

Thomas  
Aquinas on  
Human  
Nature

Robert Pasnau

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# Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature

This is a major new study of Thomas Aquinas, the most influential philosopher of the Middle Ages. The book offers a clear and accessible guide to the central project of Aquinas's philosophy: the understanding of human nature. Robert Pasnau sets the philosophy in the context of ancient and modern thought and argues for a series of groundbreaking proposals for understanding some of the most difficult areas of Aquinas's thought: the relationship of soul to body, the workings of sense and intellect, the will and the passions, and personal identity.

Structured around a close reading of the Treatise on Human Nature from the *Summa theologiae* and deeply informed by a wide knowledge of philosophy and its history, this study will offer specialists a series of novel and provocative interpretations, while providing students with a reference commentary on one of Aquinas's core texts.

Robert Pasnau is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Colorado. He is the author of *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (1997).



# Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature

A Philosophical Study of *Summa theologiae*  
Ia 75–89

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>CT</i>	<i>Compendium theologiae</i> (Leonine vol. 42)
<i>InIC</i>	<i>In epistolam primam ad Corinthios</i>
<i>InDA</i>	<i>Sententia libri De anima</i> (Leonine vol. 45,1)
<i>InDC</i>	<i>In libros De caelo et mundo expositio</i>
<i>InDDN</i>	<i>Super librum Dionysii De divinis nominibus</i>
<i>InDH</i>	<i>Expositio libri Boetii De ebdomadibus</i> (Leonine vol. 50)
<i>InDMR</i>	<i>Sententia libri De memoria et reminiscencia</i> (Leonine vol. 45,2)
<i>InDSS</i>	<i>Sententia libri De sensu et sensato</i> (Leonine vol. 45,2)
<i>InDT</i>	<i>Super Boetium De trinitate</i> (Leonine vol. 50)
<i>InGC</i>	<i>In librum primum De generatione et corruptione expositio</i>
<i>InJoh</i>	<i>Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura</i>
<i>InLC</i>	<i>In librum De causis expositio</i>
<i>InMet</i>	<i>In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum expositio</i>
<i>InNE</i>	<i>Sententia libri Ethicorum</i> (Leonine vol. 47)
<i>InPA</i>	<i>Expositio libri Posteriorum</i> (Leonine vol. 1*,2)
<i>InPH</i>	<i>Expositio libri Peryermenias</i> (Leonine vol. 1*,1)
<i>InPh</i>	<i>In octo libros Physicorum expositio</i>
<i>InPs</i>	<i>Postilla super Psalmos</i> (Parma vol. 14)
<i>InRom</i>	<i>In epistolam ad Romanos</i>
<i>QDA</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de anima</i> (Leonine vol. 24,1)
<i>QDIA</i>	<i>Quaestio disputata de immortalitate animae</i>
<i>QDM</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de malo</i> (Leonine vol. 23)
<i>QDP</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de potentia</i>
<i>QDSC</i>	<i>Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis</i>
<i>QDUVI</i>	<i>Quaestio disputata de unione verbi incarnati</i>
<i>QDV</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de veritate</i> (Leonine vol. 22)
<i>QDVC</i>	<i>Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus in communi</i>
<i>QQ</i>	<i>Quaestiones quodlibetales</i> (Leonine vol. 25)
<i>SCG</i>	<i>Summa contra gentiles</i>
<i>SENT</i>	<i>In quatuor libros Sententiarum</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa theologiae</i>

(1a = first part; 1a2ae = first part of second part; etc.)

References to *ST* 1a typically cite just question and article (e.g., 85.3c, 29.1 ad 4).

I use an abridged version of the title to refer to the following short treatises: *De substantiis separatis* (Leonine vol. 40); *De 43 articulis* (Leonine

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

vol. 42); *De unitate intellectus*, *De ente et essentia*, *De principiis naturae*, *De operationibus occultis naturae*, *De mixtione elementorum* (Leonine vol. 43).

In cases where the Leonine reference system might prove inconvenient, I provide within brackets the older Marietti reference.

*Theories* refers to Pasnau (1997c).

## Acknowledgments

At a time when many young scholars are unemployed or badly underemployed, I've been fortunate (in part just plain lucky) to have had two very good jobs, one now at the University of Colorado, and the other at St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia's fine Jesuit college. I drafted this book, in its entirety, over the course of four years at St. Joseph's, and I am grateful to the students, faculty, and administration there for their support and friendship. More recently, CU/Boulder has provided an ideal setting for extensively revising that first draft.

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I began preliminary work on this book in 1994, while still in graduate school. As the book has developed, I've been led to pursue many issues that simply would not fit within the confines of this single volume. As a result, most of the articles I've published over the last few years have grown out of the chapters that follow. Though the articles occasionally borrow paragraphs from the book, they are in every case offshoots – detached appendices, if you like – rather than rough drafts. The endnotes provide references to this work where appropriate. I spent a year in 1994–95 translating Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's De anima* (New Haven, 1999), which proved to be the ideal preparatory study for this book. My first book, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), discusses related problems of mental representation and intentionality. Here I mostly pass over those issues.

## A Note to the Reader

I have tried to write a book that would help the novice, stimulate the non-specialist, and provoke the specialist. To this end, I have sought to avoid technical philosophical jargon (both scholastic and analytic), or else to explain it clearly. Readers puzzled by a term should look to the index for cross-references. I have also tried to write each chapter, and when possible each section within a chapter, in such a way that it could be read independently. Readers interested in a particular topic can turn directly to the relevant sections, using as their guide the table of contents, the outline of the Treatise, and the summaries that precede each chapter.

I have used endnotes rather than footnotes so as not to distract from the main thread of the argument. These notes largely concern the secondary literature on Aquinas and interesting parallels to other philosophers, old and new. I have tried to make each endnote substantive enough to be worth the effort. From time to time I've placed important notes within boxes in the main text, to provide a kind of rest stop for the drowsing reader (or perhaps an entrance point, for the browsing reader).

In the end, this has become a rather large book (though it is much too small for the range of topics I discuss). Unfortunately, Part I is the most difficult and tendentious. But one needn't start there. Readers most interested in perception and knowledge might begin with Chapter 6 and then skip to Chapters 9–11. Readers most interested in metaphysics will want to start with Part I, and then perhaps skip to Chapter 12. In fact, almost any order will do.



# Introduction

*Alioquin, si nudis auctoritatibus magister  
quaestionem determinet, certificabitur  
quidem auditor quod ita est, sed nihil  
scientiae vel intellectus acquirat, sed  
vacuus abscedet.*

QQ 4.9.3c; see p. 16

*This book is a close study of Aquinas's best-known philosophical text (§In.1), read in the light of his full body of writings (§In.2). The topic is human nature, which for Aquinas means above all a discussion of the soul and its various capacities (§In.3). My focus is philosophical, and yet the subject is a work of theology, because often it is theology in the Middle Ages that comes closest to our modern philosophical concerns (§In.4). Still, it is crucial to understand the theological context. Aquinas's interest in the philosophical problems surrounding human nature grows out of his broader theological views about the meaning of life (§In.5).*

## In.1. Overview

In the chapters to come, I have some novel and perhaps surprising things to say about Thomas Aquinas. As I consider how best to ease the reader down this road, the words of Montaigne come to mind: "Aristotle wrote to be understood; if he could not do this, much less will another that is not so good at it" (*Essays*, ch. 21). In fact I doubt whether Aristotle always did write to be understood, but certainly Aquinas did, above all in his reader-friendly *Summa theologiae*. But in the more than 700 years that have passed since Aquinas's death in 1274, our modes of expression have changed a great deal. Surely there is some call for commentary.

Of course, I am not alone in this enterprise. It may be that more has been written about Aquinas than about any other philosopher, and some of it has been insightful. Again, I think of Montaigne:

Who will not say that glosses augment doubts and ignorance, since there's no one book to be found, either human or divine, which the world busies itself about, whereof the difficulties are cleared by interpretation. The hundredth commentator passes it on to the next, still more knotty and perplexed than he found it. When were we ever agreed among ourselves: "this book has enough; there is now no more to be said about it?" (ibid.).

## INTRODUCTION

Somehow I am not distressed by this. It seems to me that knots and perplexity lie at the essence of philosophy. A philosophical text without knots is not philosophical at all. At best such a text will have started as philosophy and achieved too much, by treating an issue so thoroughly and decisively that it slips out of the realm of philosophy – growing up, perhaps, to become science.

A knotty philosophical text, then, is an interesting philosophical text, and it is my aim to identify a good many of the knots lying beneath Aquinas's serene prose. To my mind, there is far too much consensus in the secondary literature, a consensus that is symptomatic of a failure to appreciate the depth of his thought. I am constantly amazed at how much of what is written avoids raising the truly hard questions, and consequently leaves the reader feeling that perhaps Aquinas has nothing of much interest to tell us. It is as if those who suppose Aquinas has all of the answers have entered into a kind of unspoken conspiracy with those who suppose he has no interesting answers, with the result that his ideas have been neglected by the wider philosophical community.

An investigation into human nature raises many of the hardest questions in philosophy. I have by no means been able to address all of the issues that Aquinas raises in connection with human nature, but I think no one will feel cheated by the range of topics. The chapters that follow begin with the nature of soul and the mind-body problem (Chapters 1–5), then take up the workings of sense, will, and intellect (Chapters 6–10), and conclude with self-knowledge (Chapter 11) and immortality (Chapter 12). I have found that to understand many of these issues, I need to turn to metaphysics. As a result, much of what is novel in these chapters stands or falls with some controversial claims on topics such as these:

- What is prime matter? (§§1.4 and 1.5, *Excursus*)
- What are substances, and what are substantial forms? (§3.2)
- What is the relationship of form and matter? (*Excursus*)
- What is the role of teleology? (§§In.5, 6.2, 7.1)
- How are substances individuated? (§12.4)

I am sure I haven't done justice to any one of these vast problems, let alone all of them. But I hope that I have been able to bring out at least some of the potential within Aquinas for an adequate solution.

Aquinas's ideas are surrounded on all sides by complex traditions. On one side, he himself was deeply influenced by earlier philosophers, Aristotelian, Platonic, and Augustinian, and he absorbed these traditions through a wide variety of sources. On the other side, Aquinas was at first the subject of fierce controversy and then, after both he and his work were canonized, the subject of a long commentary tradition. I had at one time hoped to situate Aquinas's thought within this context, backward and forward, but the task proved overwhelming. (From time to time, fragments of this effort surface, particularly in the notes.) The one influence I have remained committed to tracking is Aristotle's. Aquinas's philosophy is

## IN.2. THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Aristotelian in the way his theology is Christian, and much of what follows is unintelligible apart from its background in Aristotle's metaphysics and psychology.

### In.2. The scope of the study

This is a study of Aquinas's Treatise on Human Nature, just one small part of the *Summa theologiae*'s first part (*ST* 1a), which itself constitutes only about a fourth of *ST*. The Treatise contains a mere fifteen questions (QQ75–89) out of the 119 that make up 1a. In all, my subject is less than 3 percent of *ST*'s whole. There are obvious reasons for picking this 3 percent: it is here, more than anywhere else in *ST*, that Aquinas confronts perennial questions about the human mind, the relationship between mind and body, the senses, intellect, and the scope of human knowledge. But these are issues that Aquinas takes up in many different places, often times at greater length, and so it is not so obvious why one should pick out the Treatise for special attention.

This question can be sharpened by looking at Aquinas's prologue to *ST* 1a, where he explains in careful detail his motivation for composing the work.

A teacher (*doctor*) of the catholic truth is not only responsible for instructing those who are advanced, but also has the duty to educate those who are just beginning, in keeping with what the Apostle says, in I Corinthians 3, *As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat*. For this reason, our intent in this work is to develop those issues that concern the Christian religion in a way that suits the education of those who are just beginning.

It has seemed to us, however, that those who are new to this teaching are impeded in a variety of ways when it comes to the things that various people have written: partly by the proliferation of unhelpful questions, articles, and arguments; partly, too, because the issues necessary for such students to acquire knowledge are developed not in instructional order, but according to the requirements of a textual commentary, or as the occasion for a disputation allowed; partly, also, because the constant repetitiveness of these works has generated aversion and confusion in the minds of those listening.

We will strive, therefore, to avoid these faults and others of this sort, and we will attempt, trusting in divine aid, to pursue those issues that concern sacred doctrine in a manner concise and lucid – inasmuch as the material allows (1a pr).

These remarks paint a vivid picture of pedagogy in the thirteenth century. Like a distinguished research professor faulting his colleagues for being too wrapped up in their own work to take notice of their students, Aquinas argues that the standard scholarly formats of his day are more confusing than illuminating for the novice. Lectures and treatises were too long, too repetitive, too disorganized – the result being “aversion and confusion.”

### Vita

Aquinas is almost always silent on the subject of his personal motives and goals. We do not know, for instance, why he became a Dominican friar, nor why and how his theological and philosophical interests grew during his early years. Even as regards that most public side of him, his lectures and writings, we are largely in the dark about why Aquinas wrote what he did, when he did: Why, for instance, a *Summa contra gentiles*? (It was once widely thought that *SCG* was written as a kind of field guide for Christian missionaries in their intellectual struggles against the infidels. This has been discredited.) Why commentaries on Aristotle? (It was once widely assumed that these were written with the idea of combatting Averroes's influence as a commentator. This too has been discredited.) In light of such uncertainties, the preface to *ST* is particularly unusual and valuable for the insight it gives us into Aquinas's background motivations.

For a good summary of Aquinas's life and work, see Kretzmann and Stump (1998). The best detailed biography is Torrell (1996). Despite Aquinas's relatively explicit remarks, there is still controversy over precisely what role he intended *ST* to play. For two interesting and quite different suggestions, see Boyle (1982) and Jenkins (1997), ch. 3.

Aquinas no doubt meant these charges to apply to himself as much as to others. His first major work (1252–56) was a commentary (in question form) on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. This work was both enormous (though no more so than *ST*), and also hopeless with respect to "instructional order," as cursory inspection shows. Although the first book of *SENT* begins promisingly enough, with a discussion of theology's status as a science, Aquinas immediately plunges into a series of questions on use and enjoyment, a central topic in medieval ethics but hardly an appropriate starting point for a course in theology. Hard on the heels of this discussion, he enters into the mystery of the Trinity, the worst imaginable topic to take up with novices.

In giving his Commentary this order, Aquinas was simply following the structure of Lombard's *Sentences*; he was, then, very much writing "in keeping with the requirements of a textual commentary." Indeed, such a commentary was the standard medieval requirement for a "teacher of the catholic truth." Thus William Ockham, at the beginning of his own vast commentary on the *Sentences*, sixty years later, must first take up use and enjoyment (but only after a long and interesting prologue on theology and science), then the Trinity, and so forth.

## IN.2. THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Aquinas considered revising *SENT* in the mid-1260s, but gave up that project in favor of *ST*, which covers much the same ground, but in a style more conducive to novices. In *ST*, use and enjoyment get taken up in their proper context, near the beginning of the 12ae (QQ11,16), in the middle of Aquinas's discussion of human action. The Trinity is discussed in 1a (QQ27-43), but only after a thorough discussion of God's existence and essential nature.

Once scholastic theologians completed their lectures on the *Sentences*, their scholarly activities most often turned toward disputed questions, which might take up any topic – sometimes within certain limits, but often on any topic at all that a member of the audience might suggest. (These latter were known as *quaestiones quodlibetales*.) Aquinas delivered his first Quodlibet (QQ 7) in Advent, 1256, soon after finishing *SENT*. The topics he covered in that debate typified the random nature of such occasions: after three sets of questions on spiritual substances (the angels), the subject turned toward the Eucharist, then the bodies of the damned, then the interpretation of Scripture, and finally the value of manual labor. (He contends that doing philosophy counts as manual labor (QQ 7.7.1c).)

Most of Aquinas's disputed questions were not quodlibetal, and hence were more narrowly focused: he argued sets of questions on, among other things, truth, divine power, evil, and the virtues. The set of disputed questions that is of particular interest to us is his *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* (QDA), which seems to have been delivered the year before he began *ST*. Not surprisingly, there is considerable overlap between the two works. The most striking difference is the relative brevity of *ST*. In *ST* 1a 75.5 (“Is the soul composed of matter and form?”), for instance, there are four objections followed by a brief main reply (the body or *corpus* of the article). QDA 6 asks the identical question, but introduces seventeen objections, and makes a reply that is four times as long. This is characteristic of the difference between Aquinas's disputed questions and *ST*. By a *summa* of theology, Aquinas does not mean the pinnacle of his work but merely a summary.

These considerations lead to some obvious questions. What does a reader gain, in focusing on *ST*, and what does the reader miss? Would one merely be missing “the proliferation of unhelpful questions, articles, and arguments”? Or is *ST* an oversimplification: good for beginners, but inadequate for the serious scholar? Scholars have largely preferred the first answer. James Weisheipl (1974) refers to *ST* as “Thomas's major work, the crown of his genius” (p. 361). John Jenkins (1997) writes that “on any given issue, the *Summa* generally contains the most mature, clear and definitive statement of Aquinas's position”; it “expresses his most fully developed thought” (p. 78). These remarks suggest that *ST* manages to be both concise and definitive, accessible to students and at the same time his most profound masterpiece.

Perhaps. But we should beware of letting educational needs distort history. Descartes's *Meditations*, for example, has been influential out of

## INTRODUCTION

all proportion to its originality or quality, largely because of its accessibility to novices. If any of the great scholastic authors had put themselves to the trouble of writing in such a popular style, we would have a very different picture of the transition from ancient to modern thought. As things are, *ST* is about as close as the later medieval period can come to a *Meditations*. But it is a mistake to suppose one can reach a deep understanding of Aquinas solely by a close reading of *ST*. Aquinas's vast literary output (more than eight times the length of Aristotle's surviving work) is not a miracle. He wrote with extraordinary speed: rather than laboring for years over a single work, Aquinas chose to plow forward from treatise to treatise, regularly taking up again issues that he had already considered. At any one time Aquinas might have been composing three or four different works (dictating at once to multiple secretaries, if the stories are to be believed), and he cannot have left himself much time for polishing or mulling over the details of any given work. No one of these treatments can be viewed as decisive; each has to be considered as part of the larger fabric that makes up Aquinas's complete system of thought. Each time Aquinas reconsiders an issue he does so from a slightly different perspective. Generally, though not always, these perspectives are complementary, and so one can reach a deeper understanding of any one work by comparing it with other discussions of similar material.

My approach is to take each of Aquinas's texts as just one more rough draft on the way toward his ideal philosophy. This "rough draft" strategy makes particularly good sense for the Treatise, which in the space of fifteen questions goes over issues to which Aquinas returned repeatedly during his career, often at much greater length. So, to take just one characteristic example, 76.8 asks exactly the same question that gets asked in I *SENT* 8.5.3, *SCG* II.72, *QDA* 10, and *QDSC* 4: "Is the soul whole in each part of the body?" Any serious study of Aquinas should take advantage of his repetitiveness by examining how these multiple drafts make up a whole that goes deeper than any single version.

But then why a study of *ST* in particular? One very practical reason is that a study of *ST* should be useful to many different readers. Because the Treatise is among the more accessible works of later medieval philosophy, it makes a natural point of entry for today's generation of novices. At the same time, because the Treatise was written at the height of Aquinas's powers, and sets out what he regards as his very best arguments, it is the natural focal point for more detailed scholarly work.

The considerations of the last three paragraphs shape the approach of this study. I take the Treatise as my starting point, a guide to what Aquinas sees as the crucial issues regarding human nature. But I do not aim to understand Aquinas merely through a careful reading of the Treatise. That is where the discussion starts, but we will see in every case that the relatively brief remarks he makes there need considerable supplementation from *SCG*, *SENT*, disputed questions, Aristotelian commentaries, and various shorter treatises. I take seriously *ST*'s claim to be a concise guide

to the essential issues, but I do not suppose that the Treatise offers the last, most decisive word on any one topic.

### In.3. On human nature

QQ75–89 are often referred to as the Treatise on Man. This is wrong in two ways. First, Latin has one word for man (*vir*) and another for human being (*homo*), and so a *Tractatus de homine* is better described as a Treatise on the Human Being, if for no reason other than sound principles of translation. Second, and more substantively, Aquinas's *Tractatus de homine* extends all the way through Q102. The first part of this larger treatise, QQ75–89, concerns the *nature* of human beings (*de natura hominis*); the second part, QQ90–102, concerns their *production*, with special attention to the creation of Adam and Eve. It is hard to see how anyone could have missed this point, since the prologue to Q75 is quite clear:

Having considered spiritual and also corporeal creatures [QQ50–74], we should now consider human beings, who are composed of a spiritual and corporeal substance. And first we should consider the nature of human beings [QQ75–89], then second their production [QQ90–102].

Accordingly, I refer to QQ75–89 as the Treatise on Human Nature (or, for short, the Treatise).

What does Aquinas mean when he says he will focus on human nature? The short answer is that by 'nature' Aquinas means more or less what we would expect: he means to discuss the essential features of human beings, the things that make us human, or (as Aristotle often puts it) what it is to be a human being. But *natura* has a complex range of meanings, and we will understand the Treatise better if we take a look at how Aquinas understands the term in its various senses. *Natura* was first imposed, Aquinas tells us, to refer to the generation of living things; in this sense it serves as the abstract noun for the verb *nascor* (to be born). By extension, the term came to signify the inner principle of any generation or birth, and then, extended still more, to signify any inner principle of movement or action. Finally, the term is given one further meaning, as the ultimate end of the process of generation, which Aquinas identifies as the essence of the species.

On this analysis, three of the four Aristotelian causes are identified as candidates for the meaning of *natura*. Both the formal and the material cause can be the nature of a thing inasmuch as either of these causes can be considered the inner source of movement or action. The final cause too can be the nature inasmuch as the essence of a thing is the end of the process of generation.

Just as form or matter was called *nature* because it is the principle of generation (and generation gets called *nature* on account of how the term was first imposed), so species and substance get called *nature* because that is the end of generation. For generation has as its end-point the species of the thing being generated, which results from the union of form and matter (*InMet* V.5.822).

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So ‘nature’ starts out meaning something like *birth*, and then gets extended to mean, first, the internal principles of birth and of movement in general and, second, the ultimate end of this process.

The Treatise is concerned with human nature in this last sense: its topic is the essence or defining character of human beings. “In general it is the essence of any thing, what its definition signifies, that is called its nature” (29.1 ad 4). Yet this focus on the essence of being human leads back to the prior sense of *natura* as inner principle of action, and so in turn to the question of whether matter or form has the better claim as being the inner principle of a thing’s existence and functioning. Aquinas holds that form, rather than matter, is the inner principle that makes a thing be what it is: “the essence of any given thing is completed through its form” (29.1 ad 4). Indeed, following Aristotle, Aquinas holds that in the case of natural, nonartificial substances, the formal and the final cause are identical. The ultimate end of generation is the primary inner principle of a being, and this is its form. The form of a thing is the reason why such a thing was generated; that is what the process of generation was aimed at. So in the human case, since a human being’s form is the soul, “the end of the generation of a human being is the soul” (*InMet* VIII.4.1737). In this sense, Aquinas says, the formal and final cause of a human being are numerically the same.<sup>1</sup>

What about matter? Aquinas holds that the material cause (the human body, for example) has much less of a claim to be part of human nature. It was the characteristic mistake of the pre-Socratics to suppose that all things could be explained in terms of material causes:

Ancient philosophers, unable to transcend their imaginations, . . . said that the only things that exist are bodies, and that what is not a body is nothing (75.1c).

Following Aristotle’s famous diagnosis, then, Aquinas holds that explanations must be given in terms of formal as well as material cause (see *InPh* II.2). This is not a conclusion that the Treatise takes for granted. The very first thing that Aquinas sets out to show, in 75.1, is that the soul is not a body but rather the form of a body (see §1.3). Yet although material causes take a back seat to formal causes, still no definition of human beings would be complete without reference to the bodies from which we are composed.

The nature of a species consists in what its definition signifies. But in the case of natural things the definition signifies not the form alone, but the form and the matter (75.4c).

Human beings are essentially embodied creatures, and moreover essentially have bodies of a certain kind (see §2.1). A complete inquiry into human nature, then, would take as its subject all that is characteristically human, body as well as soul. (For discussion, see *InDA* I.2.144–160; *InPh* II.4.175.)

A theoretical enquiry into human nature will be aimed at the *universal* nature of being human:

Sometimes *natura* is called the what-it-is of a thing, which includes all that the completeness of the species requires. For it is in this way that we say that human nature is common to all human beings (*SCG* IV.41.3788).

The Treatise is not concerned with features peculiar to one person or another, but with soul in general, and body in general. To this end Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of matter, common and signate. Only the former is contained in human nature:

Thus matter is part of the species in natural things – not signate matter, of course, which is the principle of individuation, but common matter. For just as it belongs to the character of this [particular] human being to be composed of *this* soul, *this* flesh, and *these* bones, so it belongs to the character of *human being* to be composed of soul, flesh, and bones (75.4c, continuing the earlier passage).

### Etymology

Like many medieval authors, Aquinas is fond of speculative etymology. In claiming that the original meaning of *natura* is *birth* or *generation*, he seems for once to be right. (His source is Aristotle, *Met.* V 4, 1014b16, but see “*natura*” in Lewis and Short 1879.)

Here, as is often the case, the etymology serves a serious purpose (see Jordan 1986, pp. 16–17). Aquinas believes that language is isomorphic with the way we think (see Pasnau 1997a). By looking at how names change their meaning, we can see the way our thoughts have evolved.

Names are imposed by us in keeping with how we understand things, because names are signs for the things we understand. Now sometimes we understand the primary through the secondary, and thus we apply a name to something in a primary way, when in actual fact the name is suited to it only secondarily. So it is in this case. For because the forms and powers of things are cognized through their actions, generation or birth took the primary sense of the name *natura*, whereas form took the most remote sense (*InMet* V.5.824).

From a logical point of view, *natura* ought to mean the inner principle or form of generation. (Hence Aristotle remarks that “in the primary and strict sense,” *phusis* refers to a thing’s inner principle of movement (*Met.* V 4, 1015a13).) But human understanding starts with what is most visible. So *natura* was first used to refer to the action of generation, and only later applied to the inner principle. We will see that this is a key principle of Aquinas’s methodology: in understanding the soul, one works one’s way in from the external action to the internal capacity that explains the action, and eventually to the nature of soul itself. We have no direct access to the soul, not even to our own soul (§§5.5, 11.2).

This study has little to say about universals (see §10.1). But it is helpful to keep in mind that the subject of the Treatise is the human being, focused not on features peculiar to any one individual, but on the features that all fully functioning human beings must possess.<sup>2</sup>

These remarks on *natura* confirm that our subject is human nature in what is now the primary sense of that phrase: nature as essence or defining account. We can now understand more clearly how this part of *ST* is structured. Aquinas first lays out God's aim in producing the human species (QQ75–89), then he explains how in fact God did produce the human species (QQ90–102). The second set of questions rests on the first: by providing an account of human nature, Aquinas specifies the final cause of God's creative act. QQ90–102 then complete the discussion of human beings by analyzing the one Aristotelian cause left outstanding: the efficient cause. Here Aquinas addresses the question of where human beings come from. Once he has answered this question, he takes himself to have completed a general treatment of our species.

#### In.4. A philosophical study

*ST* is a work of theology. This has two important consequences. First, and most apparently, large parts of the work are concerned with issues that presuppose elements of Christian doctrine. The general topic of 3a, for instance, is Christ. Second, Aquinas permits himself in *ST* to rely on premises that are not accessible to natural reason. Thus the second part of Aquinas's general treatment of human beings (QQ90–102) presupposes in many places the Genesis account of human creation. Although Aquinas is very much concerned with showing that this account is coherent, no attempt is made to demonstrate its truth.

In between and within the more theological discussions there are a great many places where Aquinas engages in analysis that is clearly within the bounds of what we now call philosophy. The Treatise is in this regard perhaps the richest of all such sections of *ST*. The most superficial examination indicates that the topics are philosophical: mind and body, free will, knowledge, intellect, perception (see the list of questions below). A more detailed examination shows that Aquinas's arguments are themselves philosophical, generally presupposing no theological claims whatsoever. Occasionally, Aquinas invokes the existence of a God that created the world according to a rational plan (see §§6.2 and 7.1). But even such nonsectarian theological premises are rare in the Treatise, and never crucial to the argument. So while the overall plan of *ST* is theological, significant portions of the work readily fall within the modern discipline of philosophy.

There should be no objection, then, to a philosophical study of *ST*, especially the Treatise. But there still might seem to be something at least puzzling in the choice of a theological work as the subject for a philosophical study on human nature. If philosophy is what is wanted, why not focus on one of Aquinas's more philosophical works, such as *SCG* or, even more so,

his Commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*? For that matter, why focus on a theologian at all? There were many philosophers active during Aquinas's time (Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, and others even more obscure) who explicitly sought to contain their arguments within the bounds of natural reason.<sup>3</sup>

Immediate answers to these questions suggest themselves. The focus is *ST* because that provides the most clear and succinct account of Aquinas's views (§In.2). The focus is Aquinas, because Aquinas was more talented than his contemporaries who taught philosophy. Still, one might feel puzzled. For, putting to one side the excellence of Aquinas and the "concise and lucid" manner of *ST*, it turns out to be generally true (allowing for a few exceptions) that the history of medieval philosophy is the history of medieval theology, minus the theological stuff. Why should theology and philosophy have been so closely tied? Again, an answer may suggest itself. Theology was held in more prestige than philosophy: one advanced to theology only after mastering philosophy. Naturally, the most talented and ambitious minds gravitated to that field. So, since theology as then defined contained philosophical elements, it is natural for historians of medieval philosophy to spend time mining those elements. This is the sort of explanation Anthony Kenny (1993) suggests:

... of course since the greatest medieval philosophers were theologians first and philosophers second, it is to their theological treatises rather than to their commentaries on *De anima* that one turns for their insights into philosophy of mind (p. 20).

This is a non sequitur. Kenny himself notes here that theologians often wrote philosophical works, such as *De anima* commentaries. So why shouldn't philosophers today study those commentaries above all else? Are we to suppose that these theologians didn't put their best efforts into their philosophical works? Did they save themselves for their theology?

Kenny's suggestion simply articulates the conventional view among historians. Yet it is inadequate: it leaves obscure the connection between philosophy and theology, and implies that it is a matter of mere chance that the history of medieval philosophy is largely found within medieval theology. Did it really just so happen that the best philosophers decided to become theologians? Again, there is the prestige of theology in the medieval university – but what if medicine had been the more prestigious field of study? What if the best philosophers had become medical doctors? Would the history of medieval philosophy then be drawn from medical treatises (leaving out, of course, the medical stuff)?

It is surely no accident that the best medieval philosophers became theologians, and that most of medieval philosophy is found within medieval theology. My suggestion is that philosophy today actually has more in common with medieval theology (that is, theology as then practiced) than it does with medieval philosophy (that is, the part of the arts curriculum that was referred to as philosophy in the medieval university).

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In other words, it seems to me that medieval theology, not medieval philosophy, is the closest medieval precursor to modern philosophy. Such a claim needs qualification in two ways. First, much of medieval theology is outside of modern philosophy (think of *ST* 3a, devoted to Christology). Second, certain areas of modern philosophy, most notably logic and the philosophy of language, were more often practiced as parts of medieval philosophy, not medieval theology. But the core subjects of philosophy today – ethics, mind, knowledge, metaphysics – were treated in the Middle Ages as central aspects of theology.

One can readily see as much by examining, first, the list of questions that make up the Treatise.

- Q75. The soul in its own right.
- Q76. The soul's union with the body.
- Q77. The soul's capacities in general.
- Q78. The soul's preintellective capacities.
- Q79. The soul's intellective capacities.
- Q80. Appetite in general.
- Q81. Sensual appetite.
- Q82. Will.
- Q83. Free decision.
- Q84. The means through which intellect cognizes corporeal things.
- Q85. How and in what order intellect cognizes corporeal things.
- Q86. What intellect cognizes in corporeal things.
- Q87. How intellect cognizes itself.
- Q88. How the human soul cognizes things that are above it.
- Q89. The soul's cognition when separated from its body.

These are precisely the kinds of issues we would expect to see addressed in a philosophical treatise. (Only the last two questions are exceptions; they presuppose the existence of angels and God, and the temporary separation of soul from body.) Many of these issues might also be taken up by a philosopher working within the medieval arts faculty. But discussions within the arts faculty would also have included a great deal of material that we would now regard as scientific, and of primary interest to historians of science. Such tendencies are apparent even in Aquinas's own Commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*. Although that work does contain valuable philosophical discussions of issues taken up in the Treatise, it contains many excursus that by our lights are not philosophical at all, such as these:

- Why some things remain alive when cut apart (I.14)
- Does imagination have a determinate organ? (II.5)
- The nature of light (II.14)
- The nature of translucent media (II.14)
- The necessity of light for seeing (II.14)
- Why some things are visible in the dark (II.15)
- Why distance impedes vision (II.15)

Why mental fitness corresponds to touch, not to sight (II.19)

Why smells are not named after tangible qualities (II.19)

How smell is spread to such a remote area (II.20)

Why taste is distinguished from touch (II.21)

Whether touch is one sense or many (II.22)

How air and water are media for touch (II.23)

There is philosophy (as we now think of it) to be gleaned from such discussions, but only if we can put to one side the sometimes peculiar, sometimes embarrassing, scientific speculation. Indeed, the situation is quite analogous to medieval theology, where historians of philosophy often have to sort through purely theological material to uncover important philosophical discussions.

Naturally, Aquinas and his contemporaries did not see it this way. For them the issues taken up in the Treatise would not have appeared untheological; questions about soul, will, intellect, and knowledge were vital parts of theology. Similarly, the above list of topics from *InDA* would have seemed paradigmatically philosophical; it would not have occurred to the medievals that these issues were somehow less philosophical than questions about mind and knowledge. The medieval philosophical curriculum was in large part determined by the Aristotelian corpus, and so philosophy as defined by the medievals no more matches with modern philosophy than does Aristotle's wide-ranging corpus. In 1255 the Arts Faculty at Paris included on their reading list the following Aristotelian works (Dod 1982, p. 73): *The Organon* (logical treatises), *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Parts of Animals*, *On the Heavens*, *Meteorology*, *On the Soul*, *On Generation and Corruption*, *Sense and Sensibilia*, *On Sleep*, *On Memory*, and *On Death*. There is a great deal of philosophy here (as we now think of it), but there are also a great many other things.

Earlier I remarked, paradoxically, that the history of medieval philosophy is the history of medieval theology, minus the theological stuff. The air of paradox disappears once we recognize that 'theology' is being used in two senses: our subject matter is medieval theology, as it was *then* conceived, minus the stuff that we would *now* characterize as theology. What's left (very roughly) is what we now characterize as philosophy. Pushed too far, this claim becomes absurd. Of course there is much of interest to philosophers (now) in philosophy (then). Of course there is much in theology (then) that looks utterly unphilosophical (now). So a more prudent scholar might conclude merely that neither theology (then) nor philosophy (then) corresponds very closely to philosophy (now).<sup>4</sup> But I want to insist that there is a more interesting conclusion to be reached: that there is something about theology (then) that makes it in many respects the natural precursor to philosophy (now). Consider this telling passage from the prologue to the Treatise:

It is the theologian's role to consider the nature of human beings with reference to the soul, not with reference to the body – except in light of the relationship that

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the body has to the soul. And so our first consideration will be turned toward the soul (75pr).

Both theologians and philosophers of the medieval period took human nature as their central subject matter: both studied the soul, the relationship of the soul to body, the capacities of the soul, and so forth. But theologians focused on the soul itself, Aquinas here tells us, whereas philosophers devoted their attention to body as well. A full treatment of human nature would consider both soul and body (§In.3), but scholarship, even in the Middle Ages, tended toward specialization. A medieval philosophical analysis of perception, for instance, would be concerned less with abstract analysis and more with physical mechanisms: the nature of light, the relationship of light to color, the way in which light and color make their way into the eye, the contribution of the various parts of the eye and the brain. The theologian, in contrast, would tend to invoke such physical details only inasmuch as they explained the conceptual issues. For the theologian the central project was to characterize in an abstract way the various

### **Philosophy and science**

Medieval theology, like modern philosophy, tends toward the abstract and conceptual. The medieval theologian investigates human nature in abstraction from the human body, putting aside concrete physiological inquiry in favor of conceptual refinements. Hence historians of philosophy study medieval theology. But is that a good thing? Aristotle's *De anima* is sometimes praised precisely because it is *not* a work in philosophy of mind, but rather in what Kathleen Wilkes (1992) calls "theoretical scientific psychology." It is a strength of Aristotle's approach, Wilkes writes, that it takes a unified approach to all the faculties of soul, from nutrition to higher-level thought, and treats soul as a phenomenon shared by all living things, not just human beings. Moreover, Wilkes praises Aristotle precisely because his theory of soul is not driven from the top down. The philosophy of mind makes the mistake of letting theoretical claims take precedence over inquiry into the underlying physiological mechanisms.

Ironically, medieval theology might therefore be condemned for being too philosophical in the modern sense. Theology (then) would share with philosophy of mind (now) the faults of being overly abstract and too little in touch with empirical data. This raises the possibility of a further irony. In trying to understand how philosophy changed its shape and course from Aristotle to today, might it be scholastic *theology*, of all things, that played a pivotal role in transforming *philosophy* from a highly empirical field of study, continuous with science, to an abstract and sometimes isolated enterprise?

sensory capacities, their functions, and their relationship to soul's other capacities. Physiological details are relevant, as Aquinas puts it above, only "in light of the relationship that the body has to the soul."<sup>5</sup>

It might seem that this account of the relationship between theology and philosophy runs roughshod over how Aquinas himself depicts the two fields. He in fact distinguishes between two sorts of theology, philosophical theology and sacred theology (*sacra doctrina*).<sup>6</sup> In the very first question of *ST*, he sets out the difference in a way that seems to fly in the face of the argument I have been making. Philosophy, he writes, is "investigated through reason," whereas theology "is grasped through revelation" (1.1c). Theology – that is, sacred theology – takes its principles "immediately from God, through revelation," using other sciences "as inferior and ancillary" (1.5c). If we were to take these claims at face value then it would be hard to see how medieval theology could be of very much interest to philosophical historians, let alone of primary interest. Medieval theology would be almost entirely dependent on the premises of revealed dogma, with philosophical arguments coming in only as a kind of auxiliary tool.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach would be deeply unphilosophical, in the modern sense, and might even justify Bertrand Russell's notorious charge that "there is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas" (Russell 1945, p. 463).

Yet if this seems to be what Aquinas is saying, his actual practice shows that he must mean something rather different. In fact the sort of account just described badly distorts the character of medieval theology, as it was practiced not just by Aquinas (and Scotus and Ockham), but by theologians throughout the later medieval period. In *ST*, for instance, Aquinas does at times presuppose religious doctrines (as in his account of the first production of human beings (QQ90–102)). But he is constantly concerned with limiting those presuppositions as much as possible. Indeed, immediately after giving the above characterization of theology, Aquinas proceeds to give a series of five philosophical arguments for God's existence (2.3). This would be entirely inappropriate if theology really did take its premises from revealed truth, using philosophy as a mere ancillary tool. The Bible is full of evidence that God exists; why not use that as evidence, rather than the far more doubtful paths proposed by the Five Ways?

Aquinas suggests an answer to this question when he takes up the question of whether theology employs arguments (1.8). One might suppose that it does not, since the data of revealed doctrines very often speak for themselves. (Does God exist? Yes, it says so right here. Does he have foreknowledge? Yes, it says so here.) Aquinas naturally holds that theology does use arguments, and he offers two reasons why. The first is to expand the bounds of theology beyond what is immediately apparent through revelation. The second is to argue against those who would reject some of the basic tenets of the faith. Aquinas recognizes that if an opponent is willing to reject *all* the tenets of the faith then no argument is possible. The most

one could do at that point would be refute the opponent's arguments for the contrary position, leaving the two sides at a standoff. But the typical theological adversary, in Aquinas's time, was one who would accept at least some of the tenets of the faith, and in such cases "we argue through one article against those who would deny another" (1.8c). In such dialectical circumstances one theological strategy recommends itself above all others: one should rest one's arguments on as few revealed premises as possible, taking the faith for granted where one absolutely must, but using premises accessible to reason wherever possible. Such a method makes possible the study of doctrines "necessary to human beings for salvation" (1.1c), and at the same time seeks to make those doctrines as accessible as possible to people who might not accept all the evidence of authority and revelation.

In one of his later quodlibets (from 1271), Aquinas offers a further reason for why theology should spend most of its time on rational arguments rather than appeals to authority.

The disputation of a teacher, in the schools, has the purpose not of eliminating error but of instructing the listeners so that they may be led to understand the truth that the teacher puts forward. And here one must rely on arguments (*rationibus*) that investigate the basis for the truth, and that make it be known *how* what is said is true. Otherwise, if the teacher determines the question based on bare authorities, the listener will be made certain that the thing is so, but will acquire no knowledge or understanding and will go away empty (*QQ* 4.9.3c).

This announces the central motivation for Aquinas's work. Almost everything he wrote was intended for students, not for heretics or infidels, and that is of course true above all for *ST*. The goal of his teaching is not just the right answer, but a deeper understanding of why and how what is said to be true can be true. Merely having the right answer would count for nothing – it does not count even as a form of "knowledge or understanding"<sup>8</sup> – and the student would go away empty. Aquinas's theology, then, is thoroughly philosophical in its methods. Never is something accepted on faith that might be proved through reason. Revealed doctrine is the foundation of his theology, but in practice it provides at most the guidelines for his work. The real heart of Aquinas's theological project corresponds quite closely with what we consider the project of philosophy.

### In.5. The larger context

Although Aquinas's approach is philosophical, his focus is significantly different from our own. This is obvious when *ST* is viewed as a whole, but it is apparent even within the Treatise alone, in its very organization. In the prologue to Q75, Aquinas sketches the structure of the fifteen questions to follow.

## IN.5. THE LARGER CONTEXT

... our first consideration will be turned toward the soul. And because, as Dionysius says, three things are found in spiritual substances – essence, power, and operation – we will first consider features of the soul’s essence, then second features of its power or capacities, and then third features of its operation.

The Treatise is divided into three sections. The first group of questions (QQ75–76) concerns “features of the soul’s essence,” under which heading Aquinas includes questions regarding the soul in its own right and questions regarding the union of soul and body. The second group of questions (QQ77–83) concerns the soul’s capacities: nutritive, sensory, locomotive, appetitive, and intellective. This list comes from the *De anima* (414a31–32; see 78.1sc), but unlike Aristotle, Aquinas gives by far the bulk of his attention to appetite and intellect. The third group of questions (QQ84–89) concerns the soul’s operations – although in fact the only sorts of operations that get taken up here are those associated with intellect. (Discussion of the appetitive operations is postponed until 122ae.)

Aquinas’s focus therefore becomes narrower as the Treatise proceeds. He moves from soul in general (including nonhuman souls), to the various capacities of the soul (paying special attention to intellect and will), and finally to operations associated with intellect alone. Why this increasingly narrow perspective, in what is supposedly a general treatise on human nature? At the outset of his discussion of the soul’s various capacities (78pr), he makes the following remark:

A theologian, in his investigations, has to be concerned with making a special inquiry only into the intellective and appetitive capacities; it is here that the virtues are found.

Evidently the words that follow the semicolon explain those that come before it. Only intellect and the appetites are of special interest to the theologian, because only these capacities are subject to the virtues. (There is no such thing as having virtuous senses, or virtuous capacities for movement and nutrition.) Why this focus on virtue? We regard ethics as merely one kind of issue that arises regarding human nature. Aquinas seems to regard it as the only issue that is important in its own right for a theological investigation of human nature. And when we look ahead to *ST* 2a we see that vast sections of that work are devoted entirely to these topics. From our perspective, this single-minded interest in ethical questions looks rather distorted. Is there a good reason for this focus? Is Aquinas simply manifesting the kind of obsession with sin and virtue that we tend to expect from religious thinkers?

This reference to virtue goes unexplained in the Treatise, but the remark comes into focus when we step back from this particular section of *ST*. The broader plan of the work reveals that Aquinas’s focus has its own philosophical justification. What looks peculiar and narrow-minded turns out to reflect the broader philosophical framework of Aquinas’s thinking about human beings.

Here is the plan of *ST*:

**Part One (1a)**

Introduction: Sacred Doctrine (Q1)

I. God

- A. God's essence (QQ2-26)
- B. The divine persons (QQ27-43)
- C. The procession of creatures from God
  - 1. The production of creatures (QQ44-46)
  - 2. The distinction among creatures (QQ47-102)
  - 3. The conservation and governance of creatures (QQ103-119)

**Part Two (2a)**

II. Human Beings

- A. The ultimate end of human life (1a2ae QQ1-5)
- B. Actions through which a human being can reach this end
  - 1. Human actions in general (1a2ae QQ6-114)
  - 2. Human actions in particular (2a2ae QQ1-189)

**Part Three (3a)**

III. Christ

- A. Christ Himself (QQ1-59)
- B. The sacraments (Q60-)

(Aquinas ceased working on *ST* at the end of 3a Q90. To complete the work his early followers put together the so-called *Supplement*, pasting together material from *SENT*.)

- C. Immortal life

Notice, first, that the Treatise falls under the section of *ST* devoted to God, not under the section devoted to human beings. The reason for this is that Aquinas takes the study of God's creative activities to be an important aspect of studying God. Hence more than half of 1a is concerned with the created world, in particular, angels (QQ50-64), the purely physical world (QQ65-74), and human beings (QQ75-102). In part, then, the Treatise is just a piece of Aquinas's larger project to understand God. At the same time, the Treatise establishes the foundations for the enormous second part of *ST*, which takes human beings as its sole subject. These earlier questions are not considered anew in *ST* 2a (except for the discussions of will and freedom (QQ82-83), which gets expanded and reconsidered in 1a2ae QQ6-17). So the Treatise bears much of the weight for the 300-some questions that follow.

Why should *ST* 2a have been devoted entirely to human beings? In the prologue to 1a2ae Aquinas situates this part of the work in an explicitly theological context:

As Damascene says, human beings are said to be made in God's image insofar as 'image' signifies *intellectual*, and *free in one's decisions*, and *capable on one's own*. So now that something has been said about the exemplar, God, and about the things that proceeded from the divine power in keeping with His will, it remains for us to consider His image, human beings, insofar as they too are the source of their actions – as they have free decision and power over their actions (1a2ae pr).

Apparently, *ST* 2a focuses on human beings because we provide an image of God. But this cannot be the whole story, if only because it leaves unex-

plained the focus on human virtue. If Aquinas's only aim were to understand God's nature, there would be no justification for 2a's massive treatment of human action, a discussion so large it needed to be split up into two parts (1a2ae and 2a2ae).

In part, Aquinas's motivation seems to be pragmatic, in that a detailed analysis of human beings would benefit us more than a similar analysis of, say, angels. This, at any rate, is what is suggested by his explanation for the longer second part of *ST* 2a, concerned with human actions in particular:

### Imago Dei

The discussion of human beings in 1a QQ75–102 is part of a larger project to understand God via creation. The theologian looks to the created world to understand God in just the sense that the art historian looks to the Sistine Chapel to understand Michelangelo. But if this is the project, then Aquinas would seem to have no special reason to focus on human beings. All of creation provides a kind of image of God, and some parts of creation – specifically, the angels – provide a better image of God (see the Epilogue).

In fact, the distribution of questions in *ST* 1a reflects Aquinas's attempt to give a balanced treatment of the different parts of creation. Human beings are the subject of about twice as many questions as the angels, but of course we are in a better position to describe our own species. (If anything should seem surprising, it is that Aquinas could say as much as he did about where angels are located (QQ51–53), how they think (QQ54–58), etc. See **Doctor Angelicus**, p. 359.) The purely physical world (including nonhuman animals and the heavens) gets only ten questions, rather few for such a large topic. But here Aquinas is brief because the physical world is less important as a manifestation of God's creative power. Angels, as purely incorporeal creatures (50.1), are the loftiest members of the created world, and therefore play a major part in Aquinas's efforts to understand God's creative purpose. Human beings are part spiritual and part physical (“... human beings, who are composed of a spiritual *and* corporeal substance” (75pr)), which gives us a theoretically perplexing kind of dual status – we are metaphysical amphibians, to borrow Eleonore Stump's apt phrase (Stump 1995, p. 514). This unique dual status makes us especially interesting in many ways, and provides some justification for paying special attention to our own species in a general account of God's creative activities.

## INTRODUCTION

After a general consideration of virtues, vices, and other things pertaining to moral questions, it is necessary to give special consideration to each one in particular. For this is more useful than universal moral lessons, given that actions involve particulars (2a2ae pr).

Here pragmatic considerations seem to have supplanted the theoretical. Why such an extended discussion of human beings? Because that's what will be useful *to us*. This line of thought raises the question of whether the Treatise might be governed by similar considerations. Why focus on intellect and the appetites? Because that's where the virtues come into play. Why focus on virtue? Because that's what is important for us. So when Aquinas appeals to the theologian's interest in virtue as an explanation for the Treatise's selective focus (78pr), this can be understood as a reflection of the theologian's interest in studying something that will be of real value to human beings.

But again, this is only part of the story. There is a further theoretical rationale that unites Aquinas's speculative interests with his practical inclinations. The Treatise is a foundational work, devoted to giving a general account of human nature – which means, as we have seen (§In.3), an account of the essential features of human beings. It is not simply pragmatic reasons that lead Aquinas to focus on the capacities of soul that are subject to the virtues. His focus is on these capacities because they best reveal the essence of human beings – what it is to be a human being. *ST* 2a provides an extended lesson in morality not just because this is essential to human well-being, but also because these matters are essential to being human. This point is established right from the start of 1a2ae, when Aquinas takes up the question of a human being's ultimate end:

Here the first consideration to be taken up concerns the ultimate end (*fine*) of human life, and next the means through which a human being can attain or stray from this end. For the distinctive features of those things that are ordered to an end have to be drawn from that end (1a2ae 1pr).

The first question to ask regarding human beings is the question of final cause: What is their ultimate end? Aquinas takes it for granted that this ultimate end is happiness (1a2ae 1pr); he goes on to argue that happiness can consist only in a vision of the divine essence (1a2ae 3.8). With this ultimate end in mind, Aquinas can work backward toward human nature. First he determines what one has to do to achieve this final end: paraphrasing Aristotle (*Nic. Ethics* I 9, 1099b16), he writes that “happiness is the reward of virtuous activities” (1a2ae 5.7c). Then he determines the bases within ourselves for carrying out such activities (our cognitive and appetitive dispositions and capacities) as well as the external forces that aid us (law and grace).

*ST* therefore builds an account of human beings from the ground up. It begins in 1a with the essence of human beings (QQ75–76), works out the capacities (QQ77–83) and operations (QQ84–89), and then throughout 2a develops in careful detail the most essential features. But Aquinas can begin

at the ground level only because he has the whole plan in mind. He sees the end at which human beings are aimed, and only with that in mind can he proceed to lay out the fundamentals of human nature.

With this larger picture in mind, we can understand another way in which Aquinas takes himself to be arguing theologically rather than philosophically. Both theologians and philosophers consider the created world. The difference is that

the philosopher considers what applies to creatures in virtue of their own nature, such as fire's being carried upward, whereas one who has faith [that is, the theologian] considers with respect to creatures only what applies to them in virtue of their being related to God: that they are created by God, for instance, that they are subject to God, and so on (*SCG* II.4.872).

On its face this seems to undermine my claim that medieval theology provides the closest parallel to modern philosophy (§In.4). But the foregoing discussion helps to put this remark in a different light. The philosopher, to Aquinas's way of thinking, must approach creatures from the ground up, grappling with the messy physical details of why fire rises, how plants nourish themselves, how light travels through air, and on and on. The theologian, in contrast, considers human beings from the top down, in light of their ultimate end or final cause. Because of this perspective, it is the theologian and not the philosopher who is in a position to understand human nature.

These remarks suggest that the governing strategy of *ST*, and even Aquinas's conception of himself as a theologian, rest on his conception of final causality. This is an issue I return to in later chapters (§§6.2 and 7.1), but it deserves brief notice here. One of his more telling discussions of this subject comes in his short treatise, *De principiis naturae*:

Hence the end is the cause of efficient causality, because it makes the efficient cause be the efficient cause. Likewise, it makes the matter be the matter, and the form be the form. For matter does not receive its form except through the end, and the form does not perfect its matter except through the end. Hence it is said that the end is the cause of causes, because, for all the causes, it is the cause of causality (*De principiis* 4.29–36 [356]).<sup>9</sup>

The final cause is “the cause of causality.” We might, more precisely, say that the final cause fixes or determines each of the other causes. How precisely does this work? Let us consider formal causes. He tells us here that “the form does not perfect its matter except through the end.” Ordinarily, Aquinas describes form as what actualizes matter (see §1.3), but here he stresses that form perfects (or completes) matter. So we can pick out the form of any composite object by identifying that which perfects the object. But how can we know what the perfection of any given thing involves? This is where the final cause comes into play. We cannot settle questions about the form of an object unless we know what that object's perfect (complete) state consists in. When the statue is finished, we see its form. When

## INTRODUCTION

we understand the purpose of human life, we see what the essential features of a human being are. In fact, the final cause specifies and gives shape to the formal cause in much the way that the formal cause specifies and gives shape to the material cause: “The end is related to things ordered to the end just as form is related to matter” (1a2ae 4.4c).

Final causes can seem irrelevant when one supposes that there are other ways to determine the essential features of things. One might, for instance, suggest that human nature can be specified by working out the capacities that make humans different from other creatures. But if this procedure were effective then Aquinas could have devoted the Treatise to our locomotive capacity, analyzing the details of biped locomotion. Obviously this would not capture even part of human nature: “the end of the human soul is not moving the body, but intellectual cognition, wherein one’s happiness lies” (*De unitate* 5.308–10 [261]). One might then suppose, rethinking the first suggestion, that human nature can be specified by working out the most *significant* distinctive capacities of human beings. Aquinas agrees. But he sees no way of giving any content to the notion of *significant* without turning to the final cause. We can’t know what the most significant human capacities are unless we know what the ultimate end of human life is.

In this way, Aquinas’s views about the purpose of human life (the *meaning* of life, as we might loosely say) determine the structure and focus of *ST*. His initial, foundational treatment of human nature, the Treatise that is the subject of this study, takes shape in anticipation of his account of the virtues in 2a. Intellect and the appetites are the focus; the soul’s other powers are of interest only inasmuch as they pave the way for understanding intellect and the appetites. Aquinas’s focus is theological, as he conceives of that, but it is for this very reason also philosophical, as we conceive of that. His view that final causality gives shape to human nature provides both a rationale and a sample of why theology for him is continuous with philosophy for us.

# Part I

Essential features (QQ75-76)



# I

## Body and soul

*A study of human nature involves, first and foremost, a study of the human soul. The fact that we have a soul is not even a point of controversy, given the way Aquinas defines his terms. What is controversial is the nature of soul. The first and perhaps hardest article of the Treatise asks whether the soul is a body. Aquinas answers in the negative, but this does not rule out the soul's being something material, in our modern sense (§I.1). Aquinas is concerned with refuting the ancient natural philosophers, who thought that all things were bodies (§I.2). In opposition to their reductive account, Aquinas insists on the explanatory priority of actuality (§I.3). But his dispute with the ancients in fact rests on a deep metaphysical disagreement about the nature of matter, a disagreement that points toward the reductive nature of Aquinas's own account (§I.4).*

### **1.1. What is a human being?**

Aristotle remarks in *Metaphysics* VII 17 that the question *What is a human being?* is inherently obscure because it doesn't give us any help in breaking down the problem.

We lose sight of what is being asked most of all in those cases where things are not predicated of one another – e.g., when it is asked *What is a human being?* – because we are speaking unconditionally, without separating out that these are this (1041a32–b2).

Aquinas, in his Commentary, explains:

The reason for our puzzlement in such cases is that some one thing is introduced unconditionally, like *human being*, and the question does not introduce the things to which being human applies, such as the parts, or even something that is the underlying subject (*suppositum*) of the human being (*InMet* VII.17.1662).

What is needed, then, is that we give the question some structure. What, exactly, are we asking about when we ask, *What is a human being?* What are the relevant component parts? What is the underlying subject? The very simplicity of the question, as it stands, impedes our progress. Without some analysis of the subject matter we will find it difficult to provide any satisfactory answer.

It is easy to agree with Aristotle that the question *What is a human being?* is fundamentally obscure. From our perspective the reason for this obscurity lies in large part in uncertainty over what sort of answer might

be wanted. If we could determine the kind of question that is being asked then it seems that an answer might well be within reach. If, for instance, the question is a biological one then perhaps the Human Genome Project will provide the right sort of answer. If the question is psychological, or evolutionary, or historical, then different sorts of answers suggest themselves. It seems that we cannot begin to answer the question, however, until we have some general sense about the sort of answer that is wanted.

In addressing the topic of human nature, Aquinas is asking this very question, *What is a human being?* (see §In.3). He makes it clear that the *sort* of question he is asking is a theological one, and as a result he supposes that an answer must be given in terms of the human soul, focusing on the human body only as it relates to soul (see §In.4). So “our first consideration will be turned toward soul” (75pr). Indeed, the entire Treatise takes the soul as its explicit topic: first, the soul’s essential features (QQ75–76); then, its capacities (QQ77–83); then, its operations (QQ84–89). Already, then, Aquinas has given some content to the initially obscure question *What is a human being?* He will consider the question answered if he can give a general account of the human soul; he will not be interested in the physical characteristics of the human body, save insofar as those characteristics contribute to our understanding of soul.

In the prologue to the Treatise it looks as if Aquinas is simply going to presuppose the soul as his subject matter. If this were his approach then we might well feel as if the project is on shaky ground from the very beginning. To many modern readers it is not at all obvious that human beings even have such a thing as a soul; one might be inclined to agree with David Hume, for instance, who in his own *Treatise of Human Nature* – published in 1739 – speaks of soul as a “fiction,” as “something unknown and mysterious” (I.iv.6). But in 75.1c it becomes clear that Aquinas’s strategy is more credible than it might initially seem. Here, at the very start of his reply, he does give us a rationale for postulating a soul in human beings, and indeed in all living things:

In order to investigate the soul’s nature one must hold from the start that the soul is said to be the first principle of life in the things that are alive around us. For we say that ensouled (*animata*) things are living things, whereas non-ensouled (*inanimatas*) things are those that lack life.

These considerations are meant merely as the starting point of the discussion; even the ancient naturalists are supposed to accept that the soul is the first principle of life (they go wrong when they suppose that the soul is something corporeal). Aquinas thinks that this starting point is uncontroversial – something that any materialist, even the most archly empirical, should accept. For he is simply stipulating here that by ‘soul’ he will mean *first principle of life*. Take the various living things that are, as he puts it, “around us”; let ‘soul’ stand for whatever it is that gives those things life.

### Anima

How did it happen that the Latin *anima* came into English as ‘soul’? Most philosophical Latin terms were absorbed straight into English. (A few examples: *materia*, *forma*, *actus*, *potentia*, *motus*, *operatio*, *sensus*, *intellectus*, *imaginatio*, *memoria*.) English has quite a few derivatives from *anima*, such as *animate* (both verb and adjective), *animated*, and even *animal*. But *anima* itself never made it as a noun. The reason seems to be that the word ‘soul,’ Germanic in origin, was on hand from the earliest period of the English language, and was viewed as an acceptable translation for *anima*. It seems likely, however, that our thinking about the soul would be dramatically different, and closer to Aristotle’s, if we hadn’t lost the etymological connection (present in both Latin and Greek) between soul and life. (See **Qwyckening**, p. 112.)

As for why we should give the word ‘soul’ (*anima*) a meaning of this sort, Aquinas appeals to some linguistic data pertaining to the Latin term: things that are alive are said to be animate, whereas things that are inanimate are said to be nonliving. It will be the project of the rest of the Treatise to determine what this *anima* is. At the moment we haven’t even specified whether the soul is some single principle that we all share, or something individual in each one of us – and, if the latter, whether we can make any interesting generalizations from one living being’s soul to another’s. For present purposes Aquinas simply wants agreement on defining the soul as that which, at the most basic level (we are speaking of the *first* principle), gives things life.

With this definition in hand Aquinas proceeds to the article’s primary topic. It is noteworthy that the question Aquinas raises is not one of the more technical, Aristotelian questions he might ask: Is the soul material? Is it a form? Is it a potentiality? Is it an actuality? Instead, he chooses the more concrete question – *Is the soul a body?* – and derives answers to these other questions as he proceeds through QQ75–77. These other questions that he might have asked are not just more technical, in that they presuppose Aristotle’s conceptual framework, but also more controversial. This is particularly so for the question of whether the soul is material. For although to our ears there might seem little difference between asking whether something is a body and asking whether it is material, to Aquinas’s way of thinking these are significantly different questions. To address the question of whether the soul is material, in whole or in part, requires a developed theory of prime matter, an elusive topic on which there was little consensus in Aquinas’s time. Indeed, as we see below in §1.4, Aquinas views mistakes about the nature of matter as underlying the worst sorts of confusions about soul, and therefore about human nature. Aquinas wants

to set these mistakes straight, but without overwhelming the reader with confusing details; he aims here, as always in *ST*, for “a manner concise and lucid – inasmuch as the material allows” (1a pr; see §In.2).

Initially, then, Aquinas wants to duck the issue of whether the soul is at all material: this gets dealt with further on, particularly in 75.5. The question he raises, instead, is whether the soul is a body. This is, in some ways, a less problematic issue, because there was little disagreement over what a body (*corpus*) is, or what it is to be corporeal. Indeed, Aquinas thinks these terms are so clear that they need no explanation at all in 75.1. (We have seen that, in contrast, the notion of the soul *did* need some initial clarification.) To see precisely what ‘body’ means here, we can look at scattered remarks from earlier in *ST*. Bodies, he says, are those substances “in which one finds three dimensions” (18.2c); “a body is what has three dimensions” (3.1 obj. 1). Elsewhere, a body is “a complete magnitude” (7.3c), by which he means extended in three directions (unlike a point, line, or plane). Aquinas treats this characterization of body as utterly commonplace and unobjectionable.

Our topic, then, is taking shape nicely. From the initially puzzling question of *What is a human being?* we are “separating out” the issues just as Aristotle recommends, formulating a new question of the suggested form: *Is this a this? Is the soul a body?* What’s more, the *theses* that make up our question are each well-defined in noncontroversial ways: even Humeans should tolerate the sort of thing Aquinas calls a soul, and the notion of body seems entirely uncontroversial. Further, the problem seems to be posed in terms that are readily observable – there is nothing objectionably metaphysical and abstruse here. We know, at least roughly, what it is to be alive, because we see living beings all around us. Three-dimensional bodies are similarly manifest in our everyday experiences; there is nothing mysterious there. Our question, then, is whether the first principle of life is something that has three dimensions.

Now one might balk at the notion of a *first principle*, thinking that this is where the trouble starts. But in speaking of a *principle* all that Aquinas is looking for is the cause of life, or the internal source from which life springs. (This principle must be *internal*. If Aquinas were looking for the genuinely ultimate source of life then it would turn out that the soul is God.) So one should object to Aquinas’s search for principles only if one objects to the idea of looking for causes. But anyone who would resist at this point is simply not engaged in the same enterprise as Aquinas. He views it as axiomatic that one understands the world by understanding the causes of things: “In order for something to be known one must grasp the causes; for to know is to grasp the cause” (*InMet* VIII.4.1739).<sup>1</sup>

It is less clear what Aquinas means by a ‘first principle,’ and he offers surprisingly little guidance in this regard. (This is especially surprising since, as Cajetan rightly points out in his influential sixteenth-century commentary on *ST*, the main argument of 75.1 derives “its whole force”

from that phrase (75.1.IV).) As this study advances, we will see various ways in which the soul can be viewed as the *first* source, cause, or principle of life. It is first in terms of being that which is primarily responsible for the *existence* of a living being (§3.3), and it is also first in terms of what it contributes to the *purpose* of a living being (§6.2). Here we are looking for that which is primarily responsible for life, and Aquinas tells us that “life is displayed above all by two functions: cognition and movement” (75.1c). So to speak of soul as the first principle of life is to say that it is primarily responsible for cognition and movement. As for why the soul is primary, that will have to emerge in the course of this chapter.

Even if Aquinas’s question now seems clear enough, it may nevertheless appear that he has set himself an impossible task, especially for the brief space of this initial article. For, given how Aquinas understands ‘corporeal,’ it may look as if he has committed himself to establishing the existence of some sort of nonextended spiritual power within us, a Cartesian ghost in the machine, an incorporeal homunculus. His position looks even worse once one notices that Aquinas wants this account to hold for *all* living beings: not just humans, nor even just animals, but all the way down to the lowest forms of life. How will we be persuaded that there is something incorporeal responsible even for the life of a plant?

In fact, Aquinas’s goal here is rather different – although no less ambitious, as we will see. First, he is not at all concerned at this point with establishing what this first principle of life does. So there is no reason to fear that we are going to be offered a homunculus account – an account on which some inner faculty is postulated to carry out all the activities that the organism as a whole seemed to carry out. (Obviously such an account explains nothing, but simply raises all the same questions at a more obscure level.) The nature of soul’s powers will become clear as the Treatise emerges, but that is not the concern at present. Second, Aquinas is not arguing that soul is some sort of nonextended substance of the Cartesian sort. Such an entity would indeed be mysterious, and a treatise devoted to its discovery and analysis would be of limited interest. But this is not the way Aquinas thinks of the soul, and he thinks that the air of mystery that surrounds our notion of soul will be dissolved once we recognize the sort of thing we should be looking for. His argument is that to identify soul with body is to commit what amounts to a category mistake. Such corporeal theories look in the wrong place for the first principle of life: they look among bodies, when they should be looking for causal principles of a fundamentally different kind. What soul is, in fact, is the *actuality* of a living body, and to be an actuality is to be incorporeal. But this is not the sort of incorporeal stuff that might dance on the head of a pin. Aquinas is arguing that corporeal theories of soul have misconceived the way an ultimate explanation of life must be given, and consequently have misconceived the nature of soul.

Aquinas’s account is particularly ambitious because he is challenging not just a certain theory of soul, but an entire scientific/philosophical program.

## I. BODY AND SOUL

We are given a hint of this in the last few sentences of 75.1c, when Aquinas states his final conclusion:

Therefore the soul, which is the first principle of life, is not a body, but the actuality of a body. And this is so in just the way that heat, which is the principle of heating, is not a body, but the actuality of a body.

With this seemingly casual, off-the-cuff comparison, Aquinas notes that the kind of argument just used to derive soul's incorporeality might equally well be used to derive an incorporeal theory of heat. Just as soul is not a body, so too heat is not a body. Both are actualities (though we will see that they are very different kinds of actualities). The reader who might otherwise have missed the point is here forcibly shown how Aquinas is arguing not just for a particular account of soul but for a general metaphysical theory, one that will extend over all natural phenomena, living and nonliving.

The point is easily missed. For although Aquinas had, early in the reply, introduced the view of the ancient philosophers who held that all things are corporeal, he had not made it clear that he would be issuing such a fundamental challenge to their position. Aquinas says he will employ one of the "many ways of showing that this view is false." But one would naturally suppose his argument to be directed at the ancient position only as regards the soul. It is a surprise to discover, at the end of the reply, that his argument can readily be generalized as a critique of the entire ancient position. If this is Aquinas's aim, then we need to take a step back ourselves, and look at precisely what this ancient view was (§1.2). Then we need to see how Aquinas's argument in 75.1c runs (§1.3). After that, finally, we need to consider whether this argument really can work as a general critique of the ancient position (§§1.4 and 1.5).

### 1.2. The ancient naturalists

The explicit target of 75.1c is those ancients that held all things to be corporeal.<sup>2</sup> It is tempting, for us, to refer to these ancient philosophers as materialists. Yet that description can be misleading. It can be misleading, first, because there are vast differences between what we mean by matter and what Aquinas means by matter (see §1.4). Second, and more fundamentally, the label 'materialist' misdescribes the nature of the disagreement between Aquinas and the ancients. Aquinas thinks that these figures went wrong not just because they disbelieved in spiritual entities like God, angels, and the human soul, but – more basically – because they had the wrong metaphysics, even with respect to the natural world that was their focus.

To get straight on these matters we need to look closely at how Aquinas characterizes the ancients' views.<sup>3</sup>

Now life is displayed above all by two functions: cognition and movement. But the ancient philosophers, unable to transcend their imaginations, claimed that the prin-

### Antiqui

Aquinas's information on the pre-Socratics comes largely from Aristotle, from whom he learned about Democritus and Leucippus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Thales, Heraclitus, Diogenes, Hippo, the Pythagoreans, and still others. Although Aquinas was aware of some important differences between these figures, he regularly treats them *en masse*.

There were others, more in error, who claimed that the soul is a body. Although their views were distinct and various, it is enough here to disprove them generally (*SCG* II.65.1426; see also *InDA* I.3–13, *De substantiis* I.1–65 [43–44]).

Aquinas routinely uses the term *antiqui* to pick out all and only the pre-Socratics, even if from his temporal perspective these figures were not significantly more ancient than Plato or Aristotle. (What difference does a century or so make when one is looking back some seventeen centuries – from circa 1267 CE to the fourth and fifth centuries BCE?).

Might the label *antiqui* be explained by Aquinas's having taken these ancients to be considerably earlier than Plato? Not likely. Aquinas is simply following Aristotle's own usage: Aristotle himself sometimes (*Met.* I 5, 986b8, *GC* I 1, 314a6, etc.) refers to the pre-Socratics as the ancients (*hoi palaioi*). Moreover, sometimes Aquinas includes Plato among the ancients (*InDA* I.5.25–45). And in the prologue to *De substantiis separatis*, Aquinas suggests that a consideration of ancient views extends through Plato and Aristotle. Often, to distinguish the pre-Socratics, Aquinas speaks of the “ancient naturalists” (e.g., 75.1 ad 2). These men were “the first of those who philosophized about the natures of things” (*De substantiis* I.2–3 [43]; see *InMet* I.4.74).

ciple behind these functions is a body. They said that the only things that exist are bodies, and that what is not a body is nothing. And, in keeping with this doctrine, they said that the soul is a body (75.1c).

Here and elsewhere Aquinas is careful about how he presents the ancient view. The ancients in question did not hold that all things are material, but that all things are corporeal (see 75.1 ad 1, *InMet* I.4.78). Aquinas does hold that the ancients erred by postulating only a material cause (see *InMet* VIII.4.1737); it is in that sense, most properly, that we might refer to the ancients as materialists. But his standard characterization of the ancient view is the more straightforward claim that they believed “the only things that exist are bodies.” And, when the ancients are characterized in this way,

it is not at all obvious that their view is an unattractive one. For one way of describing the faith to which the modern materialist subscribes is to say that the only sort of stuff that is out there is material stuff. There is nothing in nature that is nonphysical, incorporeal, or spiritual. If this is a sound translation into modern terms of the ancient views, then most philosophers today will find themselves in sympathy.

Aquinas takes the ancients to be wedded to a more specific and less plausible kind of materialism. He believes they are committed to a very specific metaphysical picture, which we can begin to understand by looking at a slightly different way in which he often characterizes the ancients' view:

The first of those who philosophized about the natures of things held that only bodies exist. They claimed that the first principles of things are certain corporeal elements, either one or many (*De substantiis* 1.1–5 [43]; see 75.3c, *InMet* 1.9.145, *InDA* 1.5.29).

The first sentence here repeats the earlier characterization, but the second sentence makes a more specific claim. One might naturally suppose that this second claim is a straightforward consequence of the first: if only bodies (*corpora*) exist, then *a fortiori* the first principles of things will be corporeal. But the second claim is stronger. There are in fact many philosophers who would consider themselves materialists and yet embrace only the first of these two claims. A latter-day Platonist might suppose that everything that exists is corporeal, and yet believe in abstract (and therefore incorporeal) properties. One might similarly believe in space-time, or in numbers or sets, and yet still insist that everything that actually exists is corporeal. Perhaps there is an irresolvable tension in such claims. But it is at least tempting to suppose that only bodies exist, and at the same time to hold that a metaphysical analysis of bodies reveals principles that are not themselves bodily.

Aquinas identifies the weak point in ancient naturalism as its assumption that even the principles of things must be bodies. He describes all the ancient naturalists as having agreed on this point, and as quarreling over just how many such corporeal principles should be posited. Some thought that one corporeal element could account for the entire natural world. (Thales, for instance, opted for water, Diogenes of Apollonia for air.) Others (such as Empedocles) thought that several corporeal principles were necessary. But it was precisely in limiting their accounts to corporeal principles that they saddled themselves with an unworkable theory, even as regards the natural world.

What is it that makes this brand of materialism unacceptable? It is crucial to recognize that Aquinas does not attribute to the ancients a theory that is obviously false. One might suppose that if “what is not a body is nothing” (75.1c), and if corporeal elements are the first principles of things, then the ancients will be utterly unable to give any but the most reductive, even eliminative, explanations of reality. Instead of being able to say that two things look similar because they are the same color, it may

seem that the ancients would have to say that these things are similar because they share the same underlying corporeal structure, and that indeed there is no such thing as color, strictly speaking, unless ‘color’ is a term of convenience for referring to such corporeal structures. Moreover, it may seem that the ancients would not even be able to account for *structure*, unless they can somehow explain the structure of things strictly and entirely in terms of corporeal elements. (Not in terms of the *position* or *interrelationship* of corporeal elements, but in terms of strictly corporeal elements.) On this reading the ancients would be attempting either (1) a reductive explanation of all things in terms of bodies alone; or, even more radically, (2) the *elimination* of any sort of entity or explanatory principle that is not one of their elemental bodies. Either way, this sort of project looks unattractive and hopelessly crude.

But although the ancient position is flawed, it is not *that* flawed. Aquinas thinks the ancients went wrong in interesting ways; one can’t refute their view simply by showing that we must be able to talk not just about bodies, but also about the states that bodies are in. Indeed, although elemental bodies are in some sense basic on the ancient scheme, it was no part of their project to explain away all the states that might characterize these bodies. In fact, the ancients were ready to countenance properties such as color, size, and shape:

The ancient philosophers . . . did not get far enough to raise their intellects toward something that is beyond the sensible. And so they were aware only of those forms that are proper or common sensible objects. But forms of this sort are clearly accidents, such as white, black, large, small, etc. (*InMet* VII.2.1284).

The ancients did acknowledge forms such as colors and sizes, and Aquinas does not suggest that they advocated the reduction or elimination of such forms in favor of description at a purely corporeal level. What the ancients did claim, however, is that such forms are accidental – which is to say that they are attributes that might come and go while the substance remains the same (see §3.4). Elsewhere, Aquinas describes how such forms were thought to be added onto a thing’s substance:

Because principles must endure, a thing seems to be a principle if it endures through generation and corruption. But matter, which they said was the substance of a thing, endures through every change. Its states, however, are changed: the form, and all the things that are added onto the matter’s substance (*InMet* I.4.74).

Forms, on this account, come and go while the basic corporeal stuff remains the same. (Here Aquinas speaks of *matter*, because he is now talking about the fundamental stuff that makes up the body.)

On the ancient view any body can be analyzed into (1) the underlying elemental matter and (2) accidental forms. The matter is basic and elemental because it endures. Aquinas describes the ancients as arguing from an initial assumption that “principles must endure.”<sup>4</sup> And it is the underlying material stuff, the ancients supposed, that endures in this way. Gold

is mined from the ground, processed and shaped, melted down and shaped again, ad infinitum. What remains the same, every step of the way, is the underlying material stuff: either the gold itself or something even more basic than the gold. Shape, size, and surface color get added on top of this material substratum. So for these ancients the first principles of things are corporeal elements: they are the first principles because they are the simplest stuff that can be found in nature. Aquinas reports (*InMet* I.12.188) that the ancients, in looking for first principles, should have been looking for (1) that which is most simple and (2) that which is most perfect. If they had done that then they would have been led to embrace actuality as their first principle (and God as first among all actualities). But because the ancients concentrated only on the first criterion of simplicity, they focused their search on the most basic stuff that could be found in the natural world. For some this was water, for others air, and so on.

So the ancient position is not crudely reductive, and neither is it simply a generic version of materialism (“the only things that exist are bodies”). On the ancient view, the question of what is a human being becomes the question of what material – fire, water, and so on – serves as the basic principle of life. And when the ancients are understood in this way, their program suddenly begins to look quite similar in spirit to the Human Genome Project, which takes as its basic principles the four nucleotides from which DNA builds its twenty different amino acids. Of course, Aquinas has nothing against learning as much as possible about the physical makeup of human beings; indeed, he regards this as among the most important of human achievements. But he would object to any account, ancient or modern, that purports to describe the *nature* of human beings in corporeal terms. We can now turn to his reasons for this view.

### 1.3. The argument for soul as actuality

Aristotle, as we saw in §1.1, was struck by the obscurity of questions like *What is a human being?*; he advocates our “separating out” such questions into a more perspicuous form. He goes on to offer a more specific suggestion about how such *What is . . .* questions are to be analyzed: “we are searching for the cause of the matter, and this is the species: that by which the matter is a certain thing” (1041b7–8). Aquinas tries to spell this suggestion out in somewhat more detail:

It is clear, therefore, that in such questions “we are searching for the cause of the matter” – i.e., that on account of which the matter realizes (*pertingat ad*) the nature of what is being defined. And this thing we are searching for, the cause of the matter, “is the species” – that is, the form – “by which [the matter] is a certain thing” (*InMet* VII.17.1668).

As Aquinas understands Aristotle, then, the question *What is a human being?* should be analyzed as the question of what makes this material stuff be human. The general line of reply that Aristotle proposes (and Aquinas

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accepts) is that it is form, in the ultimate analysis, that makes the matter be what it is. Form is “the cause of the matter”; it is “on account of” form that the matter “realizes the nature” of what it is.

This proposal puts the disagreement between Aquinas and the ancient naturalists in a stark light. To their way of thinking, certain simple elements are the most basic and general explanation for why a thing is the way it is. There is no deeper account to be had. Aquinas, in contrast, thinks that a more fundamental explanation is available: he thinks that we can always ask, for example, Why is this the matter of a rational animal? And the answer Aquinas believes should be given is one in terms of form. He depicts the ancients as having drawn their theory of soul from their general metaphysical picture: “. . . in keeping with this doctrine, they said that the soul is a body” (75.1c). Aquinas’s reply is to argue that their theory of soul is false; if he is right about that then we will have at least one counterexample to the ancients’ more general account. So if 75.1 is successful it will not only furnish us with a basic account of what soul is, but also refute one of Aquinas’s metaphysical rivals.

To this end Aquinas chooses one of the many arguments that he says he might have chosen: one “by which it is clear in a quite general and certain way that the soul cannot be a body.” Here is the heart of the argument in 75.1c, with each premise assigned a number:

. . . no body can be the first principle of life. For (i) it is clear that to be a principle of life, or to be living, does not hold of a body as the result of its being a body: otherwise (ii) every body would be living, or a principle of life. Therefore (iii) it holds of some body that it is living, or else is a principle of life, through its being *such* a body. But (iv) as for the fact that it is actually such, it has this from a principle that is called its *actuality*. Therefore (v) the soul, which is the first principle of life, is not a body, but the actuality of a body.

The argument has three stages:

1. It derives (i) from the negation of (ii).
2. It derives (iii) from (i).
3. It derives (v) from (iii) and (iv).<sup>5</sup>

It is only the last of these stages that seems questionable. The first stage rests on the evident truth that not every body is (a principle of) living – for example, rocks – and draws the conclusion (i) that bodies are not (principles of) living simply in virtue of being bodies. The second stage relies on this conclusion to draw the further conclusion (iii) that bodies are (principles of) living only in virtue of being bodies of a certain sort – in virtue of being “such a body.” So far, so good.

The third stage stipulates that (iv) what makes a body be of a certain sort is the body’s *actuality*. This apparently amounts to nothing more than a terminological decision, and so there seems no reason for us to hesitate: let us agree that what makes a thing be such is an actuality of the thing. From this stipulation, together with (iii), Aquinas concludes:

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(v) The soul, which is the first principle of life, is not a body, but the actuality of a body.

We can take for granted that the soul just is the first principle of life (see §1.1). But do we really have an argument for the conclusion that the internal principle primarily responsible for life is not a body?

Aquinas assumes, in (v), that an actuality is not itself a body. This assumption needs some defense, especially in the present context, when dealing with philosophers who suppose that all things are bodies. And it is not clear that the conclusion follows from earlier premises. For it seems we can accept

(iii) It holds of some body that it is living, or else is a principle of life, through its being *such* a body

without endorsing incorporeal principles of explanation. And

(iv) As for the fact that it is actually such, it has this from a principle that is called its *actuality*

seems to be simply a terminological decision. Certainly, this terminological decision is of tremendous importance for Aquinas's broader metaphysics. In claiming that actuality explains what makes a thing be such (*tale*), Aquinas is making a sweeping claim: *whenever* we want to characterize an object *in any sort of way*, we should do so in terms of the presence (or absence) of something that he calls its *actuality*. As noted already, this is a claim that holds not just for the soul, but in all cases, across the board. We are not told much about this actuality in 75.1. In later articles (e.g., 75.4, 75.5), Aquinas takes for granted that actuality is equivalent to form, and so takes for granted that the soul is a form. But here he doesn't even say that much. Yet what he does presuppose – without explicit argument – is that this actuality is something nonbodily. What justifies that presupposition?<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, one body can make another body be such. This happens when one rock crushes another. Moreover, complex bodies are composed of bodily parts, and these parts can cause the complex body to be such. The heart, a bodily organ, causes the larger body of which it is a part to be such a body. Aquinas acknowledges these facts when he allows that a body can be a principle of life. Here is how he introduces the main argument of 75.1:

It is clear that not just any principle of an operation associated with life is a soul. For if so then the eye would be a soul, since it is a principle of seeing, and the same would have to be said for the soul's other instruments. But we say that the *first* principle of life is the soul. Now although a body could be a principle of life, in the way that the heart is a principle of life in an animal, nevertheless no body can be the first principle of life. For (i) . . . (75.1c).

Aquinas grants that it makes sense to speak of bodily parts as principles of life. Generally, indeed, he is willing to say that bodily parts can be principles of the various operations associated with life. The eye is a principle

of vision; elsewhere he says that the heart is the principle of movement in animals (20.1 ad 1). Corporeal explanations can be partial explanations. But what Aquinas insists on is that nothing bodily can be the *first* principle of life. From here it follows straightaway that since the soul is the first principle of life, the soul is not a body.

To say that nothing bodily can be the first principle of life is equivalent to saying that nothing bodily can be the primary explanation of a body's being actually such as to be alive. This puts the weight of the argument on (iv), which needs to be understood as follows:

(iv) As for the fact that a body is actually such, it has this [*primarily*] from a principle that is called its actuality.

And now we can ask: why couldn't a bodily organ, such as the heart or the brain, be the first principle of life? Why, for instance, couldn't the Human Genome Project reveal the nature of human beings? Why, to frame the question more generally, are corporeal explanations always incomplete?

One natural line of thought at this point runs as follows. Regardless of which part of the body we point to, we can always ask a further question about why that bodily part explains life. Most crudely, we cannot just point

### **The human core**

Of all the parts of the body, Aquinas (following Aristotle) took the heart to be the best candidate for the first principle of life. Aquinas says the heart is "that by which life is preserved" (18.1 ad 1); "the first principle of movement" (20.1 ad 1); "the instrument of the soul's passions" (12ae 48.2c). It was not until William Harvey, in the seventeenth century, that the heart's true function of circulating blood was understood.

Just as we now look to the brain as the most likely material explanation for animal life, so Aquinas looked to the heart. Why didn't Aquinas look to the brain? Aquinas was at least several steps ahead of Aristotle here, inasmuch as Aristotle believed – astonishingly enough (e.g., *Parts of Animals* II.7) – that the function of the brain was to cool the blood (think of the radiator in a car engine). Aquinas recognizes the crucial role of the brain in sensation, and hence in human life (see §§4.2, 6.4, and 9.4), but he also supposes that the heart is somehow the ultimate principle of sensation (see §6.4). Moreover, it is impossible, Aquinas believes, for the brain to account for the operations of will and intellect (see §2.2). All of this gives him little reason to take the brain seriously as a candidate for the first principle of life.

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to bodies in general as the explanation of life, because if simply having a body were the cause of life, then all bodies would be alive. But we do little better, Aquinas thinks, even if we start working harder. Obviously it would not do just to point to a human body, and say that that is what makes someone human. For that would not explain the difference between living bodies and corpses. So imagine we work out the physical differences between a living body and a corpse, and that we also work out the complete physical differences between one kind of living thing and another. (I take Aquinas's view to be that plants and nonrational animals are entirely physical things in the modern sense (see §2.3), so in these cases the physical differences should account for all the differences.) Such an account would pass the test suggested by premise (ii) of the main argument, in that we could maintain that *every* body that has this particular stuff is a living being of a certain kind. Why would that explanation be incomplete? What further explanation could be wanted?

On behalf of Aquinas, one might reply that we still haven't found the first principle of life, because we still haven't discovered what is *essentially* responsible for life. No corporeal account could qualify, because there is no essential connection between having life and any *corporeal* stuff. While certain corporeal stuff might, as a matter of contingent fact, serve to distinguish the living from the dead, this is just a contingent fact. If the world had been different then there might be other kinds of corporeal stuff producing life, and other kinds of corporeal stuff producing life of this kind. But that then shows that no corporeal stuff can be the *first* principle of life.

If this is Aquinas's view then he is committed to quite a broad thesis about the nonessential nature of properties. For recall how Aquinas thinks his argument about soul generalizes: heat too, he says, "is not a body, but the actuality of body" (75.1c). Aquinas would have to insist that no corporeal account of what brings about heat – for example, the motion of molecules – can show what is *essentially* responsible for heat. There is always the possibility, for heat as well as for any other natural property, that that property might have had some different sort of physical instantiation.

This isn't an obviously implausible idea, even when extended quite broadly over all natural properties. But I see no evidence that Aquinas was committed to this thesis, or that he even considered it.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, there is a simpler interpretation. We should take Aquinas seriously when he says that the appeal to a body is explanatory only in virtue of its being a body of such and such kind. *Whenever* one attempts a corporeal explanation – in terms of the heart, say – one is actually appealing to the form or actuality of that body. One appeals to the structure and function of the heart, not to the physical stuff that composes the heart. And even when one focuses on the physical stuff, one is still focusing on the structure of that stuff. So if we could give a complete scientific account of how living bodies differ from corpses, we *would* thereby capture precisely what gives an