

Human Nature And Life After Death In Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This paper explores the views of Thomas Aquinas, who was one of the most important Christian theologians and Aristotelian philosophers lived in the Middle Ages, concerning the nature of human being and life after death. Philosophers search for an answer to the question what is the true nature of human being, and consider what is/are the criterion/a for human nature. This issue has great significance in determining the possibility and form of life after death as it is also important for human presence in this world. The opinions of Aquinas, whose influence still continues in philosophy and philosophy of religion at present, in these matters have effective to a certain extent. This work will fill a certain gap in this area in this geography.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, personal identity, eschatology, life after death.

Özet

Thomas Aquinas'ta İnsan Tabiatı ve Ölüm Sonrası Hayat

Bu çalışma, Orta Çağ'da yaşamış önemli Hıristiyan teologlardan ve Aristotelesçi felsefecilerden olan Thomas Aquinas'ın (1225–1274) insanın tabiatı ve ölüm sonrası hayat ile ilgili görüşlerini araştırmaktadır. Felsefede insanın gerçek tabiatının ne olduğu sorusu, kişisel kimlik sorunu olarak tartışılmakta ve bu başlık altında bir varlığı insan yapan ölçütü/leri/n neler olduğu belirlenmeye çalışılmaktadır. Bu tartışma, bu dünyadaki insan varlığı için önemli olduğu gibi ölüm sonrası hayatın imkanı ve gerçekleşme türünün anlaşılması açısından da önem arz etmektedir. Günümüz felsefe ve din felsefesinde etkisi devam etmekte olan Aquinas'ın bu konudaki görüşleri, hala önemini korumaktadır. Bu çalışma, bu coğrafyada bu konudaki belli bir boşluğu dolduracaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Aquinas, kişisel kimlik, eskatoloji, ölüm sonrası hayat.

This is an inquiry aiming at disclosing Aquinas' view on the human nature and the life after death. While the philosophical problem of personal identity has importance for itself, it has great significance in determining the nature of life after death as well. Aquinas is one of the most influential theologians and philosophers, who deals with these issues. Aquinas talks about the nature of human beings in a great deal in *Summa Theologica* (written between 1265-1274) in 1a 75-89 as known the Treatise on Human Nature. Here Aquinas means with human nature that the essential features of human beings. These features are the ones that make a being human. Therefore, in his dealings with human nature, he tries to determine and explain "the essence or defining character of human beings," which is common to all human beings.¹ Besides Aquinas' views on life after death can be found in his works titled *Compendium Theologiae*, *Commentary*, *Sentences*, *Contra Gentes* along with *Summa Theologica*. Nature of life after death, resurrection of body, soul-body relation in the hereafter, the abodes assigned to soul/body after death such as heaven, hell and purgatory, and the vision of God are some of the themes of Aquinas deals with in these books.

Thomas Aquinas is an outstanding thinker from the Middle Age onwards on the ideas of the nature of the human being and the after-life among various theological and philosophical subjects. Even today, Thomist philosophers follow Aquinas' basic principles and relate them to the modern demands and problems in philosophy and theology. Thus, Aquinas' views, as the bases of Thomism, are one of the foundations of Western, particularly Catholic Christian thought. Therefore, I would like to deal with, in this paper, Thomas Aquinas' thoughts especially on the nature of human person, the places assigned to the human souls after death, and resurrection of the body. Previously, I believe that it will be more appropriate to outline the most important events of Aquinas' life. Then, I will be dealing with the nature of the human being as a union of body and soul, neither mere body nor soul, from Aquinas' point of view. In addition to this, heavenly places assigned to the souls after death immediately, according to Aquinas, such as purgatory, hell, and heaven will be exposed. Further, the necessity of reunion of the soul with the resurrected body in his doctrine will be put forward; and the nature of the resurrected body will be

1 Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 8.

discussed. At the same time, the vision of God, which Aquinas regards as the ultimate happiness, will be dealt within this section. Before that a short sketch of Aquinas' life story might be helpful.

Thomas Aquinas was born at Rocca Secca in the Kingdom of Naples in 1225 or 1227. His family sent him to study the liberal arts to the University of Naples about 1239. Despite opposition on the part of his family, he joined the Dominican Order; and studied philosophy and theology under Albert the Great (1206-1280) at Paris and Cologne. He, subsequently, lectured at Paris from 1252 to 1259, taught in Italy till 1269, and from 1269 to 1272 at Paris again. But two years later on the 7th of March 1274, he died on the way to Lyons to take part in the Church Council.² Some of his contemporaries were Alexander of Hales (c.1183-1245), Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), and Roger Bacon (1214-1294). Aquinas was influenced by Aristotelian philosophy including its Muslim exponents on the one hand, by Christian faith on the other. Accordingly, the major works which had the greatest influence on his thought were those of Aristotle (384-322 BC), Augustine (354-430), and Peter Lombard (c.1100-1160). In his article "Thomism and the Italian Thought of the Renaissance" P. O. Kristeller conveys that "Saint Thomas' thought represents a synthesis of a very special sort which contains a great diversity of historical and philosophical elements."³ It seems that these elements were mainly the works of Aristotle which were then being translated from Greek, the works of St. Augustine among the early Fathers, and the Sentences of Peter Lombard which Aquinas studied and taught throughout his life.⁴

He left behind voluminous writings on very diverse subjects, from theological synthesis to liturgical pieces and sermons.⁵ His most well-known works are undoubtedly *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*. It is generally accepted that *Summa Contra Gentiles* is a philosophical work, and

2 W. A. Wallace, J. A. Weisheipl, «Thomas Aquinas, St.,» in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (Washington: Jack Heraty & Associates, Inc., 1981), vol. 14, pp. 102-115. For more detail of Aquinas' life, see also J. A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975).

3 P. Oskar Kristeller, «Thomism and the Italian Thought of the Renaissance,» in Edward P. Mahoney, *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1974), p. 32.

4 D. J. Kennedy, «Thomas Aquinas,» in *the Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York: The Encyclopaedia Press, Inc., 1913), vol. 14, p. 670.

5 It can be found a full list of the authentic works by Thomas Aquinas in James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino*.

was written for people who were not Christians. On the other hand, *Summa Theologica* is a book of theology, and it is for Christians. “As a philosopher,” says Anthony Kenny “his job is to get as far as he can in discovering what kind of place the world is, and what truths we can know which are necessary truths about the world and about thought, discoverable by unaided reason, without appealing to any alleged Divine Revelation.”⁶ Aquinas was trying, as a theologian, to defend the revelation and sacred books of Christianity and the doctrine of the Church then in his *Summa Theologica*. Thomas Aquinas left this “conventional theological synthesis of the time” unfinished, and then his pupils completed this work and added a Supplement. Although there have some suspicions about the authenticity of the Supplement, some believed that this was mostly extracted from Aquinas’ previous writings, as Le Goff mentioned “especially the Scriptum.”⁷

Thomism has a strong force in certain philosophical milieu and in the particular parlance of philosophy of religion at present ever. As Pasnau suggests, “philosophy today actually has more in common with medieval theology (that is, theology as then practiced) than it does with medieval philosophy.”⁸ That is particularly true when considering the core issues of modern philosophy, especially philosophy of religion, such as mind-body problem and ethical issues. One of the most influential figures in the area of medieval theology and philosophy is Thomas Aquinas. Before exploring Aquinas’ views on the human nature and life after death, it seems to me relevant to point out the philosophical antecedent to his thinking. That is, of course, the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Aquinas’ view on the nature of being is closely related with the Aristotelian notion of material causation. Aristotle posits four “contingent” causes or factors in explaining the nature of a being. He calls the first one material cause. It is something from which the being is made. The second is formal cause pertaining to the form or essence of a being. The third is efficient cause explaining what produced it. Aristotle lastly posits final cause showing the purpose

6 Bryan Magee, *The Great Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (London: BBC Books, 1987), p. 67. This book is based on a series of television programs. This is quoted from the dialogue with Anthony Kenny.

7 Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer, (London: Scholar Press, 1984), p. 267.

8 Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, p. 11.

why it is formed.⁹ If we use Aristotle's example, the menstrual blood is the material cause of man, the seed is the efficient cause; the essence of the thing is formal cause; and finally, the end thereof is the final cause. Having stated this point we can move along Aquinas' understanding of human being.

Aquinas thinks that a human being consists of both mental and physical units. In other words, a human person is a union of soul and body. According to Aquinas, his soul is not himself; but he is a composite of his body and soul.¹⁰ As a successor of Aristotle, he mainly adopts his argument in this matter as well. Aristotle argues in *de Anima* that the human person is not merely body or soul, but a composite of both mental and physical units. At the same time, the human soul is the substantial form of the body "which potentially has life."¹¹ Thomas Aquinas is, as an Aristotelian thinker, opposed to the attitude of Plato to the nature of the human person. Plato (427-347 BC) asserts that human soul is motive force and user of the human body as its apparatus. "The soul," according to Plato, "is in the body as the pilot on his ship."¹² It seems obvious that the stress in Platonic doctrine is on the essentiality of soul, not body; soul simply employs body as a tool. Whereas Aquinas considers that people are "complex unities both mental and physical." They are biological creatures being made up of flesh, bones, blood, and so on; and they have physical functions such as birth, growth, and reproduction, which are crucial to the future of mankind.¹³ In addition to this, human beings are intellectual beings that think, love, sorrow, and so on. Soul is, according to Aquinas, "the principle of life" in the living, and the form of the body.¹⁴ Thus, the French Thomistic philosopher Etienne Gilson (1884-1978) expresses, "the human body truly deserves to be called such only while the soul animates and imparts life to it."¹⁵

To grasp Aquinas' doctrine of soul, it will be useful to glance at two doctrines concerning the nature of the human person, namely dualism and physi-

9 Aristotle, *The Metaphysics* (New York: Cosimo, 2008), p. 182.

10 Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1924), p. 165. He quotes this from *Summa Theologica*, I. p. 75, 3, ad. Resp.

11 Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, tr. Hugh Lawson-Tancred, (London: Penguin Books, 1986), II.I, pp. 156-58.

12 Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 167.

13 Brain Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 210.

14 Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 209.

15 Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 168.

calism. René Descartes (1596-1650) is an eminent advocator of dualism. He accepts entire disunity and division between human soul and body. Descartes holds that people are identical with their minds, not their bodies; and they can continue living without their bodies.¹⁶ On the other hand, physicalism asserts that people are merely physical, and observable beings. Therefore, mental and intellectual states or events are nothing other than physical events in the human biological system. Thomas Aquinas' position on this matter is, I think, very clear. He believes that people are neither identical with their soul nor simply collection of physical process. Aquinas says that "a human being is 'a compound whose substance is both spiritual and corporeal.'"¹⁷ Thus, the soul without body is not a person, and vice versa. In other words, the soul is, as the characteristic of its nature, combined with the body, and constitutes the composite human person.

However, it is not an angelic spirit attached to human body, but the form the body, and "non-corporeal" principle of human life. In Aquinas' words, "the soul, which is the first principle of life, is not a body, but the act of a body."¹⁸ Thus, it needs the body to get information, and then to act. It is quite difficult, in a perfect condition, to talk about subsistence of the immortality of the soul after death. Although the soul can subsist after death, it is not a natural way as the form and the principle of life. That is why Aquinas regards the final resurrection and reunion of the soul and body as "the necessity" for reward and punishment.

Before Thomas Aquinas' thought of resurrection, I want to deal with the existence of the soul, and the places which will be given to the soul after death. According to Aquinas, the separated souls, although they are not human beings in the way in which they are in the earthly life, will be assigned certain abodes corresponding to their degrees of merit and demerit, and they are "as in a place."¹⁹ The souls, as the intellectual principles, can know that what are their degrees of dignity, and receive reward and punishment as soon

16 Davies, *The Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 208.

17 Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 209.

18 Thomas Aquinas, «The Resurrection of Man,» in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Immortality* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 91-99. "The Resurrection of Man" consists of selections from Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

19 Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 268.

as they are separated from the bodies, unless they have some debt making a prior purgation compulsory.

In Aquinas' opinion, the soul is aware of its degree, and so it knows where to go after death. The term "the status of the soul" is very important at this point. If the status of the soul is ready to receive reward, then the soul flies to heaven. If its status deserves the punishment, then it is plunged into Hell. The other places assigned to the soul according to its status are the Limbo of Children, Purgatory, and the Limbo of Patriarchs. The Limbo of Children is for those who dies with "the burden of original sin;" Purgatory is for the soul who is not ready to receive reward and punishment from a personal cause; and the Limbo of Patriarchs is for those who cannot get reward or punishment from a natural cause. Aquinas holds that the Limbo of Patriarchs is no more existent since Christ descended into Hell.²⁰ As the soul is an immaterial subsistent, Aquinas explains its states in psychological terms. He says that "souls, because they know what place is assigned to them, conceive either joy or sadness therefrom: In this way their abode contributes to their reward or punishment."²¹

It seems to me there is a dilemma at this point. On the one hand, Aquinas says that "my soul is not I, and if only souls are saved, I am not saved, nor is any man;"²² on the other hand, he maintains that souls receive reward and punishment as soon as they are separated from their bodies. According to Thomas Aquinas, this does not posit any dilemma. Because bodies have merit and guilt only through souls. In case of corpses, for instance, there is no merit and fault any more in the body since soul is separated from body. He, therefore, believes that "since the souls had priority in the fault and merit, they have priority also in being punished or rewarded."²³ The souls immediately after death receive punishment and reward. If there is an obstacle such as venial sins to receive the reward, there must be, for him, a "receptacle" of the soul to purge all evil, and to gain the pure state.²⁴ Aquinas maintains that the souls

20 Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 271.

21 Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 269.

22 Paul Badham, *Christian Belief About Life After Death* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 48

23 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Four: Salvation, tr. Charles J. O. Neil, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975), p. 335.

24 Robert Ombres, «The Doctrine of Purgatory According to St. Thomas Aquinas,» *The Downside Review*, v. 99, no. 337, (October 1981), pp. 282-83.

go to Purgatory voluntarily, because they know that they cannot receive the ultimate reward unless all evil is purged. He also believes that to pray for the dead may deliver those in Purgatory.

As can be seen, Aquinas' evidence for the existence of Purgatory is the teaching of the Church then concerning pray for the dead. Since the Scripture explicitly says nothing about Purgatory and its nature, as Robert Ombres asserts, Thomas Aquinas does not seem to be comfortable with its description.²⁵ However, he maintains that even though there is no hope for those in Hell, there can be hope for those in Purgatory. Those who are being helped by pray and suffrages of the living can go to Heaven, the others to Hell. It can be said in a relative confidence that Thomas Aquinas is not concerned with Purgatory as "a transitory place" apart from Heaven and Hell; what he is interested in is the status of the soul which can be purged through the suffrages.²⁶ Consequently, there are, according to Thomas Aquinas, three eternal places in the other world: Heaven, Hell, and the Limbo of Children.

The belief in resurrection of the body has also a very significant place in the eschatological viewpoint of Thomas Aquinas. He holds that both the Scriptures and sound reason are in support of resurrection of the body after death. He, therefore, believes that the belief in resurrection is manifest in the Old Testament:²⁷ "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and in the Last Day I shall rise out of the earth; and I shall be clothed again with my skin; and in my flesh I shall see my God" (Job xix. 25-26). Additionally, Aquinas reports that some has distorted the truth, and deliberately given false meanings to the concepts of the Scripture concerning resurrection of the body. So he insists that what the Scripture indicates, and what St. Paul (c.5 BC-c.67 AD) believes in is the bodily resurrection. "The hour cometh, wherein all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God" (John v, 28). Therefore, what will be risen in the Last Day is nothing else other than this physical present body; so to reject the resurrection of the present body, and further "to affirm a purely spiritual resurrection is," in Aquinas' words, "against the Christian Faith."²⁸ It is obvi-

25 Ombres, «The Doctrine of Purgatory According to St. Thomas Aquinas,» p. 281.

26 Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 278.

27 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Theological Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 406.

28 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Theological Texts*, p. 405.

ous that Aquinas' thought is opposed to the spiritual resurrection, "a resurrection from sin through grace," but in favor of the bodily resurrection.

I think, Aquinas was aware of the difficulty of this idea such as the decay of the human body, cannibalism. That is why his belief in resurrection postulates the omnipotence of God. In his opinion, whatever happens to the body, the omnipotent Creator will supply it again in the Day of Resurrection.²⁹ For this reason, in Aquinas' doctrine of resurrection, resurrection of Christ has very important effect. As Brain Davies cited, Aquinas says that "whatever properties belong to the nature of a human body were totally present in Christ's risen body."³⁰ So, it means that, as Christ delivered human beings from the sin of the first man, he will liberate the rest from death. In the Apostle's word:

"If Christ be preached that He arose again from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there be no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen again. And if Christ be not risen again then is our preaching vain and our faith is vain" (I Corinthians 15: 12-14).

While Thomas Aquinas argues that the present, material human body will be risen by the power of God, he holds that the risen body will be incorruptible, and the human person who has incorruptible life will, therefore, live forever. Aquinas asserts that the resurrected bodies will not use food and sexual intercourse since the nature of the corruptibility will have been taken away.³¹ After the resurrection, what will be perpetual is "only the occupation of the contemplative life." Hence Aquinas interprets Mary's contemplation in Luke (10: 42), which reads "Mary has chosen the best part which shall not be taken away from her," in this sense. The best act of a human being is nothing else than contemplation of good things.

Thomas Aquinas also uses what he calls "sound reasons" to support his thought. First, as mentioned earlier, the nature of the human person necessitates the resurrection of the body. According to Aquinas, since the human soul is the form of the body, and union with the body is the basic nature of the soul, the soul is an imperfect and unnatural condition after its separation from

29 St. Thomas Aquinas, «The Resurrection of Man,» pp. 98-99.

30 Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 219.

31 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Four: Salvation, pp. 311-15.

the body. Therefore, he concludes that the human soul desires reunion with the body, and this desire can be satisfied with its resurrection.³²

Furthermore, Aquinas' second reason stems from the requirement of the ultimate justice. He observes the human life and sees that in this life people commit sins and act well. Therefore, each individual person, as a compound soul and body, is entitled to reward and punishment. As can be seen in our earthly life, many die without receiving punishment or reward deserved.³³ So Aquinas asserts that reunion of the soul with the body is necessary to receive proper punishment or reward.

Finally, Thomas Aquinas maintains that there is a natural desire within every human person to attain happiness. Since the soul without body is imperfect and incomplete, it is impossible to reach happiness. Additionally, we cannot gain the ultimate happiness in this life. Therefore, resurrection of the body is necessary for the ultimate happiness, and final perfection.³⁴ According to Thomas Aquinas, the ultimate happiness is the vision of God. As Brain Davies cited, Aquinas says "there can be no complete and final happiness for us save in the vision of God."³⁵ This vision should be understood as an intellectual knowledge of God. In this world, our intellect cannot perfectly comprehend the knowledge of God because of "the external accidents" such as color, shape, and so on.³⁶ Thus, only through purification of the body and soul, human beings can reach the intellectual knowledge of God after resurrection.

In conclusion, Thomas Aquinas tries to preserve the balance between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology then. While he adopts an Aristotelian position on the nature of the human person as a composite of soul and body, he reconciles this thinking with the belief in resurrection in the Christian Scripture. His main concern is, I think, to defend and to explain the divine revelation. Since Aquinas sees no contradiction between "sound reason" and the faith, he elucidates the doctrine of the Church by means of sound reason as well as the Scriptures. Therefore, he defends resurrection of the body through

32 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Theological Texts*, p. 406.

33 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Four: Salvation, pp. 209-300.

34 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Theological Texts*, p. 406.

35 Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 218.

36 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Four: Salvation, pp. 35-38.

the Scripture and through sound reason. Further, life after death is necessary for human beings, from Aquinas' point of view, to attain the ultimate happiness. Vision of God is, for him, this ultimate happiness and the final perfection. This is not actually seeing God in person, but absolute knowledge of the divine substance. Thus, the human souls will reunion with their bodies in the Last Day, and they will reach the ultimate happiness.

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