

# Do Human Beings Stop Existing at Their Deaths in Aquinas' Account?

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## Abstract

Thomas Aquinas persistently defended the idea that the soul survives physical death. But what exactly is the rational soul that becomes separated from the body at death? When a person's body dies, do they cease to exist? Over the past few decades, a nuanced debate has developed between "survivalists" and "corruptionists" over whether or not a separated soul is still a person, leading to impenetrable disagreements in which neither side can seem to sway the other. In this research, I propose a previously unexplored answer to this contentious query: that a person whose soul has been separated from their body is an incomplete human being.

## Keywords

Survivalist, Corruptionist, Incomplete Person, Soul

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## 1. Background

Death is a reality that everyone experiences. We shall all die. Are human beings mortal or immortal? Do we fully die or merely exist differently? According to Thomas's view, these questions are going through a debate between two groups of Thomists (corruptionists and survivalists) on the status of human beings or persons after the death of their bodies. Both of those groups agree that for Aquinas, the soul still exists after the dead bodies. However, they differ in what happens to human beings. According to corruptionist, St. Thomas Aquinas believed that human beings or persons cease to exist after the death of their bodies and will come back again at the resurrection (Davies, 1992: pp. 215-220; Elders, 1997: pp. 274-284; Kenny, 1993: p. 138; Lee & George, 2008: pp. 66-81; Pasnau, 2002: pp. 380-393). St. Thomas Aquinas upholds the thesis that the separated

soul is *not* a person.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the survivalist view believes that, according to Aquinas, persons continue to exist in the separated soul when their bodies die (Brown, 2007: pp. 655-668; Brown, 2005: pp. 120-124; Moreland & Rae, 2009: p. 201; Stump, 2003: pp. 51-54; Stump, 2006: pp. 153-174).

In this paper, I will contend that Aquinas, in contrast to the Survivalists and the Corruptionists, was not committed to this view. He argues that human beings separate souls after death, but it is not clear whether he thinks they will continue to exist between death and resurrection. In this paper, I argue that Aquinas consistently assures you (human beings) are not your soul, but you (a part of human beings) still exist as a soul. Therefore, a human being is an incomplete person. There are three sections to the paper. First, I discuss Aquinas's definition of humans, which he calls "human persons" or "the nature of humans." In the second part, I contend that the standard and alternative views on the persistence of an individual human being's soul at death and before the bodily resurrection are not explicitly St. Thomas's meaning. Then, in the third, I argue that, even though death separates the soul from the body (the corruption of the human person), the soul remains the "essential part" of the person and retains a particular identity (can do the sort of things a person does after the body's death human) with that person as a subject of attribution. Therefore, it is a representation of an incomplete human being or an imperfect human.

## 2. The Nature of Human Beings on Aquinas

In Part I of *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas deals with human nature in fifteen questions (75-102). This session will deal with Thomas's nature of human beings as a soul-body composite based on Thomas Aquinas' account of the rational soul's metaphysical nature and its hylomorphic union with the body. Aquinas simultaneously holds that the rational soul is the substantial form of human beings and that it is an incorporeal subsisting thing that survives death.

So what are human beings? Aquinas adopts the definition of a person formulated by Boethius, "A person is an individual substance with a rational nature." In general, a person is a being that has an intellective mind—to be rational thought and a living and corporeal substance:

"It belongs per se to a human being that there be found in him a rational soul and a body composed of the four elements. So without these parts, a human being cannot be understood, and they must be placed in the definition of a human being, so they are parts of the species and form."<sup>2</sup>

According to Aquinas, a person is a being that owns in itself a specific nature, which is not only shared with other beings of its kind but also distinguishes

<sup>1</sup>Aquinas. *Scriptum Super Sententiis (In Sent.)*, III, d5, q3, a2, ad1: "quod anima separata, proprie loquendo, non est substantia alicujus naturae, sed est pars naturae." *In Sent.* III, d5, q3, a2, ad3: "quod anima rationalis dicitur hoc aliquid per modum quo esse subsistens est hoc aliquid, etiam si habeat naturam partis; sed ad rationem personae exigitur ulterius quod sit totum et completum."

<sup>2</sup>Aquinas, *De Trinitate Boëthii*, q. 5, a. 3.

himself from other types of persons, to be rational nature—as a rational animal: Animal indeed is predicated of a human being per se, and similarly rational of an animal. Hence this expression, rational animal, is the definition of human beings<sup>3</sup>.

In other words, Aquinas said that human beings are a composite of the form (or soul) and matter (or body). “The body is not of the essence of the soul, but the soul by the nature of its essence can be united to the body, so that, properly speaking, not the soul alone, but the composite, is the species.”<sup>4</sup>

No human person can exist without a body. The human soul and the human body, which is a substantial form, are not two separate existing substances<sup>5</sup>. A human person is necessary for a composite of body and soul, as Aquinas insists:

“Body and soul are not two existing substances, but from these two is made one actually existing substance. For a human being’s body is not the same in the soul’s presence and absence, but the soul makes it exist actually.” (Aquinas. *De unitate intellectus*, chap. 3)

In question 75, in part Ia of *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas explicitly asserts that “man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body.”<sup>6</sup> We and our bodies would not be one thing, but one thing inhabiting another thing different from itself. However, how do these two things go together in ours? What kind of composite (combination) is Aquinas talking about here? In what way does it come about?

There are several ways for an object to be considered united. In the book “The mortal in you,” Augros mentions two kinds of combining different things into one. One way is collective unity—many individuals unite into one collection. The other way is that many different things unite into one individual (Augros 2007: p. 146).

Formerly, many individual things come together in a new whole, so we have a collection, but not a real individual. Augros gives an example: when we melt all the marbles down and make a new one as a giant marble. In this way, the origin of marble disappears entirely, and they do not exist anymore in the new marble. (Augros, 2007: p. 147)

Many things can bring together into one individual without totally losing their nature after they combine with others in a new individual. Augros used a combination of words to illustrate this possibility. We can combine many words to make a phrase or sentence. (Augros, 2007: p. 147)

The relationship between the soul and body is not the first type of unity. According to Aquinas, the relation between the body and soul is the intrinsic unity of matter and substance form, which is responsible for the unified existence of human beings (Eberl, 2004: p. 335). Therefore the second type in the Augros

<sup>3</sup>Aquinas, *In duodecim libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, bk. 7, lect. 3, #1326.

<sup>4</sup>Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 75, a. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Aquinas, *SCG II*, chapter. 69.

<sup>6</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 75, a. 4.

view is an easy way that illustrates the unity between a soul and body. The soul and body profoundly depend on each other. The body will exercise its power informed by the soul. Once again, the soul is the act of the body. So there will be no action without a body. Thus, without the body, the soul's function would be paralyzed. In this light, Aquinas opposed the conception of Platonist that human beings are identical with their souls—we are souls that merely use bodies as an instrument or a substance that moves another substance.

Aquinas also asserts that body and soul are not merely an aggregate of soul and body. Both of them are separated and distinct. Nevertheless, none of them is a substance; the two together compose a substance—a human person. He observes that the soul does not occupy the body like a sailor and his ship. If then, at death separated, the union of soul and body will be the decomposition of a substance (Eberl, 2004: p. 336).

By admitting people are not identical to a soul or a body, the human person is a union of spiritual and corporeal (soul or mind and body). Thus, Aquinas is unequivocally against dualism and materialism (Eberl, 2004: p. 337) that only the composite of body and soul constitutes one (a human being), complete substance.

However, combined with the body and forms the composite of a human person, the soul is not a spirit attached to the human body. A soul is a form of the body and the principle of life. In question 76, St. Thomas makes clear that the human soul is the form of the body: “For that whereby primarily anything acts is a form of the thing to which the act is to be attributed.” Therefore, it is evident that the first thing by which the body lives is the soul. The soul is the primary principle of all bodily operations. Aquinas gives details:

“For the soul is the primary principle of our nourishment, sensation, and local movement, and likewise of our understanding. Therefore this principle by which we primarily understand, whether it be called the intellect or the intellectual soul, is the form of the body.”<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, it is the soul that gives being to the composite. The soul is the form of the body. What happened to the soul at the death of my body? According to Aquinas, the rational principle that we call the mind or intellect (the soul) has an operation apart from the body.

Nevertheless, nothing can operate *per se*, except it exists *per se*. Therefore, we can conclude that the human soul, which is the intellect or mind, is not dependent on the body but subsistent *per se*.<sup>8</sup>

In saying that the human soul is subsistent, Aquinas means that a soul is a form that, by some means, surpasses matter, meaning that it can potentially exist apart from its matter—that is, apart from the body (Pasnau, 2002: p. 49). However, Aquinas's conclusion about the soul's subsistence at the body's death raises another problem. What happens to us when we die?

<sup>7</sup>Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 76, a.1.

<sup>8</sup>Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 75, a. 2.

### 3. Does a Human Person Still Exist at Their Death?

As we have seen in question 75, Aquinas said that death would separate the soul, and body union confirms; however, he contends that the human soul still exists at the death of our body. Our souls will continue to exist without our bodies: “[T]he dust returns into its earth from whence it was, and the spirit returns to God Who gave it.”<sup>9</sup> However, in the commentary on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Aquinas writes: “My soul is not me.” Even so, what do we think about our ancestors and others who have already died? Are they still exist in some sense, or do they not exist anymore? As we shall see, contemporary interpreters of Aquinas quoted above have recently entered a new debate about his view on the status of human beings or persons in the temporary period between death and resurrection between two rival philosophical positions. The corruptionism or standard view on the one hand and survivalism or alternative view on the other.

In general, both views agree that human beings are a composite of soul and body, according to Aquinas, and the soul will separate from the body at their death. The body will cease to exist and corrupt while the soul survives and continue to exist. They disagree with Aquinas’s view about what happens to human persons after death and prior to the resurrection.

### 4. Corruptionism View

I will begin with an account of corruptionism. The corruptionist view contends that human beings corrupt at death; the separated soul survives death, but it is not a person. According to corruptionists, Aquinas thought that human persons die down to exist at their bodies die and only exist again at the resurrection (Toner, 2009: pp. 121-138; Toner, 2010: pp. 587-599).<sup>10</sup> Although Aquinas unequivocally believes that I will survive during my death and before the general resurrection, he does not mean that I—my nature as a body and soul composite exist. The main argument of this view is that the separated soul cannot constitute a human being (which is a composite of soul and body) because it lacks complete human nature: “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.”<sup>11</sup>

In the article “St. Thomas Aquinas on death and separated soul,” Patrick Toner (2010) argues that human beings do not exist at their deaths: I am not my soul (I am a composite of body and soul). My soul is all when I die (death is a

<sup>9</sup>Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 75, a. 6.

<sup>10</sup>Leading defender of corruptionism is Patrick Toner. In his articles, Patrick Toner argues that from St. Thomas’ point of view on the composition of the human being that anything that is a man must be embodied whereas anything that is not embodied is not a man. The author contends that when a person dies and is no longer composed of flesh and bone, the man that they were ceases to exist, although their act of existence may remain in something else, such as their soul. The author concludes that the corruptionist’s view is accurate and that the persistence of the soul alone is insufficient for the survival of a human being.

<sup>11</sup>Aquinas. *De potentia* q. 9, a. 2, rep 14; Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1, rep 5.

corruption of the composite). Therefore, I do not survive at my death (587-599).

I am not my soul. If I am a composition of body and soul, as the definition above, then I cannot be a soul or body. So I am not identical to my soul, and then clearly, I do not survive my death. Aquinas explicitly claims that my soul is not me in the commentary on 1 Corinthians letter. He writes:

“The soul is not the whole human being; only part of one: my soul is not me. So that even if the soul achieves well-being in another life, that does not mean that I do or any other human being does.”<sup>12</sup>

Anthony Kenny was in line with Toner when he argued that I do not have a body, but I am a body, “A human being is not something that has a body; it is a body, a living body of a particular kind. Therefore, the dead body of a human being is not a human body any longer...” (Kenny, 1993: p. 28). Indeed, in another passage, Aquinas seems to deny the existence of Abraham (a human being) at his death:

“Abraham’s soul, properly speaking, is not Abraham himself, but a part of him (and the same as regards the others). Hence life in Abraham’s soul does not suffice to make Abraham a living being or to make the God of Abraham the God of a living man.”<sup>13</sup>

The corruptionist holds that the separated soul would not be a human being, which has a complete substance for two reasons. First, if the separated soul had human nature, it would not be needed for the body because it has already completed its own, or the soul could use the body as an instrument, as Plato thought (Spencer, 2014: p. 870). However, according to Aquinas, a human being cannot be without a body. A separated soul does not have it as a complete nature.<sup>14</sup> Aquinas affirms that “neither the definition nor the name of a person belongs to it (the separated soul)”<sup>15</sup>. Second, as mentioned in the former, the soul does need to unite with the body for substantial completion. If both body and soul were complete and independent substances, then the human being would be indefinite.<sup>16</sup> There could be two human beings, one as the separated soul and one which was a reunion between a soul and body at the resurrection (Toner, 2010: p. 594). Therefore, even though the human soul (the substantial form) is the principle of identity for the human being, does not completely human nature and is not a human being.

The corruptionist asserts that the composite human being, not only the rational soul, is responsible for actions such as understanding and perceiving. As Aquinas said, it is correct to say that man understands through the soul than the soul understands<sup>17</sup>. According to Aquinas, the separated soul cannot have com-

<sup>12</sup>Aquinas, 1993: p. 192.

<sup>13</sup>Aquinas. *ST III*, Supplement, q. 75, a. 1, rep 2.

<sup>14</sup>Aquinas. *ST III*, Supplement, q. 93, a. 1; *SCG II*, chapter 71.

<sup>15</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1, rep 5.

<sup>16</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 118, a. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 75, a. 2, rep 2.

plete knowledge without the body since it cannot turn to phantasm.

“It is as natural for the soul to understand by turning to the phantasms as it is for it to be joined to the body, but to be separated from the body is not following its nature, and likewise to understand without turning to the phantasms is not natural to it.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, according to the survivalist view, during the period of death and before the general resurrection, the human being is constituted by only one part the soul—which does not cease to exist. On the ground of Aquinas’s thought in question 29, article 1 of *Summa Theologiae*, Toner argues that a human person cannot be constituted by just one of the proper parts (body or soul) as survivalism’s view. There is no way to distinguish the soul and the person—a composite of soul and body, which is the “problem of too many thinkers” (Toner, 2009: pp. 133-134).

Since these are reasons, the corruptionist concludes that we do not exist at death since the separated soul is not human. It is just a part of human beings. However, the “too thinkers problem” is not a thing for survivalists; it is also a problem for the corruptionist. In some passages, Aquinas talks about Abraham, Peter, Felix, or anyone else in the interim period between death and resurrection, which seems to give the corruptionist serious trouble. In these texts, it seems that Aquinas does not hold the corruptionist view (Toner, 2010: p. 595).

## 5. Survivalism View

Like corruptionists, survivalists accept that human beings are composed of body and soul, and the separated soul continues to exist at death. According to survivalists, Aquinas claims that human beings survive the death of their bodies and go on living as separated souls because the separated soul is a person. Defenders of survivalists argue that human being still exists at death<sup>19</sup>.

The survivalist gives the first argument that the constitution is not identity. According to survivalists, Aquinas distinguishes between constitution or composition<sup>20</sup> and identity. A human being is not identical to his soul or his body: “The man is not a mere soul, nor a mere body, but both soul and body”.<sup>21</sup> Aquinas holds that composition is not identity. According to this distinction, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts that compose it. They are not identical to their parts, but their parts constitute them. According to this distinction, the whole human being is not identical to the soul and a body; preferably, it is composed of, but greater than, the soul and body (Nevitt, 2016: p. 81). By adopting

<sup>18</sup>Aquinas. *STI*, q. 89, a. 1, c. 2.

<sup>19</sup>The defenders of this view are Eleonore Stump, Jason T. Elberl, Christopher M. Brown, Mark Spencer. Although there are differences in their respective interpretations, these authors do agree that the perseverance of the separated soul is enough to ensure the perseverance of the human person.

<sup>20</sup>In this paper the term constitution and composition are exchangeable.

<sup>21</sup>Aquinas. *STI*, q. 75, a. 4.

the notion that composition is not identity, survivalists argue that a human being is his soul.

The survivalist holds that the constitution is not identified consistently and that a composed substance can lose some of its constituents' parts without losing its identity (Stump, 2003: pp. 51-52). According to the survivalist, a thing can lose parts, and the remaining parts still hold the original thing. In this way, a human can lose a hand or a leg and still exist as the same person. Since the constitution is not identity, Stump (2006) argues that a human being could lose his body and still exist and be constituted by its separated soul alone (151-172). In a new state, a human person exists composed of his soul alone, but he is not identical to his soul (Eberl, 2004: p. 340).

The second argument is that the human soul at death can keep sensitive and intellectual activities like the same human being (before death). According to Aquinas, a human being is identical to a rational animal (human soul).<sup>22</sup> Stump says that in Aquinas's view, some properties, which are characteristic of a human person, were attributed to the separated soul (Stump).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the separated soul can experience delight and suffering,<sup>24</sup> understand and make choices<sup>25</sup>, appear to the living,<sup>26</sup> and respond to their prayer.<sup>27</sup> Besides, Stump contends that "a substantial form is sufficient for the existence of the supposit whose form it is, and so the existence of a human soul is sufficient for the existence of a human person" (Stump, 2006: p. 165). The fact that we can say the human soul alone, with the abilities (properties) of human beings that is a human being.

The separated soul does not seem to fulfill the notion of a human being, according to Aquinas as he writes: "The separated soul is an individual substance of the rational nature, but it is not a person. Therefore a person is not properly defined as above".<sup>28</sup> The soul is a part of human nature and not some nature per se. Its lacks of complete nature. Furthermore, the "two thinkers problem" is another dilemma the survivalist have to cope with.

After previewing the corruptionism and survivalism views, compared with the notion of human beings according to Aquinas's thought, it unequivocally seems that both the two views about the separated soul cannot convince everyone and their rival. The separated soul is not a complete human being in a survivalist view, but it does not favor the corruptionist view. If the separated soul were not a human being, even though it does not cease to exist at death, what is its state of it?

## 6. Incomplete Persons

Will I continue to exist during the time between death and resurrection? As was

<sup>22</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1.

<sup>23</sup>Stump. "Aquinas's Metaphysic: Individuation and Constitution," 1383-84.

<sup>24</sup>Aquinas. *SCG II*, c. 81; *ST I*, q. 89, a. 4-6.

<sup>25</sup>Aquinas. *ST III*, Supplement, q. 72, a. 3.

<sup>26</sup>Aquinas. *ST III*, Supplement, q. 69, a. 3, c. 4.

<sup>27</sup>Aquinas. *ST III*, Supplement, q. 72, a. 3.

<sup>28</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1, rep. 5.



said above, the survivalist and corruptionist interpretation of the separated soul during death and prior resurrection is not precisely Aquinas's view. In this part, by using both textual evidence and philosophical arguments, I will prove that Aquinas admits that I will exist but also that I will not. Although the separated soul cannot be interpreted as a human person, according to Aquinas's term (composite of a soul and body), it can be a human being in an analogous sense (it is part of persons with full capacities to whom it belonged before death). Therefore, I contend that the separated soul at death is an incomplete human person (human being).

According to Aquinas's definition of human beings, we cannot exist as a separated soul if we are a composite of body and soul. However, the separated soul can exist at death; what is it? Aquinas said that the separated soul is a substance, primarily an incomplete substance (Toner, 2009: p. 127). According to Toner, something could be completeness in two senses. First, it is completeness in substantial perfection. In this sense, a substance completely exists without being substantially united with any other substances to form a further substance. Second, there is completeness in the line of specific perfection. A substance exists as a complete in substantial perfection and can discharge all functions naturally to its species (Toner, 2009: p. 127).

Together with two meanings of completeness, there are two senses of incompleteness. First, something is incompleteness if it cannot meet both of those senses (completeness). Second, an object can be incompleteness if it meets only the first sense of completeness. A separated soul is incompleteness in this sense. The separated soul can exist apart from the body but cannot operate the sensitive and vegetative functions natural to humans (Toner, 2009: pp. 128-129).

I will show that a separated soul is an incomplete person, according to Aquinas, by looking for some passages and philosophical arguments where He ascribes some characteristics of human persons to disembodied souls' properties.

The textual evidence consists of several passages in which Aquinas contends that a separated soul will exist radically, incompletely, and imperfectly (Conn, 2012: p. 329). In the commentary on the first letter to Corinthians, Aquinas writes: "The union of body and soul is certainly a natural one, and any separation of the soul from the body goes against its nature and is imposed it. If the soul is deprived of the body, it will exist imperfectly as long as that situation lasts" (Aquinas, 1993: p.192). For Aquinas, it is inconceivable that our souls could exist forever alone: "The soul is not the whole human being, only part of one: my soul is not me. So that even if [my] soul achieves well-being in another life, that does not mean I do, or any other human being does" (Aquinas, 1993: p. 192). He believes that in itself, the human soul is only part of a complete human being. A complete human being must have body and soul. So "my soul is not anyone than I, and in a sense, it is I, but it is not fully I, not I in the strictest sense" (Pasnau, 2002: p. 389). In the commentary on Lombard's Sentences, Aquinas declares the same point:

“Abraham’s soul, properly speaking, is not Abraham himself, but a part of him (and the same as regards the others). Hence life in Abraham’s soul does not suffice to make Abraham a living being or to make the God of Abraham the God of a living man. Nevertheless, there needs to be living in the whole composite.”<sup>29</sup>

In answer to objection in *De anima*, Aquinas explicitly insists that “although the soul has some dependence on the body inasmuch as the soul’s species is not complete without the body, and the soul does not depend on the body in such a way that it cannot exist without the body.”<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen, Aquinas holds that just only complete substances count as a human person. The disembodied soul is a part of human beings that can exist independently; it must be understood as an incomplete existence.

“Although the soul has a complete act of existing of its own, it does not follow that the body is united to it accidentally: first, because the same act of existing that belongs to the soul is conferred on the body by the soul so that there is one act of existing for the whole composite; secondly, because, while the soul can subsist of itself, it does not have a complete species, for the soul needs the body in order to complete its species.”<sup>31</sup>

Overall, these textual pieces of evidence contend that Aquinas admits the separated soul is a part of human beings and not a whole rational human nature. Therefore, the soul is not a person. It is an incomplete substance. Now let us move to the philosophical point.

On the philosophical, Aquinas contends that at death, the disembodied soul will exist in a radically incomplete and imperfect manner. The human soul is incomplete because it does not subsist with a completely specific nature. It lacks a complete nature—a human body. Imperfect because it cannot have a normal mode of cognition, which depends upon the sensitive and vegetative functions of bodily senses.

As mentioned above, human beings (complete persons) are a composition of the soul and body. Therefore, a part cannot constitute a complete human being. Integral parts like organs, essential parts like forms, and logical parts like rationality, cannot be persons. Many survivalists argue that the separated soul, with its abilities such as experiencing delight and sorrow, thinking and choosing, hearing and answering prayers that are a person’s actions (which are the same as the composite used before death), is a complete person. In reply to objections in article 2 of *De spiritualibus creaturis*, Aquinas argues that no part in itself has a complete nature if separated from the whole. The soul is a part of human beings; therefore, it does not have the perfection of its nature without union with the body. Therefore, a soul alone does not have a complete human nature.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Aquinas. *Sentences IV*, d. 43, q.1, a. 1, rep. 2.

<sup>30</sup>Aquinas. *Anima*, q. 1, rep. 12.

<sup>31</sup>Aquinas. *Anima*, q. 1, rep. 1.

<sup>32</sup>Aquinas. *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 2, rep 4.

In the treatise on the resurrection and life everlasting, in reply to the objection that there will be no resurrection of bodies, Aquinas contends that the soul by itself is not a complete person. The separated souls do not attain that happiness until the Day of Judgment when they will receive their bodies back again:

“Abraham’s soul, properly speaking, is not Abraham himself, but a part of him (and the same as regards the others). Hence life in Abraham’s soul does not suffice to make Abraham a living being, or to make the God of Abraham the God of a living man. But there needs to be life in the whole composite, i.e. the soul and body.”<sup>33</sup>

This passage illustrates that the resurrection of the body is necessary to restore a person to live since the death of the body is the death of the human person. In another text, Aquinas says that “the state of the soul in the body is more perfect than outside the body because it is a part of the whole composite.” (*ST III*, Supplement, a. 1, rep. 4)

Aquinas claims the soul alone could not exist everlasting. The separated soul at death awaits union with the resurrection of the body. In the treatise on prayer, Aquinas says that St. Peter’s separated soul is not St. Peter. Although we spoke to the saints, our prayers were not heard or answered by them (person) but by their souls. Their soul waits to join with the resurrection of the bodily, not to complete human nature so that the persons they once belonged to might live again.<sup>34</sup> The separated soul never loses its natural desire to inform a body, which must be the same nature and species as the body before death.<sup>35</sup> These pieces of evidence show that the soul alone is not incomplete in itself without a body.

Furthermore, the separated soul is imperfect when it departs from the body. According to Aquinas, the separated soul could exist at death, and as a rational animal, it can think and make choices, pleasure, and sorrow, appear to the living, and answer their prayers even if missing its body. However, a human soul requires a material body to function in all of its capacities completely (Eberl, 2004: p. 343). At death, the separated soul achieves a new perfection in Aquinas’s view, yet it loses perfection in separation from the body.<sup>36</sup>

In the composition of the soul and body, the soul can have intellectual capacities that are not dependent on the material human body and some capacities of a human soul—sensitive and vegetative—that act through material organs. In the composite mode, the soul only thinks by turning to phantasms. Our intellect understands material things by abstracting them from the phantasm. The activity of the phantasm depends on sense perception, which requires bodily organs. Without phantasm (through bodily organs), the soul could not understand.

Aquinas claims that the separated soul has a mode of being: subsistence. So a human soul has an intellective capacity, which is not dependent upon the material body. However, in another place, he contends that the soul alone cannot

<sup>33</sup>Aquinas. *ST III*, Supplement, a. 1, rep. 2.

<sup>34</sup>Aquinas. *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 11, rep. 5.

<sup>35</sup>Aquinas. *Compendium of Theology*, chap. 153.

<sup>36</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1.

get full knowledge without being united to a body: “the soul apart from the body through such species does not receive perfect knowledge, but only a general and confused kind of knowledge”.<sup>37</sup> So a human soul must be joined to its body to have full capacities and have perfect knowledge.

To conclude, while separable from the body, a human soul still has many powers—intellective capacities—is naturally united to a body as its substantial form for the sake of its other capacities. Because the more its powers, the more perfect it will be. Therefore, the disembodied soul requires an organic body constituted of different parts, as Aquinas writes:

“Nevertheless, the soul is united to the body for the sake of intellection, which is its proper and principal operation. For this reason, the body, being united to the rational soul, must be best disposed to serve the soul concerning the things necessary for intellection.”<sup>38</sup>

By nature, the soul will be imperfect and incomplete when separated from its body. So, it is natural for a soul to unite with its body. To be reunited with the body, the human soul will be natural perfection. Therefore, in the body, the soul’s happiness also increases.

## 7. Summary

In sum, whether human beings exist at death or not is not easy to answer. The many discussions among philosophers about this topic have produced so many different or even contradicting opinions that could be divided into two groups: on the one side, there are the survivalists who believe that human beings still exist during the interim after death and resurrection. On the other side, the corruptionists argue that human beings do not exist at death and before the resurrection. However, the argument of each side does not convince the other side. Each of them has some problems which cannot satisfy the other. After looking at both sides and analyzing the textual evidence and philosophical arguments, I conclude that the human soul persists at death but is not a whole human being. It is an incomplete human being. A human being can survive death, yet it does not have some capacities that belong to a bodily organ. So, the human soul at death is naturally only a part of human nature, including both soul and body (Lee & George, 2008: p. 69). In Aquinas’s view, a soul will exist radically, incompletely, and imperfectly in such a case. An incomplete person lacks a complete specific essence that must ever remain the soul of some human being, and an imperfect person because it loses a normal mode of cognition, which depends upon the bodily senses of phantasms.

I am hoping that other Thomists will see the perspective presented in this research as a viable answer to this controversial question. In addition, it is my sincere hope that the presentation of this viewpoint will generate additional various objections and responses to the contentious question at hand, thereby contri-

<sup>37</sup>Aquinas. *ST I*, q. 89, a. 3, rep. 2.

<sup>38</sup>Aquinas. *De Anima*, a. 8, rep. 15.

buting to the advancement of the Thomist tradition's investigations into anthropology, metaphysics, and eschatology.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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