

Some Aspects of St Thomas' Conception of the Mind-Body Relation

RAMESH KUMAR SHARMA

University of Delhi
Delhi

Even when we do not exactly hypostatize them, mind (or soul) and body seem to us to present elements or aspects with such diverse, nay contrary, natures that the apparent fact of their making up what to all intents and purposes is a single being presents something of a paradox. At the same time, however, unless you are being a strict and *self-conscious* monist, either on the materialist side or on the spiritualist side, nothing strikes you as more natural than to regard man as a combination of mind and body. If this latter appears ultimately to pave the way for a dualistic doctrine (even if only of a relative or moderate kind) to prevail and assert itself as about the best possible explanation around, there is nothing to be astonished at. Even without claiming to resolve every mystery attaching to the problem, such a metaphysics may attempt to demonstrate that there is nothing inconsistent with the over-all nature of reality that there be a being who possesses both mental and physical characteristics. It may not ask the further question as to what specific purpose, blind or otherwise, does the (alleged) union of mind and body serve; but it cannot avoid the challenge of determining its nature and drawing appropriate conclusions either for itself, or for the universe. (This feature it may share even with a monistic or non-dualistic metaphysics.)

It will be seen that the difficulties the question presents are more formidable for a dualist than for a monist. I say 'for a dualist' for it would seem that all metaphysical explanation, in so far as it is ultimate, aims to reduce the world to a unity; it tends to a monism of either kind. Mind and matter are contraries; no two things can perhaps be more heterogeneous. Naturally, then, a theory which thinks either of them as the sole ultimate reality bestows upon the world a greater amount of unity than a theory which regards them as distinct realities. And if you add the further fact that the concerned metaphysics happens to be one which takes a teleological view of the universe, difficulties augment. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy is of just this sort and is not, I think, worse for that. It believes that there is a well-contemplated purpose to the universe, created as it is by a God who does not 'throw' dice, and so there is a purpose to everything else

in the universe, however blind thinking beings may be to that purpose or however inscrutable it may otherwise appear to us men of finite intellect.

If one were to be asked to sum up Aquinas' conception of man in a single word, 'person' would perhaps be the most fitting expression. (This, however, does not prejudice St. Thomas' own special use of the term in a different context.) We say 'person' and not simply 'soul' or anything of the sort, for to be a person and to be a soul would not quite mean the same thing in Aquinas' philosophy if the idea of person were necessarily to involve, besides that of soul, the idea of body. (We are, however, far from suggesting, as for example, P.F. Strawson does, that the idea of a person is logically primitive.) In that case, indeed, we will note that there is a characteristic one-way dependence of the concept of 'person' on the concept of 'soul' (or 'human soul'). You cannot be a person unless you are a soul in the first instance. The idea of a human soul, on the other hand, does not involve the idea of a person as a prior concept either logically or ontologically. A human person then turns out to be an entity composed of two things, soul and body. For practical purposes, we can even use the word 'embodied soul' for a human being. Though it may invite raised eyebrows, the word 'embodiment' is not so inept as it sometimes is thought to be: soul and body are after all differently conceived by Aquinas. But, besides, what is generally forgotten by the objectors is that in Aquinas a primacy attaches to the soul which does not attach to the body. We thus get the necessary conditions for a dualistic doctrine to obtain. The alleged dualism derives not simply from the fact that soul and body are considered as basically different; it derives also from the fact that their union is considered conceivable. This soul-body union is not a chance happening, explanation of which cannot be found either in the nature of reality—and this includes God—or in the nature of the terms themselves. Grounds exist, says Aquinas, for believing that the mind-body union is not only a possibility, but a fact, a plausible fact, for which there is clear warrant in reality.¹ The task then remains to probe the nature of this union.

In St Thomas' scheme of things, the universe is a creation of God and not natural necessity.² God's will and intelligence, which indeed direct the course of creation, are not arbitrary, though they are free and hence unshackled and unobstructed. There is an end and a purpose to the universe, and hence an end and a purpose to everything in the universe.³ Everything strives to achieve perfection, but this perfection can only be one which is proper to its nature, so

that really speaking, there is no clash of interests or dissonance. As long as a thing remains essentially the same, it acts in the same very way.

In such a world, there are at one end (the highest end) substances purely spiritual or incorporeal, and at the other end substances which are purely material or corporeal. The former, also called angels or angelic substances, represent the principle of pure intelligence (of which the supermost exemplar is God himself) at its highest so far as creaturely beings are concerned, and thus are nearest to God in comparison to those who are less intelligent or completely unintelligent. (Which means there is an ordered hierarchy of beings). They are called pure forms, while those at the lowest end are called sensible forms and are entirely wrapped up in matter. The spiritual substances are self-sufficient and self-contained like islands cut off from each other, and so as if content in their isolation. They do not seek each other, for they do not need each other. As pure forms they are wholly capable of subsisting separately; consequently the title of separated substances which Aquinas gives to them. They do not need bodies for their perfection.⁴ They too seek to be perfect, but they are capable of attaining such perfection by themselves.

It is different, however, with the human souls. They too represent the principle of intelligence. The intelligence, however, is in their case simple, an intelligence, in other words, which is of a lesser degree than that which angels are supposed to possess. If so, and Aquinas has no doubt that it is so, the human souls require bodies, a specific kind of matter in other words, to achieve the ends consistent with their nature and power.⁵ It is by having a body alone that they can hope to attain the level of perfection which they seek and of which they are (potentially) capable. In this respect, then, union with the body is a must for the human souls, also called intellectual substances.

The significance of the body is generally accepted by all. Even the monists of an idealistic and spiritualist variety quite reckon with the part, positive or negative, played by our bodies in our lives taken as a whole, and accept, up to a point, the mind-body distinction. The mind-body distinction incidentally is one which has had to be accepted, however provisionally, even by those who are otherwise wedded to a materialistic ideology and who consequently hold that mind or consciousness is nothing more than an activity of the body or an epiphenomenon. They have found, when they are being honest or dispassionate with regard to their innocent—epistemically innocent—experiences, that not everything we think or feel or do can be adequately explained in, or reduced to, purely physicalist terms. The

real point, however, is that philosophers, even when accepting the mind-body duality, however limitedly or qualifiedly, have not been unanimous in their estimation of the body.

There is Plato, for instance, who, a passionate votary of reason as the was, to which alone he attributed the power to discern necessary and eternal truths (and that alone was what for Plato mattered) saw in the body a positive evil and regarded the fact that we have bodies as very regrettable, even abnormal. In one of the passages specially notable for his firm view in the matter (*Republic*, BK X. 611), we not only find expressed Plato's deep wish that we break free from our present encumbrances and afflictions, which the mere fact of having a body inevitably brings in its wake and which adversely affect the natural activities of the soul, but also his belief that there is hardly any positive merit or worth in anything associated with the body. The soul, he maintains, has its proper (since original) abode in the kingdom of ideas or forms and it is only because of some guilt or natural law that it finds itself caged in a body. (Cf. *Phaedo*, 67d, 82e-83a, etc.). No wonder, then, that he thinks of the embodied soul as a sailer in a boat or as a man with his suit; the body is nothing more than an instrument which, since it somehow gets connected with the soul, is meant to be used by the latter, though otherwise the soul, as a spiritual substance, is quite capable of subsisting by itself and pursuing its objectives. In other words, to Plato the relation between soul and body born of their union is not only a bizarre accident, but also and perhaps for that reason, external and contingent. Consequently, the view of man that emerges is one in which there is no room for a composed or uniform entity which is a single existence and which possesses a substantial unity of its own. The physical side of the human being, which on the Platonic view represents largely the appetites and pleasures, carnal or otherwise, thus stands completely sundered from what is known as the rational side. The appetites and pleasures are such that they, through their sheer impetuosity, overwhelm the soul; they are like leaden weights with which the soul gets encumbered right from the time of its bodily existence and from which therefore it has to break free before it can move upward from the earth.

When we turn to Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the human soul, the first thing that strikes us is that union with the body is not seen here as a descent in itself; it does not symbolize soul's fallenness. In one clear sense it is the most natural thing that can, speaking loosely, happen to a soul⁶ so far as the concept of the substance 'man' is concerned. The soul is naturally united to the body in order to

complete the human species. Though created by God⁷ directly it begins to exist only as an integral part of the human being, who is consequently viewed as a composite of soul and body. (Thus though otherwise immortal, it has a beginning.) Its union with the body is also natural in a different sense, namely that except in the case of angelic substances, everything we encounter in the world is, in the nature of things (as willed by God), a combination of matter and form. In the notion of personhood (or embodiment) is thus involved the very idea of the composite of soul and body, body here standing for matter.

But why should every substance, corporeal and non-corporeal, be made up of form and matter? And, further, why should it be the soul in particular which should represent the form-aspect or-element in the substance called man. For this we have to turn to the notion of 'form'.

We shall misconstrue the whole logic of form if we understand by it something like a pattern or configuration—a meaning no doubt the word quite often conveys. At least of the human soul, this cannot be said, if the human soul is to be called form on the ground that it, like some other forms, informs and animates the matter of its body. We soon discover, however, that this cannot be said of any form. What does 'form' then stand for in Aquinas' thought? This is a tangled question, and besides involves a couple of other complicated notions. We shall try, however, to put things as simply as possible.

If we leave aside the angelic substances which are 'pure' forms, free as they are from even the meagerest vestige of corporeality (or matter in its general sense and not in the specific Thomist sense), we find that all entities are composed substances, composed of both matter and form and composed further in such a way that in *most* of them form and matter, though representing different elements, are inseparably united; after all, there is no necessity that the distinguishables must be separable too.

We learn something vital about form when we ask the question: What is the essence of a thing? It cannot be its matter, for matter is not a principle of knowledge. The essence, on the other hand, is that by which we obtain knowledge of a thing, knowledge here meaning placing a thing in its genus and species accordingly.⁸ Nor can we see in form alone the essence of a thing; the definition of a thing must somehow differ from the mathematical definition. A thing's essence must refer to both matter and form,⁹ though not by way of a superadded relation: that would make essence something accidental and so external to the thing, *not* something by which it could be

known. Form consequently is but a part of a thing's essence. But though it is so, and this is to be marked, it is form, not matter, which provides actual existence (or being) to a particular thing. Form it is which is the principle of being and so imparts to the matter existential actuation. Now a composed thing or substance, in virtue of the fact that it is a whole, a single whole, such that its constituent parts no longer exist except virtually, can have only *one* (act of) existence; it is the whole, after all, to which the act is attributed. If essence is to be understood in relation to the act of existence (*esse*)—and that is how Aquinas conceives the matter—then matter, since it does not *in itself* constitute the possibility of existence, is not so far essence. It is then only a potency, though that in itself is not a nugatory fact. It is form which bestows upon the thing the specific unity it has, for it is form which determines what kind of thing a thing is to be. Matter, on the other hand, supplies numerical unity to the composite thing. It is the principle of individuation¹⁰ (Aquinas sometimes uses the word 'individuality'), a principle, in other words, which makes a thing a particular thing within the same species. Plato is not only a man but a particular man, numerically distinct, for example, from the man called Socrates. It is in this unity contributed by matter that we can find an explanation of the existence of multiple examples of the *same* form in nature. Aquinas follows Aristotle's doctrine that it is the notion of quantity which is *the* principle of individuation¹¹ within 'corporeal' substances. The origin of the idea of matter is of course the (undeniable) fundamental fact of production and corruption (or distintegration) which becomes the basis of Aquinas' analysis of matter. However, all said and done, it is form which is supposed to be the real formal cause of a thing.

Let us now turn to examine how the relationship of form and matter, which extends over the totality of substances except the pure forms, unfolds in the case of human beings who also are seen as composite substances.

Now, in no other substance is the composite character more evident than in the human beings. There are things such as walking, talking, eating and drinking, moving or stopping, which directly involve reference to (what is called) the body. And there are things like knowing and understanding and willing and desiring which apparently do not involve direct reference to the body; they can be known and distinguished as such without knowing any particular state or posture of the body. Once this distinction impinges on our consciousness with force, consequences follow. To cut the story short, if you happen to be metaphysically minded your first reaction may well be:

How can two entities as different as soul and body, representing as they do different functions, come to combine and form a single being such that, and this is of fundamental importance, this being can at the same time be a subject of markedly different attributes? That this is at least what appearance tells us, we are never in doubt: we find ourselves to be the kind of beings who typically represent such an entity. We may not know whether or not there are other living beings who instantiate such radically different properties but we are certain that *we* human beings do this is one aspect.

The problem assumes further and graver proportions when we find Aquinas maintaining—and this is what makes the position of the composite 'man' specially unique among creaturely beings—that the human soul survives the death of the human body and lives thereafter a disembodied existence (so to speak). In the case of all other composites, their forms do not survive, and perish with the dissolution of matter. And this, according to Aquinas, is indeed how it should be: they are after all corporeal forms. (These include even forms of minerals and plants.) The form of the substance man, viz. soul, is however (says Aquinas) not corporeal; it is spiritual. And though even as spiritual form it can perish, it need not perish with the disintegration of its matter, the body. Aquinas however goes on to assert that it does not perish at all. This then is the problem of 'embodiment' as many philosophers conceive it. And this is the form the problem takes in Thomas Aquinas. One can speak of embodiment of something only, if that something is different from the body and different in such a way that it is able to maintain its separate existence independently and irrespective of what happens to the body, with which it otherwise unites to form a certain substance.

Now given this independent existential character of the soul in its relation to the body, two basic questions are apt to arise. The first is: what is there in the soul which distinguishes it so fundamentally from the body? And the second is: given the natural union of soul and body, where does the soul stand vis-a-vis the body? In other words, what is the form of this union, and further, what consequences of a general nature, if any, does it entail as regards the nature of the human soul?

Nothing in St Thomas' conception of the soul distinguishes it from the body as much as the fact that it (the soul) has intelligence; it knows or can know, and is therefore capable of 'intellectual' or rational knowledge. We say 'capable of' because the soul's knowledge is possible knowledge and soul a 'possible intellect' which, says Aquinas, Aristotle described as a *tabula rasa* on which nothing had

been written.¹² We noted above that among the functions belonging to man which do not seem immediately to involve direct reference to the body (or its states), one is that of knowing. St Thomas calls it 'intellectual operation'¹³ and sees in this a *basic* feature that distinguishes the soul from the body and besides, but no less importantly, affirms the former's subsistent character.¹⁴

By means of intellectual operation man can know all corporeal things. However, St Thomas points out, whatever knows certain things cannot have them in its nature. For if it had them in its nature, their presence in it would hinder the knowledge of anything else.¹⁵ Every body has a certain determinate nature so that if an intellectual operation contained it within itself it would not be able to know all bodies; for, in the nature of things, these bodies will have their own determinate nature. It is impossible therefore for an intellectual principle to be a body and to have a corporeal character. The second point is that intellectual knowledge is not possible through a bodily organ.¹⁶ Intellectual operation is not an operation of a bodily organ, since, as said above, the latter's presence, specially its own determinate nature, would hinder knowledge of other bodies.

But there is a third argument, much more powerful and, in my view, even beautiful. To know something, holds St Thomas, is to be able to become or be it in a certain definite manner. This doctrine follows from one cardinal principle of Aquinas' philosophy that 'everything naturally aspires to being after its own manner.'¹⁷ But how can one *be* what one knows? It is sensible things mostly and (perhaps) firstly that we happen to know. We cannot however know things in their sensible actuality or character, unless we are sensitive beings ourselves. Not that one becomes a thing one knows literally. The point is, there must be some principle in us which corresponds to the thing *as* we happen to know it. This principle in respect of sensible things is our body, which means our senses. Not only that, there is also in us a principle of *being* such that we are able to apprehend things *as* or in their being or actuality. Knowing primarily makes its appearance in the mode of act; it is the mode of act which is the mode of being.

It is true not doubt that Aquinas regards intellectual knowledge as the product of intellectual abstraction. But we have to note also that he does not think all knowledge to be intellectual knowledge. Before the intellect begins its job of abstraction (and conceptualization) it has to give, at the level of *knowledge*, sensible existence to that which is sensible at the level of *being*. To put it shortly, being (i.e. being in and of things) first of all comes to us as sensible something, and human

knowledge begins in the form of an exercise of the sensible act of being in things.¹⁸ This is not all however, for there remains intellectual knowledge. The presumption here, of course, is that there is an intelligible aspect, or rather form, which saturates things in their sensible being. Always intertwined with the sensible, it is never given separately. To apprehend it, therefore, means to abstract it from the sensible and place it, e.g., under a genus and a species. This operation is therefore called intellectual abstraction. To know something intellectually is thus to be or become the known thing by assimilating its form, not matter.

Now it should be obvious that this process of intellection is inherently such that in it corporeal matter (here body and sense-organs) can have, or has, no share to claim. But only that which subsists in itself can have an operation by itself.¹⁹ An intellectual operation is something which, since it involves no contribution by the body as such, is through and through immaterial and as much so as its objects, the intelligible forms, are immaterial. There is then something in man, concludes Aquinas, which cannot be reduced to, and so is essentially different from, the corporeal body. This something is the soul. Briefly, the very possibility of intellectual knowledge implies as an antecedent condition the existence of an immaterial subject, an immaterial knowing capacity and immaterial knowing operations.

We now come to the second question, namely, what is the form that the union of soul and body takes, such that it yields a *single* being. It is clear that if the soul-body union is no mere accident, then it is not superfluous but rather directed towards a definite end. Now the final end of man according to Aquinas is knowledge of God or Truth. And knowledge, as we have seen, is possible only through the soul, the principle of intellection. Since, however, it is to the whole human person of which the body forms a necessary constituent that the intellectual operation is attributed, one can legitimately conclude that the composite substance man derives its *species* from the soul. But bestowal of specific unity is, we noted above, a task which properly belongs to the form of a thing. It turns out then that it is the soul which is fit to be called the form of the (human) body,²⁰ and which therefore provides it (the body) actual existence. The standing of the soul-form is, however, unique too in many ways. Unlike other corporeal forms, which cannot exist independently of matter, the soul, the characteristically human soul, can, because of its essential immateriality (see above), exist or subsist independently of the body²¹ with which it otherwise unites to form the substance man. The soul is, then, concludes Thomas Aquinas, an (intellectual) substance (or

subsistent form) in its own right. As substance it has its own act of being the act which properly belongs to it, and belongs without the aid of any intermediary. And surely that which belongs to something directly, belongs to it necessarily and not as a matter of contingent fact. Since the human body cannot exist on its own—it is matter after all—it needs something which can give it or share with it its existence. This something is the soul.

But this is not all. St Thomas, further, talks of two conditions which in his view are essential for one thing to be another thing's substantial form. The first is that the form must be the principle of substantial being to the thing of which it is the form. This principle cannot be the 'effective' principle; it has to be the 'formal' principle²² by which 'a thing is, and is called a *being*.' This leads to the second condition, viz. that the form and the matter should be united in *one* being. A simple juxtaposition of two things cannot yield one being or existence in which a composite substance could subsist. The soul as the formal principle of being to matter, communicates its being to matter.²³ As form, it vivifies the body so that it may perform its own operations which indeed are variform.

It may be objected that since soul and body have different genera they must have different modes of being, or that the soul being a more noble substance should have a more noble mode. And this may be thought to militate against the very idea of a single being for body and soul.²⁴ Thomas is quite anticipative of this and replies that the protest can hold only if this single being belonged in the same way to the body (or matter) as it does to the intellectual substance soul. This is not the case, however. For it (being) belongs, says he to corporeal matter as its recipient and subject raised to something higher, while to the intellectual substance it belongs as its principle and in conformity with its very nature.²⁵ This principle, incidentally, also goes to explain why this form cannot be the human body as body, for that would make every body a 'living thing' and the first principle of life. Not that the body cannot at all be a principle of life: the heart is, for example, the principal of life in an animal. And so can be the entire body. It cannot however be the *first* principle.²⁶ In fact, it can be a living thing and a principle of life only as *such* (or as *this*) body. This character of being *such* a body it owes to some principle which is regarded as its *act*. The soul is this act of the body.²⁷

There is a further consideration which strengthens the soul's claim to the office of form. Man proper is called a *rational* animal, and rightly, according to Aquinas, for the essence²⁸ of man consists in his rationality. And though animality is also an important characteristic of

man, this he shares in common with other animals. It cannot therefore act as a differentia so long as man retains his link with the animal kingdom. His rationality however he does not owe to his animality but to the power of intellection (or reason) which (as we noted above) he is supposed to possess. And this power represents the soul. Therefore, properly speaking, the soul is the form.²⁹ Indeed, were it not so, an explanation would be due as to how an act of understanding or knowledge becomes the act of a particular person: after all, each one of us has the awareness (reflectively or otherwise) that it is he himself who understands.³⁰ The conclusion, then, is that it is more apposite to regard the human soul as the form of the body than anything else—so far as, that is, their mutual relationship is concerned.

We are now at a crucial and penultimate stage. If the foregoing discussion is any guide, then one message is loud and clear. It is that though a very close relationship exists between soul and body as it comes to manifest form in the human being, the independent and the special position which the soul retains with respect to the body is, in the end, not negotiable. In fact, as we saw, even the purpose behind the soul-body union is to serve the interests of the soul,³¹ not of the body, for (we are told) it is matter which 'exists for the sake of the form, and not the form for the sake of the matter.'³² To see the matter expressed in Thomas' own words: 'The soul communicates that being in which it subsists to the corporeal matter, out of which and the intellectual soul there results one being; so that the being of the whole composite is also the being of the soul. This is not the case with other non-subsistent forms. For this reason the human soul retains its own being after the dissolution of the body, whereas it is not so with other forms.'³³ It is because the soul is a *subsistent form* that the disintegration of the body it animates cannot mean its own death. But there is a further reason. The soul is not only a substance, but an immaterial one, its immateriality deriving from its intellectual character. (Hence also its another name, viz. spiritual substance, used by Aquinas). It is the soul's character as an *immaterial substance*³⁴ which, for Aquinas, serves finally and irrevocably to clinch the issue of its independent and immortal existence. The angelical doctor just cannot afford to allow this central Christian doctrine to be diluted or otherwise compromised. The corporeal substances, on the other hand, disintegrate with the disintegration of their matter.

This way of understanding the matter may be contested. It may be said that our view falls short of the truer perspective which consists in realizing that the soul and the body constitute a single being in a single composition; that, if the body as body cannot do without soul,

the soul too needs the body for its operations to become a possibility in the first instance. And there is no doubt that this is the case upto a very great extent. We human beings not only know and understand but also sense, and also further *know* that we sense.³⁵ And sensible knowledge, as far as our present experience goes, is impossible without the body. Not only that. We attribute sensible knowledge to the same person as much and in as good a sense in which we attribute to him intellectual knowledge. Which means, our sensible knowledge belongs to our body (-part) no more than our intellectual knowledge belongs to our soul (-part). St Thomas' modern interpreter Etienne Gilson has endorsed and summed up this position by calling man a substantial union of form and matter, of soul and body. He writes: '[T]he union of soul and body is not only so close that the soul interpenetrates and envelops the body to the extent of being present in each of its parts³⁶—which goes without saying, if it is really the form of the body; but we must further assert that this union is a substantial union, not merely an external union'.³⁷ Explaining his meaning of substantial union Gilson says: 'The accidental union leads to one essence being grafted on another without the nature proper to either of them requiring the union. The substantial union, on the contrary, is one which combines two beings, each incomplete by itself, into one single complete being.'³⁸ Few remarks could be more straight and forthright. If such an interpretation is to be trusted, the relation between soul and body, as conceived by Aquinas, can scarcely be called contingent or external. The human soul comes united with the body not so much out of a natural inclination towards it, not from any desire to lend it life simply, but because it needs it. The human soul, says Aquinas himself, 'in a certain way requires the body for its operation.'³⁹ It is only as an embodied being that it can exist as a knowing spiritual substance.

Now if carefully studied, the above protest does in no wise falsify or compromise the special position of the soul which, we have insisted, follows from St Thomas' conception and utterances. In fact, it seems we can go further and say that not only soul but *any* form enjoys in Thomas' thought a priority, a metaphysical priority, over matter. This is not simply to play with words. As Aquinas envisages, the relation which form has to matter in any composite is nor a necessary one. It is not necessary *because* that which has the relation of cause to something else, as form does to matter in the particular thing, can in principle exist without the other.⁴⁰ In fact even when it has relation to matter such that it cannot exist except in matter—as e.g. at the lower end of the hierarchy of being—it retains its nature as cause and act,

and hence its decisive primacy over matter. If this is the position which form occupies vis-a-vis matter, then the relation between form and matter cannot strictly be called necessary at least in that sense of the word which implies mutual existential dependence. Goheen states this conclusion thus: 'Aquinas is conscious of the fact that one must so define form that its dependence on matter is incidental.'⁴¹ This is specially true of the soul, which as a spiritual substance has its *essence* free from matter. Of the soul then, it would be more true to say that (to put in Aquinas' own words) it *shares* its existence with matter—the body—retaining at the same time its independent status with respect to the body. The soul thus is 'too superior to fall into a real composition with matter *in the sense* that it cannot exist without matter.'⁴²

Such a view may appear startling and may even seem to run counter to some of the fundamental things Thomas Aquinas is supposed to believe and say. Isn't it Aquinas' clear view, it may be asked, that the soul needs to be united to the body for its own intellectual understanding to become a possibility—an understanding which is the soul's main end? And this certainly is undeniable. But this (in our view) does not seem to settle matters finally, for we find Aquinas envisioning a different possibility too: 'Nevertheless it is possible for it [the soul] to exist apart from the body, and also to understand in *another* way.'⁴³ The meaning here seems to be that the soul-body union appears necessary for acquiring intellectual knowledge so long as it (the union) actually lasts. After it snaps, however, the soul is not only able to maintain its existence, but also to understand things; only its mode of understanding now undergoes a change.⁴⁴ The suggestion then seems to be that it is possible that the present (admitted) inability of the soul to know things intellectually except through its union with the body is a limitation which derives from the actual presence of the body, and which disappears along with it.⁴⁵ Aquinas goes on to explain, and says, that though on separation from the body the human soul ceases to understand things by first turning to corporeal phantasms (or sensible things), as is the case in the embodied state, it nevertheless understands in that state 'by means of participated species resulting from the influence of the divine light, shared by the soul as by other separate substances, though in a lesser degree.'⁴⁶ Hence it is that 'as soon as it ceases to act by turning to the body, the soul turns at once to what is above it; nor is this way of knowledge *unnatural*, for God is the author of the influx both of the light of grace and of the light of nature.'⁴⁷ This vision of the soul's retention of its knowing capacity even in the disembodied

state cannot but drive one to the view that the soul's union with the body, however nice a thing in itself, is after all not necessary in the sense some interpreters have understood it to be.

This is not the end of the matter, however. For it is possible (Aquinas seems to tell us) to view the question of the soul-body relation from a different perspective, a perspective which drives home the necessity of the union in terms which are really incontrovertible. To quote from Aquinas: 'But to be separated from the body is not in accordance with its [the soul's] nature, and likewise to understand without turning to the phantasms is not natural to it.' 'That is why,' he continues 'it is united to the body in order that it may have a mode of being and operation suitable to its nature.'⁴⁸ Conceding that it is nobler to understand by turning to something higher—pure intelligibles, for instance—than to understand through phantasms; Aquinas nevertheless maintains that such a mode of understanding is less perfect 'if we consider to what extent it lay within the power of the soul.'⁴⁹ In other words, in order that the human souls are able 'to possess a perfect and a proper knowledge of things', it was necessary that they 'be joined to bodies, and thus ... receive a proper knowledge of sensible things from the sensible things themselves.'⁵⁰

It transpires then that, as things stand, the human soul, though capable of subsisting and even understanding things without a body, can find its natural perfection only when it is joined to the body. Gilson puts the matter thus: 'To say that the human soul is naturally capable of union with a body does not mean that by a combination of circumstances unrelated to some fundamental feature of its own nature, the soul is merely accidentally united with the body; the capacity of man with the body is on the contrary, essential to the soul and characteristic of its nature.'⁵¹ This innate urge to be united with the body is then constitutive of the soul's essence, without which it remains incomplete. But this principle also raises some questions which seem to undermine some of the basic tenets of Aquinas' cosmology. It is by briefly alluding to them (I can do nothing more presently) that I wish to close.

First, if it is consistent with, nay demanded by, the soul's nature and by the nature of the soul's chief ends that it have a body, then what philosophical *reasons* can there be for supposing that it does not need the body always? (For, on this issue St Thomas is not talking theology so much as arguing philosophically.) For surely it cannot be anybody's case—at any rate it seems inconceivable on the present state of our knowledge—that a person can realize all the ends proper to his nature and being in a life span which being embodied is circum-

scribed by death and therefore so severely limited. In fact, often enough men, well-meaning men, devoted single-mindedly to the pursuit of knowledge and truth, are known to die in an unsatisfactory state of intellectual and moral (or spiritual) progress, not to speak of those who die in a state of complete depravity. The pertinence of the question becomes specially obvious when we consider cases in which a person happens to die within a very short period (say a few hours or days) of his birth. Given the soul's need for a body; its union with the body in such a circumstance appears utterly fruitless; the pursuit here does not even seem to take off. What possible account can be given of this contingency, an account which is consistent with the original principles, and besides, makes plausible sense?

Secondly, we are told that, though immortal, the human soul has a beginning and comes into existence through creation by God and united with an appropriate body. And its bodily existence is also further accepted to be bounded by death. Now though we may never quite know the causes of this particular limitation, it cannot be denied that some causes must have been in operation so as to produce this result. This means that if the soul after the death of its present body ceases to have birth and death again in the ordinary sense of the term (we are omitting here the idea of resurrection), but continues to survive otherwise, the causes which contributed to its (first) birth are no more operative now, nor will they ever be operative again in any future time. This position entails that the birth and death of our present incarnated existence would for all time create such conditions that though we (i.e. our souls) may continue to exist, we will not have to face the prospects of a birth and death again. What grounds do we have for maintaining this position?

Thirdly, and this follows from the preceding, if death is to occur only once in a soul's long immortal existence, then it is clear that the life hereafter which will continue without interruption till the end of time, would be profoundly, if not fundamentally altogether, different from our present existence. Our present bodily existence has pain, old age and death closeby. Our future life would suffer from no such limitations and would be circumscribed only by what C.D. Broad has somewhere called 'a state of half-enclosed indivisible duration at the end of time.' Death; then, would become a unique event in the history of soul, unique not only because it only occurs once, but also because it affects, profoundly and permanently, the life-conditions of all future existence. Is such a state of affairs by any chance probable?

If there is any substance in the above posers, then we are willy-nilly led, by the sheer logic of the case, to a state in which the idea of

rebirth seems to suggest itself as about the only plausible alternative around. It alone seems to provide a way out of the very serious incongruities which otherwise seem to attach to the Thomist view, which while affirming the soul's immortal character and its need for a body (as derived from the latter's essentially material character) regards, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, a single bodily existence to be sufficient for the soul's purposes. And so far as this writer can see, there is perhaps nothing in Aquinas' philosophical principles which should make the idea of plurality of embodied lives look recalcitrant or otherwise impossible. The soul, then, if it fails to complete its tasks in the present birth, will have the opportunity to do so by having a body in some future moment. The details of this position cannot however be worked out in this essay and are to be left for another place.⁵²

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Aquinas says: '[N]ature never fails anyone in what is necessary... Therefore, the intellectual soul had to be united to a body which could be the fitting organ of sense.' St Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1. q. 76. a.5 (p.71), as in Anton C. Pegis (ed.) *Basic Writings of St Thomas Aquinas*, vol. I (New York: Random House, 1944). (Hereafter cited as *ST* (All references to *ST* are to this edition.)
2. St Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, 5 vols. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1924-29), Bk. II, Chap. 23. (Hereafter cited as *Contra*) (All references to *Contra* are to this edition)
3. *Contra*, Bk. Pt. III, Chap. 2
4. *ST*, I, q. 51, a. 1 (p. 492)
5. *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 5 (pp. 710-11).
6. *ST*, I, q. 51, a.1 (p. 492). 'In this way it belongs to the human soul to be united to a body, because it is imperfect and exists potentially in the genus of intellectual substances not having the fullness of knowledge in its own nature, but acquiring it from the sensible things through the bodily senses.'
7. *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 87
8. St Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, as referred to in John Goheen, *The Problem of Matter and Form in the De Ente et Essentia of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 21. See *ST*.I. q. 85, aa. 1-2 for a detailed account of how the intellect acquires knowledge of universals and intelligibles.
9. *ST*, I, q. 29, a. 2 (p. 294).
10. By matter Aquinas here means 'signate' matter and not common matter, which latter is in natural things part of the species *ST*, I. q. 75, a.4 (p.688). It deserves to be noted that Aristotle drew a distinction, within the substantial unity of a thing, between the unity of the specific form and the unity which is the contribution of matter.
11. *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 49 (p. 117)
12. John Goheen, *The Problem of Matter and Form*, op.cit., p. 117.
13. *ST*, I, q. 75, a.2 (p. 685)

14. *Ibid.*
15. Drawing a comparison, Aquinas says: 'Thus we observe that a sick man's tongue, being unbalanced by a feverish and bitter humour, is insensible to anything sweet, and everything seems bitter to it.' *ST*, I, q. 75, a.2 (p. 685).
16. *Ibid.*
17. *ST*, I, q. 75, a.6 (p. 692).
18. Anton C. Pegis, (ed.) *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), Introduction, p. XXVII.
19. *ST*, I, q. 75, a.4
20. 'The nature of each thing is shown by its operation. Now the proper operation of man as man is to understand, for it is in this that he surpasses all animals ... Man must therefore derive his species from that which is the principle of this operation. But the species of each thing is derived from its form. It follows therefore that the intellectual principle is the proper form of man.' *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 1 (p. 698). Elsewhere (*Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 68) Aquinas says; 'The human soul is an intellectual substance united to the body as *its form*.' Italics mine.
21. *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 79.
22. *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 68.
23. *Ibid.* The same doctrine is expressed in *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 1 (p. 69) thus: 'The soul communicates that being in which it subsists to the corporeal matter, out of which and the intellectual soul there results one thing; so that the being of the whole composite is also the being of the soul. This is not the case with other non-subsistent forms.'
24. *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 68 (p. 172).
25. *Ibid.*
26. *ST*, I, q. 75, a. 1 (p.683).
27. *Ibid.*
28. *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 1 *passim*; q. 76, a. 3. 'Essence' I use here not in the strict Thomist sense
29. *ST*, I, q. 76, 1. To quote Aquinas: '[T]his principle by which primarily we understand, whether it be called the intellect or the intellectual soul, is the form of the body.' (p.696)
30. *Ibid* (p. 697). In *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 66 (p. 170), while distinguishing between intellect and sense, Aquinas says: 'But the intellect knows itself and knows that it understands. Therefore intellect is not the same as sense.' Knowledge, then, according to Aquinas, is self-conscious.
31. *ST*, I, q. 89, a. 1 (p. 852).
32. *Ibid.*
33. '[T]here is no matter in intellectual substances, for they are complete simple substances. Hence there is no potentiality to non-being in them. Therefore, they are incorruptible.' *Contra*, Bk. II, Chap. 75 (p. 29). See *Ibid.* for a comprehensive treatment of the issue. Also see Chap. 51.
35. *ST*, I, q. 76, a. 1 (p. 697)
36. *ST*, I, q. 3, a. 7 (p. 34).
37. Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Edward Buylough, 2nd ed. (reprint; New York: Dorset Press, 1948), p. 215.
38. *Ibid*, pp. 215-216.
39. *ST*, I, q. 75, a. 7 (p. 694).
40. 'For whatever things have the relation that one is the cause of the existence of

another, that which has the relation of cause can have existence without the other, but the converse is not true.' Quoted in Goheen, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

41. John Goheen, *op. cit.*, p. 24

42. Goheen, *op. cit.*, p. 119

43. *ST*, I, q. 89, q. 1 (p. 853). Italics mine.

44. 'The soul has one mode of being when in the body, and another when apart from it, though its nature remains the same.' *Ibid.* (p. 852).

45. The following passage from McTaggart seems to explain the same thing by way of a metaphor: 'If a man is shut up in a house, the transparency of the windows is an essential condition of his seeing the sky. But it would not be prudent to infer that, if he walked out of the house, he could not see the sky because there is no longer any glass through which he might see it.' J.M.E. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (1st ed. 1906; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 105.

46. *ST*, I, q. 89, a. 1, ad. 3 (p. 854).

47. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

48. *Ibid.* (p. 852).

49. *Ibid.* (p. 853).

50. *Ibid.*

51. Gilson, *The Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas*, p. 205

52. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Fr. G. Gispert-Sauch (Delhi) for his valuable critical comments. I also thank him for allowing me access to the Vidya Jyoti Library.