powers or of habits from our knowledge of their acts, which we can know immediately through sensation and experience. A radical difference in act, as an effect of the power, points to a real distinction in the powers as causes. From this principle Aquinas concludes that the powers of the soul are really distinct from the substance of the soul. At this point, Aquinas’ thesis is open to the two objections. First, because the powers are distinct from the soul’s substance, they must be accidents, but if they are accidents and as accidents act on the accidents of the body which they vivify, then Aquinas’ account seems redundant and non-explanatory, since it offers principles which are of the same nature as the effects in order to explain the effect. This argument

⁴⁴ Ibid., Aquinas additionally says that “the powers of the soul are called parts, not of the essence of the soul, but of its total power; just as if one were to say that the power of a bailiff is a part of the royal power as a whole.” Reply Obj. 19.

is only reinforced by the second, more general objection against Aquinas' inappropriately metaphorical language in describing the relationship of the powers of the soul to its substance. If Aquinas' account offers no real explanation, either in his account of what the powers are in their mode of being or in his language describing them, then he is not justified in positing the real distinction between the soul and its powers. However, as I have argued, Aquinas' work does not conclude by simply positing this distinction. His further account of properties, as an important intermediary between the absolutes of substance and accident, is the key to his response to these objections. Aquinas' theory of properties explains the unique role the powers have in intermediating between the substance of the soul and the accidents of the body and do so in a way that philosophically grounds his language which, without this account, could only be interpreted as metaphorical.

In addition to helping Aquinas answer these two objections, his account of properties is important philosophically since it adds nuance to the common understanding of the medieval categories of substance and accident. In closing his paper discussing Aquinas' and Buridan's accounts of the powers of the soul, Adam Wood remarks that both Buridan and Aquinas "owe us" accounts of precisely how the powers of the soul, either as instruments, or as distinct accidents, are related to the soul itself. And according to Wood, on this score, Aquinas and Buridan have about equally as little to offer: Buridan is left trying to explain "how the soul uses an instrumental power, given that souls and instrumental powers are distinct," whereas for Aquinas, "It would be difficult to maintain that any of this [i.e., Aquinas' account of the powers as "virtual parts" flowing from the soul's essence] approaches an informative account of the relationship between souls and their powers."⁴⁵ As I have argued here, a precise elucidation of Aquinas' account of properties as intermediary accidents gives exactly this understanding of the relationship of the soul and its powers. The account Aquinas gives is of special contemporary relevance, as Wood points out, due to the growing interest in substance and powers in philosophy of mind and metaphysics, especially the importance of powers in the metaphysics of scientific discourse.⁴⁶ Encouragingly, he proposes, "If both these groups of contemporary

⁴⁵ Wood, "Aquinas vs. Buridan on the Substance and Powers of the Soul," 90-1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 91. He points to Kit Fine, *Towards a theory of part*. (The Journal of Philosophy, 2010), 107, 559-589; Mark Johnston, *Hylomorphism*. (The Journal of Philosophy, 2006), 103, 652-698; Kathrin Koslicki, *The structure of objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2008), pp. 229-256

metaphysicians are correct, and there is need for both substantial forms and powers in our ontology, then explaining the relationship between substantial forms and powers is still a challenge to be met.⁴⁷ I would suggest that, if the Aristotelian soul and its powers can still be meaningful within a contemporary philosophical and scientific framework, then it is Aquinas' account of the soul and its powers that has the strongest claim to this; and this is in large part due to his account of the powers of the soul as properties, as intermediary causes.

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as examples of contemporary metaphysics working on accounts of substantial forms, and Ruth Groff & John Greco, (Eds.) *Powers and capacities in philosophy* (The New Aristotelianism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Jacobs, (Ed.) *Putting powers to work: Causal powers in contemporary metaphysics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Anna Marmadoro, (Ed.) *The metaphysics of powers: Their grounding and manifestations*. (London: Routledge, 2010), as instances of recent work in reintegrating the idea of powers as important features in the metaphysics of scientific discourse.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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