

# St. Thomas Aquinas's Concept of a Person

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## Abstract

This article develops an argument in defense of the claim that Aquinas holds that there are some kinds of activities which can be performed only by persons. In particular, it is argued that Aquinas holds that only persons can engage in the activities proper to a rational nature, e.g., the activities of intellect and will. Next, the article turns to discuss two implications of this thesis concerning Aquinas's concept of a person. First, the thesis can be used to resolve a prominent scholarly debate concerning Aquinas's views on the possibility of human persons surviving their bodily deaths. Second, it also points to a problem with a leading interpretation of Aquinas' account of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Finally, the article concludes by discussing how a correct interpretation of Aquinas's views on these matters is related to a broader scholarly debate concerning the history of the Western concept of a person.

**Keywords:** Aquinas; Person; Hypostasis; Supposit; Personhood; Separated Soul; Survivalism

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### **I. Introduction: My Central Question and Central Thesis**

Are there some kinds of actions (e.g. some kinds of thinking, judging, reasoning, evaluating, deliberating, and/or choosing) such that only persons can engage in those actions? This is an important question about our concept of a person. I will not defend an answer to this question here, though I'll note that I hold that there is a strong case to be made for an affirmative answer to it. Intuitively, if one learned that an alien individual or "Martian" could engage in all the kinds of mental activities that you or I can engage in, i.e., if one learned that it could think in all the ways that we can, reason in all the ways that we can, form intentions and exercise free choice in the ways that we can, love in the ways that we do, think of itself as a self, etc., one would conclude that the alien individual, though not a human being, nonetheless is like you or me in being a *person* and, as such, has the dignity and moral status that we believe all persons have.

It is not this paper's aim to address the above question, for the above question concerns *our* concept of a person. This paper will instead address a

historical question about the medieval philosopher *Thomas Aquinas's* concept of a person. In particular, the question I'll address is this:

Central Question: Does *Aquinas* hold that there are some kinds of actions which only persons can perform?

I will argue that Aquinas does in fact hold this:

Central Thesis: Aquinas maintains that there are some kinds of actions that only persons can perform.

More precisely, in what follows I will first defend the aforementioned Central Thesis, showing that Aquinas maintains that there are some kinds of actions, namely those involving what he refers to as the powers of "intellect" and "will," which he thinks only persons can perform. Second, I'll discuss two important implications of my being right about this historical question concerning Aquinas's concept of a person. Finally, I'll conclude by highlighting the relevance of my discussion to a broader scholarly debate about the history of the Western concept of a person.

## II. A Defense of the CENTRAL THESIS

Aquinas follows Boethius in defining a person as "an individual substance of a rational nature" and goes on to clarify that by "an individual substance" he means a "hypostasis" or "supposit."<sup>1</sup> (In the contexts at issue in this paper,

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<sup>1</sup> See *ST* I.29.1, I.29.1.ad5, and I.75.4.ad2. All references to Aquinas's works are to the Latin editions available at <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/>. English translations are my own. I abbreviate references to Aquinas' texts as follows: *Summa Theologiae* = *ST*; *Summa Contra Gentiles* = *SCG*;

Aquinas uses the Greek term “hypostasis” synonymously with the Latin term “supposit<sup>2</sup>”). To understand this definition of a person, we need to understand what Aquinas means by a “hypostasis” and what it is for an individual substance or hypostasis to be “of a rational nature.” Let’s begin with what Aquinas means by a “hypostasis.”

Hypostases are subsistent individuals. A subsistent individual is a being that does not “exist in” something else in the way that characteristics (what Aquinas calls “accidents” or “accidental forms”) – e.g., colors, shapes, relations, powers/capacities, etc. – do. Such accidents or accidental forms by nature “exist in,” or as characterizing, something else. Shapes, colors, capacities, etc. exist as the shapes, colors, and capacities of other things, the things that have such shapes, colors, and capacities. Subsistent individuals, by contrast, do not “exist in,” or as characterizing, anything else but rather, Aquinas says, exist “in themselves” or “through themselves” (*per se*). Aquinas includes among his examples of subsistent individuals not only the primary substances of Aristotle’s *Categories* (e.g., individual human beings and animals) but also the bodily parts of individual human beings and animals (e.g., hands, ears, heads, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

Though all hypostases are subsistent individuals, not all subsistent individuals are hypostases. Subsistent individuals that are hypostases differ

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*Compendium Theologiae* = CT; *Quaestio Disputata De Anima* = QDA; *Quaestio Disputata De Unione Verbi Incarnati* = De Unione; *Quaestio Disputata De Spiritualibus Creaturis* = QDSC; *Quaestiones De Quolibet* = QQ; *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei* = QDP; and *Scriptum Super Sententiis* = In Sent.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *ST* I.29.2 and *SCG* IV.49.12-13. See *ST* I.29.2.ad1 for a text in which Aquinas allows that other authors sometimes use the term “hypostasis” in a more restricted sense, to denote not any supposit but only a supposit of a rational nature, i.e., a person.

<sup>3</sup> See *ST* I.75.2.ad1.

from subsistent individuals that are not hypostases in that the former are “complete in their nature or kind,” whereas the latter are not. Examples of subsistent individuals that are hypostases include individual animals and individual human persons, as well each of the divine persons of the Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Aquinas contrasts such subsistent individuals with the bodily parts of humans and animals as well as the substantial forms or souls of human persons (which he famously regards as subsistent individuals, though not as hypostases). When Aquinas says that the bodily parts of animals and human persons and the substantial forms of human persons are not “complete in their nature or kind,” he means that to be such a thing (e.g., a hand, a foot, an eye, a brain, a hoof, a human soul, etc.) essentially involves being of a part or form of something else, in fact of some hypostasis. For example, something's being a hand essentially involves its being an organ *of* a human person or animal, and something's being a human soul essentially involves its being the form *of* a human person.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, hypostases are subsistent individuals that are “complete in their nature or kind,” i.e., they are subsistent individuals which are not essentially a part of or a substantial form of something else. Thus, Aquinas's definition of a person as a hypostasis of a rational nature implies that anything that is a person (a) is a subsistent individual and (b) is not essentially a part of (or a substantial form of) something else. This is what Aquinas means by “hypostasis” when he defines persons as individual substances, or hypostases, of a rational nature.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that individual animals are not hypostases of a rational nature and thus are not persons. Not all hypostases are persons; only those which have a rational nature are persons. Though for a more restricted use of the term ‘hypostasis’ to denote only persons, see *ST* I.29.2.ad1.

<sup>5</sup> See *ST* I.75.2.ad1, *ST* I.75.4.ad2, *ST* I.29.1.ad5, *SCG* IV.49.12-13, *ST* III.2.3.ad3, *QDP* 9.2.ad14, *QDSC* 2.ad16, and *QDA* a.2, ad.11.

Let's now turn to the second part of Aquinas's Boethian definition of a person: what does it mean for an individual substance or hypostasis to be "of a rational nature"? As Aquinas understands the term, the "nature" of an individual substance consists in a substantial form in the case of an immaterial substance or a substantial form and matter in the case of a material substance. Aquinas maintains that the nature of an individual substance is not only what makes the substance to be of a particular species or kind (e.g., a human, a cow, an oak tree, etc.) but also serves as "the primary principle" of the substance's specific powers and operations.<sup>6</sup> By this, Aquinas means that any individual substance or hypostasis has the powers to perform whatever operations that it is capable of performing in virtue of having the kind of nature that it has. Thus, for an individual substance or hypostasis to have a "rational" nature is for it to have a nature (in particular, a substantial form) in virtue of having which it has certain basic rational powers.

What are these basic rational powers? Aquinas discusses two basic multifaceted powers that he takes to be bestowed by a rational nature. The first is what Aquinas refers to as the "intellective power" or the "power of intellect." This is a power to formulate concepts of universals or kinds (e.g., the concept of a tree, the concept of color, the concept of a rectangle, etc.); to entertain, assent to the truth of, or deny the truth of propositions employing these concepts (propositions like all squares are rectangles, Socrates is a human being, shapes and colors are properties, etc.); to reason using these concepts (e.g., Socrates is mortal, for Socrates is a human being and all human beings are mortal); and to engage in reflexive thinking about oneself

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<sup>6</sup> See *CT* 2.212, *ST* 1.77.1.ad3, *ST* 1.76.1c, and *De Unione* 5.c.

and one's own thoughts, sensations, feelings, and other mental states. The second of the two powers bestowed by a rational nature is what Aquinas refers to as the "power of will." This is a power to engage in various kinds of evaluative judgments (i.e., to judge things to be good or bad in this or that respect, just or unjust in this or that respect, beautiful or ugly in this or that respect, etc.) and act in light of these evaluative judgements.

Aquinas also claims that things which have these two powers of intellect and will can exercise a kind of self-determination or self-governance that sets them apart from non-rational individuals. By virtue of its intellect, a rational individual can recognize various possible ends for action and can, by exercising its will, make a "free choice" as to which of several actions it will perform for which end(s). As Aquinas puts it in one particularly striking passage (in *ST I-II.1.2.c*),

a thing tends to an end by its action or movement in two ways: in one way, by moving itself to the end, as a human being does; in a second way, by being moved by another to the end, as an arrow tends to a determinate target through being moved by an archer...[T]hose things which have reason [i.e., a rational nature] move themselves towards their end, since they have control over their actions through their free-will, which is a faculty of will and reason. But those things that lack reason tend to their end by natural inclination, as if being moved by another and not by themselves, since they do not have

cognition of an end as such and consequently cannot ordain their behavior towards [some cognized] end.<sup>7</sup>

Putting this all together, we arrive at the following understanding of Aquinas's concept of a person: to be a person is to be a hypostasis of a rational nature, i.e., (a) a subsistent individual which (b) is not essentially a part of or a substantial form of something else and which (c) has a substantial form in virtue of having which it has certain powers, namely, the powers of intellect and will. It follows from this definition that anything that is a person has the powers of intellect and will. But does Aquinas also hold the converse? That is, does Aquinas hold that anything that has the powers of intellect and will is a person? I will now argue that Aquinas does in fact hold this.

Crucial here is Aquinas's clarification that only a hypostasis can perform the "operations" or "actions" associated with any substantial nature.<sup>8</sup> Though in various contexts Aquinas will speak as if the parts or forms of hypostases perform such operations (e.g., he'll talk as if eyes see and as if the substantial forms or souls of human persons "understand" (*intelligere*)), in other contexts he makes it clear that this is not a precise way of speaking. This is not a precise way of speaking because, he explains, what in fact performs the actions or operations in question are the hypostases to which these parts, forms, or powers belong, not the parts, forms, or powers themselves.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See also the prologue of *ST I-II*, *ST I-II.1.2.c*, *ST I.29.1.c*, and *ST I.83.1.c*.

<sup>8</sup> See *ST III.2.3.c*. For other places where Aquinas affirms that supposit/hypostases alone perform actions and operations, see *ST I.29.1.c*; *ST I.39.5.ad1*; *ST I.40.1.ad3*; *ST III.7.13.c*; *De Unione* a.1, ad16; *ST III.19.1.ad3*; and *ST III.19.1.ad4*.

<sup>9</sup> See especially *ST I.75.2.ad2* and *ST II-II.58.2c*. See also *QDSC 2.ad2* and *ST III.20.1.ad2*. For some further nuances concerning Aquinas's use of the term "subject" (*subiectum*), see Hauser, Forthcoming: §5.



What exactly is an “operation” or “action”? For my purposes here, it is not necessary to give a precise definition of these terms. Instead, it will suffice to note that thinking, willing, sensing, feeling, and any other exercise of a psychological power, including the powers of intellect and will, are all “operations” or “actions” as Aquinas uses those terms. Thus, Aquinas’s position is that only hypostases can think, will, sense, feel, and engage in any other exercise of a psychological power, including the powers of intellect of will.

We have reached the conclusion that Aquinas holds that the only things that think, will, sense, feel, and engage in any other exercise of a psychological power, including the powers of intellect and will, are hypostases. We are close to establishing the aforementioned Central Thesis, but not quite there yet. To establish that thesis, we must consider whether Aquinas thinks there could be a hypostasis capable of exercising the powers of intellect and will without having a rational nature.

A careful consideration of Aquinas’s texts indicates that he maintains that a hypostasis’s being capable of exercising the powers of intellect and will entails that it has a rational nature. This is because Aquinas holds that the form of a hypostasis is what accounts for its being able to operate in the ways that it is capable of operating. As he puts it in one text, “that primarily by virtue of which anything performs an operation is the form of the thing so operating.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, any hypostasis that engages in the operations of intellect and will must have a corresponding nature or form, by virtue of having which it has such powers of intellect and will. To have such a nature or form just is to have a rational nature or form. Thus, only a hypostasis possessed of a rational nature

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<sup>10</sup> *ST*1.76.1.c.

or form can engage in those kinds of thinking, reasoning, judging, deliberating, and deciding that are the manifestations of the powers of intellect and will.

It's now time to assemble the foregoing points to see how they establish my Central Thesis:

1. Aquinas holds that only hypostases, and not the subsistent parts or forms of hypostases, are capable of thinking, willing, sensing, and, in general, performing any psychological operation, including any operations of intellect and will.
2. Aquinas holds that every hypostasis which can engage in the operations of intellect and will has a corresponding rational nature or form, by virtue of having which it has such powers of intellect and will.
3. Thus, Aquinas holds that only hypostases that have a rational nature can engage in the operations of intellect and will. (From 1-2).
4. Aquinas holds that to be a person is to be a hypostasis that has a rational nature.
5. Thus, Aquinas holds that only persons can engage in the operations of intellect and will. (From 3-4).

Thus, my Central Thesis is established: Aquinas's view is that there are some kinds of mental activities such that only persons can engage in those mental activities. In particular, Aquinas holds that only persons can engage in the kinds of conceptual thinking, evaluative judgment, practical reasoning, and free choice that Aquinas identifies as the multi-faceted operations of the rational powers of "intellect" and "will."

I turn now to discuss the implications my Central Thesis has for other matters.

### III. Implications for the Scholarly Controversy Concerning Aquinas's View of the Interim State

It is well-known that Aquinas rejects the view that human persons are wholly immaterial substances, including the position which he associated with Plato according to which a human person is a "soul using a body."<sup>11</sup> On Aquinas's view, it belongs to the nature of a human person to have both an immaterial soul and a material body but to be identical to neither. Furthermore, it is also well-known that Aquinas holds that human persons differ from other substances composed of matter and form (including animals) in that the forms (or souls) of human persons can exist separately from their bodies (i.e., from their matter), whereas the forms (or souls) of other material substances (including animals) cannot exist separately from their bodies/matter. Aquinas maintains that, in the case of human persons, this separate existence is possible because their human powers of intellect and will do not essentially require a body to be exercised, a fact which Aquinas takes to imply that the "formal principle" of such powers (i.e., the substantial form that is the "principle" or ground of such powers, viz., the human soul) does not depend for its existence on its enforming a body (or the matter thereof).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., *SCG* II.57.

<sup>12</sup> See *ST* I.75.2.

In fact, Aquinas goes further and claims that one's soul surviving the death of one's body is not merely logically possible but in fact what actually happens. Moreover, when discussing this disembodied afterlife which he believes natural reason can show to be possible and which he, on account of his faith in Christian revelation, takes to be actual, Aquinas speaks not only of disembodied acts of intellect and will but also of post-mortem experiences of rewards (in Heaven), trials (in Purgatory), and punishment (in Hell) as well as post-mortem acts of intercessory prayer.<sup>13</sup>

But *which thing is it exactly* that Aquinas believes thinks, wills, experiences, and prays after a person's death? As it turns out, the answer to this question has been the subject of a fierce ongoing scholarly debate. There are two competing interpretations of Aquinas's position: the "Corruptionist Interpretation" and the "Survivalist Interpretation."<sup>14</sup>

Proponents of the Corruptionist Interpretation maintain that Aquinas holds that human persons are essentially embodied and hence cannot exist without having a body. According to this interpretation, when human persons die, their souls survive but the persons themselves cease to exist (at least until God, by a supernatural act, brings them back into existence by restoring their disembodied souls to their bodies in the final bodily resurrection that

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<sup>13</sup> For evidence that Aquinas thinks separated souls or persons are capable of thinking and willing, see *ST* I.75.6.ad3; *ST* I.89; *ST* I-II.4.5; *ST* I-II.67; *SCG* II.81; *QDA* a.15; *QDA* a.19, ad.11; *ST* Suppl.70.2-3; *In Sent* III.31.2.4; and *In Sent* IV.60.1.1. For evidence that Aquinas thinks separated souls or persons experience the reward of heaven or the punishment of purgatory/hell, see *SCG* IV.91, *ST* Suppl.69.2, and *ST* Suppl. 69.7. For evidence that Aquinas thinks separated souls or persons can enjoy the beatific vision, see *SCG* IV.91-92. For evidence that separated souls or persons can make intercessory prayers, see *ST* Suppl.72 and *ST* II-II.83.11.

<sup>14</sup> For recent arguments for the Corruptionist Interpretation, see Toner, 2009; Toner, 2010; Nevitt, 2016; and Nevitt, 2020. For recent arguments for the Survivalist Interpretation, see Stump, 2003; Stump, 2006; Stump, 2012, and Brower, 2014. References to the numerous other authors engaged in this exegetical dispute can be found in these works.

Aquinas and all Christians believe in). But if human persons cease to exist when their souls separate from their bodies, *what it is that* thinks, wills, experiences, and prays during the interim period between one's death and one's eventual bodily resurrection? Proponents of the Corruptionist Interpretation maintain that Aquinas's belief is that it is the person's *separated soul* that does these things.

By contrast, proponents of the Survivalist Interpretation claim that Aquinas thinks that human persons can and do survive the separation of their souls from their bodies. Though a human person's body is part of their nature as a human being, it is not true of such persons that they can exist only if they have a body. Rather, Survivalists maintain that just as human persons can survive the loss of their legs, even though their legs are part of their natural endowment as human beings and necessary for them to exercise their full range of natural capacities, likewise human persons can survive the loss of their bodies altogether, even though their bodies are part of their natural endowment as human beings and necessary for them to exercise their full range of natural capacities. This Survivalist claim opens room for the further claim that the disembodied thing that thinks, wills, experiences, and prays after death is the same human person who thinks, wills, experiences, and prays prior to death. Upon dying, that person simply becomes disembodied, i.e., a hypostasis with a human soul but no body enformed by that soul. Such a person loses the ability to exercise those of their powers that essentially require a body (e.g., they can no longer smell, hear, taste, walk, run, etc.), but they retain the ability to exercise those of their powers that do not essentially

require a body, which (on Aquinas's view) includes their powers of intellect and will.<sup>15</sup>

If my Central Thesis is correct, then the Corruptionist Interpretation is inconsistent with Aquinas's concept of a person and should be rejected in favor of the Survivalist Interpretation. Here's why:

1. Aquinas insists that separated souls are not persons.<sup>16</sup>
2. Aquinas thinks something can think, will, experience, pray, and, in general, engage in acts of intellect and will after the soul's separation from the body.<sup>17</sup>
3. As my Central Thesis makes clear, Aquinas believes that only persons can engage in the operations proper to a rational nature (i.e., the operations of intellect and will).

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<sup>15</sup> Does the Survivalist Interpretation make having a body an "accidental" feature of human persons? If one takes any contingent feature of a thing to be an "accidental" feature of that thing (i.e., for all  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $y$  is an "accidental" feature of  $x$  if  $x$  can exist without having  $y$ ), then the Survivalist Interpretation does imply that having a body is an accidental feature of human persons. However, Survivalist interpreters of Aquinas can maintain that there is an important difference between a human person's having a body and a human person's having the sort of features that Aquinas typically has in mind when discussing the "accidents" of a thing. When discussing "accidents," Aquinas typically has in mind features the possession of which are not necessary for the substance to exercise the powers bestowed by its substantial form. For example, a person's curly hair, particular spatial location, habits of will, level of grammatical knowledge, particular eye-color, etc. (typical accidental features) are not necessary for her to exercise any of her essential powers (i.e., her powers of intellect, will, sensation, etc.). By contrast, having a body is not "accidental" to human persons in this sense, since having a body *is necessary* on Aquinas's view for human persons to exercise some of their essential powers (e.g., sensation requires a body). For this reason, Aquinas says in *ST* I.118.3 that human souls are not "accidentally" united to bodies: unlike an angel (a naturally disembodied person), a human person must have a body if they are to be able to exercise all the powers bestowed by their souls. Though Aquinas is talking here about the relation between human *souls* and bodies, we can reasonably conclude that he would say the same about the relation between human *persons* and their bodies: having a body is not "accidental" (in the relevant sense) to human persons, for such persons have (by virtue of their souls) certain essential powers the exercise of which requires having a body.

<sup>16</sup> For Aquinas's claim that separated souls are not persons, see *ST* I.29.obj5 and ad5.

<sup>17</sup> See the references in n.13 above.

It follows that, on Aquinas's view, one's separated soul *cannot be* what thinks, wills, experiences, prays, etc. during the interim state. Moreover, it also follows that only a person could engage in such psychological activities (operations of intellect and will) during the interim state. The only plausible candidate for such a disembodied person would be the previously embodied person who, in dying, has become disembodied, which is exactly what proponents of the Survivalist Interpretation claim. In short, if my Central Thesis is correct, the Corruptionist Interpretation of Aquinas ought to be rejected in favor of the Survivalist Interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting that Aquinas is clear that a human soul retains both its numerical identity (as *this particular* human soul/form) and its species-nature (as a *human* soul/form) even when, after death, it has become separated from any individuating body/matter.<sup>19</sup> In other words, on Aquinas's view, a human person after dying retains the same individual substantial form, the same individual human soul, that he or she had before dying. Since Aquinas holds that in general what secures an individual substance's identity through change is its having at the end of the change the same individual substantial form that it had before undergoing the change, it follows that, upon dying, a human person persists through this change as the same individual substance, the same person.<sup>20</sup>

Such a position can be fruitfully likened to a position defended by some contemporary philosophers. Just as some contemporary philosophers claim

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<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of this issue, including several well-known passages from Aquinas's works which seem to conflict with my claim that separated souls cannot engage in the operations of intellect and will, see Hauser, Forthcoming: §5.

<sup>19</sup> See *QDA* a.1, ad.2 and *ST* I.75.6.ad3.

<sup>20</sup> For a careful discussion of the textual evidence for this, see Stump, 2003: 44-54.

that a human person, though normally composed of all the parts that comprise a complete human body, could (conceivably) persist as the same person even when reduced to nothing more than a brain cut-off from the rest of the body to which it used to be united, likewise Aquinas maintains that a human person can persist as the same person even when reduced to nothing more than a soul cut-off from the human body to which it used to be united. Moreover, just as for the aforementioned contemporary philosophers the persistence of the person's brain would (conceivably) be sufficient to sustain at least some parts of her mental life, viz., whatever parts of her mental life don't require her absent bodily organs, likewise for Aquinas the persistence of the person's soul would be sufficient to sustain some parts of her mental life, viz., whatever parts of her mental life don't require her absent bodily organs but instead require only the use of her powers of intellect and will.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, in addition to securing in this way the numerical identity of post-mortem, disembodied persons with their pre-mortem, embodied selves, Aquinas also maintains that post-mortem, disembodied human persons will retain various characteristics acquired during their embodied lifetimes, accidents whose continued possession depends only on those persons' continued possession of numerically the same human form/soul and not on their continued embodiment. Such accidents that remain after death include, Aquinas claims, certain sorts of memories (viz., those that don't essentially require the use of one's sensory powers), certain states of knowledge, and certain states of will.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Aquinas holds that disembodied persons can (and do) have

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<sup>21</sup> For a similar analogy, see Stump, 2003: 53.

<sup>22</sup> See *QDA* a.19, ad.16; *ST*I.89.5; *ST*I.89.6; and *ST*I-II.67.



qualitatively different “inner lives” in many of the same ways that embodied persons can (and do) have qualitatively different inner lives. As Eleonore Stump puts it, on Aquinas’s view “all the intellectual faculties, including the rational will, of Socrates are preserved in his separated soul. But what is contained in these faculties of the separated soul of Socrates, the habits of the will as well as the knowledge, will be different from those in the faculties of the separated soul of Plato” (2006: 164). In this way, Aquinas offers a view of human nature on which it is not just possible for human persons to survive their deaths but also possible for them to retain after death important parts of their individual identities, including particular states of memory, knowledge, and will different from the particular states of memory, knowledge, and will retained by other disembodied human individuals.

#### IV. Implications for Aquinas’s Account of the Christian Doctrine of the Incarnation

At the center of the Christian religion is the doctrine that one of the three persons of the Divine Trinity, while retaining an essential divine nature and thus remaining God, contingently assumed a human nature and thereby became a human being, the man we know as Jesus Christ. There is a much-discussed challenge to this Christian doctrine, a challenge which contemporary philosophers of religion often refer to as “the coherence objection.”<sup>23</sup> The coherence objection charges that nothing could be both a human being and God since there are properties essential to being human which are incompatible with

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<sup>23</sup> For a careful summary of recent work on the coherence objection, see Cross, 2009.

properties essential to being God. For example, one might think that it is essential to being God to be impassible, essential to being a human being to be passible, and that nothing can be both impassible and passible. Similarly, one can argue that it is essential to being God to be omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal; essential to being a human being to be limited in power, limited in knowledge, and temporal; and that nothing can be both omnipotent and limited in power, omniscient and limited in knowledge, or eternal and temporal.

Aquinas, of course, is one of the most prominent exponents of Christian doctrine within Western history. Unsurprisingly, he has much to say about the doctrine of the Incarnation. Moreover, in the course of discussing this doctrine, he does say some things which are intended to address the aforementioned coherence objection. But what exactly does Aquinas claim?

The dominant interpretation of Aquinas's response to the coherence objection, an interpretation proposed by scholars such as Eleonore Stump, Richard Cross, and Alfred Freddoso, maintains that Aquinas answers the coherence objection by holding that Christ has his human properties only derivatively, in virtue of having a human nature which has those properties in its own right. Just as an apple can be both red and not-red in virtue of having red skin and a not-red core, Christ can be both passible and impassible, in virtue of having a divine nature which is impassible and a human nature which is passible. Proponents of this interpretation claim that Aquinas extends this idea to all of Christ's human and divine properties: any human property had by Christ is had by him only derivatively, in virtue of his having a human nature which has that property in its own right, and any divine property had by Christ is had by him only derivatively, in virtue of his having a divine

nature which has that property in its own right.<sup>24</sup> This kind of response to the coherence objection is known as a “mereological response,” and the associated interpretation of Aquinas has thus been called the “mereological interpretation.”<sup>25</sup>

Now among Christ's human properties are his capacities to do all the things that human persons can do, e.g., think human thoughts, experience human emotions, experience human desires, etc. What this means is that if Christ has whatever human properties that he has derivatively, in virtue of having a human nature which has those properties in its own right, then Christ's human nature would be a thing that can do all the things that human persons can do. But Aquinas unequivocally maintains, as Christian orthodoxy requires, that Christ's human nature is not a person. Thus, this dominant, mereological interpretation of Aquinas commits Aquinas to the claim that something that is not a person can do all the things that human persons can do, including exercise human powers of intellect and will. However, the arguments in favor of my Central Thesis show that Aquinas would reject this, on the grounds that only persons, i.e., hypostases of a rational nature, can engage in the operations of intellect and will.

Here one might wonder whether Aquinas might have been pressured by the unique case of the Incarnation into allowing that, contrary to what I have argued above, the operations of intellect and will can be exercised by something that is not a person or hypostasis, namely the assumed human nature of Christ. Such a view is taken by Timothy Pawl, a leading contemporary

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<sup>24</sup> See Stump, 2002: 212-217 and Cross, 2002: 196-197. Freddoso (1983: 304-308) offers a variant on this interpretation. For further discussion, see Hauser, Forthcoming: §3.

<sup>25</sup> Gorman (2017: 128) and Hauser (2020) use this terminology. Contemporary philosophers of religion discussing the coherence objection frequently associate mereological responses to the objection with Aquinas (see Flint, 2001: 4; Flint, 2011: 71–72; and Hasker, 2017).

contributor to philosophical discussions of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Pawl claims that Aquinas (as well as other scholastics) endorsed a conception of a person according to which there can be something (in particular, Christ's human nature) which can engage in all the operations that human person can engage in and yet not be person owing to its being suitably united to something else (in this case, the Incarnate Divine Word). Such a being is capable of engaging in all the operations that a human person can engage in but is not a person or hypostasis because it lacks the independence necessary for something to be a hypostasis and hence to be a person, i.e., a hypostasis of a rational nature.<sup>26</sup>

However, as a matter of fact, there is direct textual evidence that contradicts this claim.<sup>27</sup> When discussing the unique case of the Incarnation in *ST* III.2.3.c, Aquinas writes,

a hypostasis alone is that to which the operations and properties of a nature, as well as whatever pertains to the account of the nature in the concrete, are attributed.

Here Aquinas is discussing the unique case of the Incarnation. But rather than find a counterexample to my Central Thesis, we instead find powerful confirmation of it. Here, while unpacking the conciliar claim that Christ is one hypostasis with two natures, Aquinas maintains that the operations which pertain to a substantial nature should be attributed *only to* a hypostasis of that nature. Thus, Aquinas concludes, the human operations of the Incarnate God-Man

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<sup>26</sup> See Pawl, 2016: 33

<sup>27</sup> For other textual evidence beyond that discussed in the main text above, see Hauser, Forthcoming: §§4-5.

are performed by the Incarnate divine hypostasis/person, not the human nature which that divine hypostasis/person assumed when it became incarnate.

Further confirmation for this interpretation of Aquinas's position on the Incarnation can be found in article 5 of Aquinas's *Quaestio Disputata De Unione Verbi Incarnati* (a short treatise on the Incarnation). The topic of article 5 is Christ's "operations." In the body of the article, Aquinas notes that,

the unity and plurality of an action can be considered on the part of the principle by which an agent operates (*ex parte principia quo agens operatur*). And in this way an action is said to be one or several in respect to species, just as vision and hearing are operations differing in species. For an action proceeds from an agent in respect to the nature of the power by which the agent acts (*secundum rationem virtutis qua agit*).<sup>28</sup>

A person who can see and hear can be said to perform two kinds of operations, though he is but one agent. Applying this point to questions at issue in *De Unione*, Aquinas concludes that the Incarnation involves only *one agent* but *two kinds of operations*, viz., (1) those which Christ (the hypostasis) performs by exercising the power(s) of which his divine nature is the principle, and (2) those which Christ (the hypostasis) performs by exercising the powers of which his human nature is the principle. As Aquinas puts it in *De Unione* 5.ad14, "Christ is one agent [because he is one hypostasis], but there are two [kinds of] actions in him [on account of his two natures]." The general ideas about natures and hypostases that are here applied to the case of the Incarnation –

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<sup>28</sup> *De Unione* 5.c.

namely, that the hypostasis is the agent that performs the operations associated with its nature (or natures, in the case of the Incarnation); a hypostasis's nature (or natures, in the case of the Incarnation) is not itself the agent that performs these operations but is rather the "principle" of the hypostasis's so acting, i.e., that by virtue of having which the hypostasis has the powers to perform the acts in question – fit neatly with the interpretation of Aquinas' view I have defended above in §II.

In summary, contrary to what Pawl's remarks would suggest, what Aquinas says about the Incarnation does not constitute a counterexample to my Central Thesis. Instead, Aquinas consistently applies the conception of personhood reflected in my Central Thesis to the unique case of the Incarnation. As I noted above, a consequence of this is that the dominant, mereological interpretation of Aquinas's response to the coherence objection must be rejected, for it is inconsistent with Aquinas's application of the claim of the Central Thesis to the case of the Incarnation. This of course results in a need for an alternative interpretation of Aquinas's view of the Incarnation. In another article, I have developed and defended such an alternative interpretation, an interpretation which is consistent with Aquinas's thesis that only persons can engage in the kinds of thinking, judging, reasoning, deliberating, and choosing that essentially involve the powers of intellect and will.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Hauser, Forthcoming: §§6-7.

## V. Concluding Remarks: Aquinas's Conception of Personhood in Historical Context

The concept of a person has played a key role in modern Western ethical and political theorizing, especially about human dignity, moral status, and human rights. But before modernity, the concept of a person also played a crucial role in Christian theology. In fact, many scholars of Western intellectual and religious history have claimed that the concept of a person first gained prominence in the West not as a concept employed in ethical or political theorizing but rather as a concept which patristic Christian authors developed and employed in their efforts to articulate their distinctive religious beliefs about God (viz., that there is one God and one divine substance and yet three divine persons) and about Jesus Christ (viz., that Jesus Christ is an incarnate divine person who assumed a human nature and hence became a human being even while retaining his divine nature and hence remaining God).

Some scholars (e.g., Richard Cross and Timothy Pawl) have claimed that the concept of a person employed by these patristic and scholastic authors, a concept canonically encapsulated in Boethius's (d. 424 A.D.) definition of a person as *an individual substance, or hypostasis, of a rational nature*, is importantly different from the modern Western concept of a person. Crucial here is a question about whether these patristic and scholastic authors thought that being a subject of a sufficiently rich mental life (e.g., being an individual which thinks, wills, and loves) is sufficient for being a person. Richard Cross and Timothy Pawl claim that, in general, Christian patristic and scholastic authors maintained that the human nature of Christ – a particular or individual

thing composed of a human soul and body – is not a person even while also affirming that it is an individual which thinks, wills, loves, suffers, and, in general, engages in all the characteristic activities of an individual having a rational human nature.

In fact, Richard Cross has gone so far as to claim that

any orthodox Christology would have to accept some form of this distinction – such that it would be true to state that the ultimate metaphysical subject of characteristics cannot be simply identified with the psychological centre of rational and sensitive experience...to talk of a psychological centre of consciousness is, in an orthodox Christology, to talk of what pertains to nature, not to person. (1989: 250-251).

In a similar vein, Timothy Pawl claims that the term “person,” as used by the relevant patristic and scholastic Christian authors (including Aquinas),

is not used in a psychological sense. One might understand the psychological sense of “person” as follows (Carlson 2012, 204): “An individual who manifests the developed traits and abilities associated with human, personal life (e.g. self-awareness, deliberate choice and action).”...Christ’s human nature counts as something that is individual and has the traits associated with human, personal life, but it fails to count as a supposit [and hence as a person], owing to its being sustained [or dependent on the divine person who assumed it]. (2016: 33; see also 214).



If Cross and Pawl are right about this, then the relevant patristic and scholastic authors, the authors from whom the modern Western concept of a person descends, rejected what is now a widely accepted idea about personhood, namely, that being a subject of sufficiently rich mental states (e.g., an individual which thinks, wills, reasons, chooses, and loves) is sufficient for being a person.<sup>30</sup>

My discussion of Aquinas's concept of a person is relevant to this broader historical debate about the concept of a person employed by patristic and scholastic Christian authors. In particular, I have argued here that Aquinas, one of the most influential of these authors, does not hold the view that Cross and Pawl attribute to him. On the contrary, I have argued that Aquinas consistently maintains that only persons, i.e., hypostases of a rational nature, can engage in the kinds of thinking, judging, willing, and choosing that essentially involve the powers of intellect and will. In other words, on Aquinas's view, there are psychological operations (*viz.* those of intellect and will) such that anything that engages in those operations is a person. I have also argued that, rather than revising this thesis in light of the unique case of the Incarnation, Aquinas in fact explicitly makes use of this thesis when expounding what he takes to be the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

Now, one could grant this while adding that perhaps Aquinas's claim that Christ's human nature could not itself think, reason, will, or, in general, engage in human operations was unusual and contrary to the accounts of the

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<sup>30</sup> It's worth emphasizing that these comments concern only what is *sufficient* for something to be a person, not what is *necessary* for something to be a person. While it is widely agreed by modern and contemporary thinkers that having a sufficiently rich mental life is *sufficient* for being a person, it is of course quite controversial whether having such a mental life is *necessary* for being a person (consider, for example, the controversy surrounding the personhood of unborn human fetuses or the personhood of individuals in seemingly irreversible "persistent vegetative states").

Incarnation offered by most other patristic and scholastic thinkers. In other words, one might think that perhaps most patristic and scholastic authors differed from Aquinas in endorsing a conception of personhood on which something (viz., Christ's human nature) could think, will, reason, and, in general, do all the things that human persons do and yet not be a person. One might even add that the later, scholastic authors in this group may have thought that such a conception of personhood was required if one is to accept the claims of "orthodox Christology." This is certainly what Cross and Pawl's sweeping historical claims would suggest.

However, I am skeptical that these sweeping historical claims are right. In fact, in another article, I have challenged the exegetical arguments that Pawl and Cross use to attribute the aforementioned conception of personhood to Pope St. Leo the Great (d. 461 A.D.) and the authors of the doctrinal statement of Third Council of Constantinople (680-681 A.D.). Contrary to what Pawl and Cross claim, I argue in that article that both Pope St. Leo the Great and the Third Council of Constantinople make use of the distinction between a hypostasis and the nature of a hypostasis in order to affirm that, in the case of the Incarnation, the individual who does what is human (e.g., suffers on the Cross) is "one and the same as" the individual who does what is divine (e.g., sustains the world in being). This individual is the Incarnate divine person, the hypostasis, not either of its natures; in other words, that which performs the operations associated with either nature is the person, the hypostasis, not its natures. In particular, that which performs Christ's human operations (e.g., suffers on the Cross, joins Mary and Martha in weeping for the dead

Lazarus, etc.) is the Incarnate divine person, the hypostasis, not his human nature.<sup>31</sup>

In light of all of this, I conclude by suggesting that the issues under discussion here are well worth further investigation. Such further investigation would shed light not only on the history of the Western concept of a person but also on the efforts of contemporary philosophers of religion like Pawl who aim to formulate a coherent account of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation that faithfully accords with how the original formulators of that doctrine intended it to be understood.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Hauser, 2020: §4.

<sup>32</sup> For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, I wish to thank my audiences at the 2021 Midwest Meeting for the Society of Christian Philosophers and the 2022 2<sup>nd</sup> Joint International Conference of the University of Scranton and National Taiwan University. I would also like to thank an anonymous referee for this journal for their thoughtful suggestions on how to improve an earlier version of this article.

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## 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

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(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 other<sup>1</sup>, 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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*?

## **Reply to Prof. White's Comments on "St. Thomas Aquinas's Concept of a Person"**

Christopher Hauser

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see Hauser, 2022.

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