

INCOMPLETE PERSONS: THOMAS AQUINAS ON SEPARATED SOULS AND THE IDENTITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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I. INTRODUCTION

In some of her recently published works,¹ Eleonore Stump challenges a fairly common interpretation of Thomas Aquinas on the identity of the human person, an interpretation which she refers to as the constitution view of the human person. According to this interpretation, the identity of the human person cannot be distinguished from his constitution. For this reason, the death of the body is thought to result in the death of the person, since the body is considered one of his constituent metaphysical parts. From this, it follows that a separated soul can no more be identified with the person to whom it once belonged than a part can be identified with a whole. Against this view, Stump has advanced an alternative interpretation according to which persons can survive the death of their bodies and go on living as separated souls. Central to her interpretation is the claim that a thing's identity is not bound up with its metaphysical constitution.

In the first part of the essay (sections II and III), I will argue that Stump's reading of Thomas fails on both exegetical and philosophical

¹ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2003); "Aquinas's Metaphysics: Individuation and Constitution," in *Categories: Historical and Systematic Essays*, ed. Michael Gorman and Jonathan J. Sanford, *Studies in Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, vol. 41 (Washington, D.C.: the Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 33-44; "Forms and Bodies: The Soul," in Maria Candida Pacheco and Jose Francisco Meirinhos, eds., *Intellect and Imagination in Medieval Philosophy*, vol. 3, *Actes du XI Congres International de Philosophie Medievale de la Societe Internationale pour l'Etude de la Philosophie Medievale* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 1379-87; "Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul," in *Die Menschliche Seele: Brauchen Wir Den Dualismus?*, ed. B. Niederbacher and E. Runggaldier (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2006), 151-72.

grounds. On exegetical grounds, because Thomas explicitly rejects the view she attributes to him; on philosophical grounds, because while constitution is not identity at the level of accidental being, it is identity at the level of substantial being. To lose a hand is one thing; to lose a body something else entirely.

Yet, although I disagree with her reading of Thomas, I do think Stump is right to point out a serious exegetical difficulty with the constitution view, namely, that it makes it very difficult to explain how Thomas could have spoken of the separated souls in terms usually reserved for persons if he did not believe them, in fact, to be persons. It would seem, therefore, that the challenge for those of his interpreters who cannot see their way to giving up the constitution view is to square his metaphysics of the human person, which says that the death of the body marks the death of the person, with his theological belief in the ability of disembodied souls to do the kinds of things persons do.

An attempt to do this will be made in the second part of the essay (section IV), where I will argue that although the separated soul cannot, on Thomas's own terms, be construed as a person, it is more true to say that it is the person to whom it once belonged than to say that it is not. Somewhat against the grain of this conclusion, I will also argue that Thomas assigns much less moral significance to personhood than we moderns do and that this might be the key to understanding why he does not hesitate to use moral categories such as punishment and reward when speaking of separated souls.

II. STUMP'S REJECTION OF THE CONSTITUTION VIEW

In rejecting the constitution view of the human person, Stump marshals both textual evidence and philosophical arguments to help make her case. The textual evidence consists of a number of passages where Thomas "attributes to disembodied souls properties which he and we take to be most characteristic of human persons."² These attributes include the capacity to experience delight³ and suffering;⁴ to

² Stump, "Aquinas's Metaphysics: Individuation and Constitution," 1383-84.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (ST), trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981), Suppl. III, q. 70, a. 2 ad 5. All quotations from the *Summa Theologiae* are from this translation.

understand and make choices⁵; to appear to the living⁶ and respond to their prayers.⁷ Taken together, these passages are said to point to a doctrine of personal immortality according to which the human person, not just his soul, “persists after bodily death.”⁸

The philosophical portion of Stump’s case turns on an analogy. There is no doubt that Thomas believes that it belongs to the constitution of the human person to have two hands. Yet Thomas also believes a person can lose one or both without ceasing to be a person. Hence, constitution is not identity. But if this is so, Stump argues, there is no a priori reason to suppose that a person cannot survive the loss of his body. And if “the remaining constituents can exist on their own and are sufficient for the existence of the substance,” then there will be nothing preventing Thomas from supposing “that [a human person, can] survive even the loss of some of [his] metaphysical constituents.”⁹

Now, Stump argues that “a substantial form is sufficient for the existence of the supposit whose form it is, and so the existence of a human soul is sufficient for the existence of a human [person].”¹⁰ “Analogously,” therefore, although “the metaphysical constituents of a human being normally include matter and substantial form... Aquinas thinks that a human being can exist without being in the normal condition in this way either.”¹¹ Since constitution is not identity, and, Stump argues, what makes someone a person is his substantial form, the death of the body does not spell his doom.

⁴ Ibid., q. 70, a. 3.

⁵ Ibid., q.72, a. 3.

⁶ Ibid., q. 69, a. 3.

⁷ Ibid., q. 72, a. 2. For Stump’s discussion of these passages, see “Forms and Bodies: The Soul,” 1383.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stump, “Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul,” 165.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1383. By “supposit” Stump means an individual, concrete existing thing.

¹¹ Stump, “Forms and Bodies: The Soul,” 1382.

It is important to stress that Stump is not trying to reduce the human person to his substantial form. Although she insists that constitution is not identity, it is not metaphysically insignificant, either. Stump goes out of her way to reject any such reduction, arguing instead that a human person is constituted of both body and soul:

[A] human person is identical to a particular in the species *rational animal*. A particular of that sort is normally, naturally, constituted of an array of bodily parts and is composed of form and matter. Because constitution is not identity for Aquinas, however, a particular can exist with less than the normal, natural complement of constituents. It can, for example, exist when it is constituted only by one of its main metaphysical parts, namely, the soul. And so although a person is not identical to his soul, the existence of the soul is sufficient for the existence of a person.¹²

So, although it belongs to every human person to have a body and a soul, those same persons can continue to exist without their bodies, although to do so, it should be noted, would be to endure a loss of a “main metaphysical part.”

III. PROBLEMS WITH STUMP’S ANTI-CONSTITUTION VIEW

If there is a philosophical problem with Stump’s reading of Thomas, what we might call her anti-constitution view of the human person, it is precisely in her attempt to extend a truth about constitution and identity at the level of accidental being to the level of substantial being. Certainly, on Thomas’s metaphysics, a substance can endure the loss of at least some of its constituent parts without losing its identity. A hand or a foot, although part of the human person’s constitution, is not essential to him. They do not, properly speaking, belong to the essence of the human person, but rather flow from it in the same way risibility and other proper accidents do.¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, 1384.

¹³ See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s METAPHYSICS*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirlkel (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), Bk. 6, lect. 3, n. 1219, 418.

But it is difficult to see how a substance could lose a main metaphysical part without ceasing altogether to exist, much less remain “a particular in the species *rational animal*.” Stump would have a point if such parts did not belong to the substance essentially. In that case, a human person could lose his body without ceasing to be a person. But it belongs essentially to the human person to have a body. It is this fact that places him in the genus *animal*. As such, it is no more possible for the disembodied soul to be a person than for two straight lines to form a triangle.

Thomas confirms this line of reasoning in *ST* I, q. 29, a. 1 where he defends Boethius’ definition of person as an individual substance of a rational nature. The fifth objection to Boethius’s definition is a *reductio ad absurdum*. According to this objection, if a person were in fact an individual substance of a rational nature, then we would have to say that the separated soul is a person. But the separated soul is not a person. Therefore, the objection concludes, Boethius’s definition must be wrong. In his reply, rather than taking issue with the objection’s denial of personhood to the separated soul, Thomas instead takes the logic of constitution used by Stump and turns it on its head, arguing that just as neither a hand nor any other part of man can be an individual substance, neither can the soul alone—which “is part of the human species”—“be called an individual substance.” Because the soul “ever retains its nature of unibility” with the body, Thomas explains, “it cannot be called an individual substance.” That is to say, because the soul ever retains its natural ordination to inform a body,¹⁴ the soul separated from the body must be incomplete. Thomas therefore concludes that “neither the definition nor the name of person belongs to [the separated soul].”¹⁵

At this point, one might wonder what could have prompted Stump to advance an interpretation so apparently at odds with Thomas’s explicit teaching on the nature of constitution and identity at the level of substantial being. Two major reasons seem to have been at work in her thinking, one philosophical, the other exegetical. Stump puts the philosophical reason in the form of an objection:

¹⁴ For further discussion of this point, see n. 33 below.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, 1:156.

The intellectual faculties of the separated soul of Socrates are the intellectual faculties Socrates had during his lifetime. So, for example, the memories that Socrates laid down during his earthly life are the memories of the separated soul of Socrates. And insofar as the will is a rational faculty, the will of the separated soul of Socrates is the same will as the will which Socrates had during his lifetime. Finally, the separated soul also has experiences and passions. If it is in hell, for example, the separated soul experiences pain and has the passion of sorrow; and the mind in the separated soul affected by these passions is the mind of Socrates. But how can these things be true if Socrates has ceased to exist?¹⁶

The exegetical reason, related to this objection and supportive of it, rests on a number of passages in Thomas's corpus where we find him speaking about the disembodied soul in terms proper to human persons, a fact noted above. Turning first to a consideration of the exegetical reason, we will return to the philosophical one in the next section.

From the fact that Thomas tells us that the separated soul is able to experience delight and sorrow, think, choose, appear to the living and respond to their prayers, Stump concludes that Thomas must have believed that the soul in its disembodied state is a person, since these are the actions of a person, the sorts of actions only persons can perform. Mindful, however, of Thomas's insistence on the existential unity of body and soul, Stump is also careful to say, as we have seen, that human persons are usually constituted of both. She sums up her position by saying that "the claim that the existence of a soul is sufficient for the existence of a person or a human being is compatible with Aquinas's claim that a soul by itself is not a person or a human being."¹⁷ That Stump can say this without contradicting herself is due entirely to her carefully staked out claim that constitution, even at the metaphysical level, is not identity.

¹⁶ Stump, "Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstruction: Aquinas on Soul," 155.

¹⁷ Stump, "Forms and Bodies: The Soul," 1385.

One of the most explicit disavowals of Stump's anti-constitution view found in Thomas's corpus has the same provenance as the texts she adduces in support of it,¹⁸ namely, the treatise on the resurrection and life everlasting (qq. 69-101), which is in the supplement to the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*.¹⁹ In q. 75, a. 1 of the treatise, Thomas asks whether there is to be a resurrection of the body. In the second objection, we find the following argument against the bodily resurrection. In Matthew 22:32, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6, where God says that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now since God is the God of the living and not of the dead, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must have been alive when Jesus quoted the text, otherwise he would not have quoted it approvingly. And since their bodies had long since died, they must have been without their bodies when Jesus spoke these words, proving that they did not need their bodies to be alive. Therefore, the objection concludes, "there will be no resurrection of bodies but only of souls."²⁰ The obvious implication for our discussion is that disembodied souls are persons.

Thomas begins his reply by flatly denying that the soul by itself is a person: "Abraham's soul, properly speaking, is not Abraham himself, but a part of him (and not the same as regards the others). Hence life in Abraham's soul does not suffice to make Abraham a living being, or to make the God of Abraham the God of a living man. But there needs to

¹⁸ See Stump, "Aquinas's Metaphysics: Individuation and Constitution," 41; "Forms and Bodies," 1383-84.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that the supplement was "composed by [Thomas's] disciples [after his death] on the basis of his commentary on the *Sentences*." Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, revised edition, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 147. As such, it represents Thomas's early views. But on this, as on so many other points in his teaching, there is no discernible change between his first treatment of the subject and later ones. As is evident from his treatment of the separated soul in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa* (q. 29, a. 1), which was written between 1265 and 1268, Thomas continued to believe in the non-personhood of the separated soul long after he wrote his commentary on the *Sentences*.

²⁰ Aquinas, *ST Suppl.* III, q. 75, a. 1 ob. 2 (5:2862).

be life in the whole composite, i.e., the soul and body.”²¹ The reason the resurrection is necessary is that bodily death is the death of the human person and the resurrection of the body is the only way to restore him to life. That is why Thomas says that “there needs to be life in the whole composite” “to make *Abraham* a living being, or to make the God of Abraham the God of a living *man*.”²² Stump might try to interpret this passage as saying only that it belongs to the constitution of a human person to have a body and a soul, not that a human person’s identity is bound up with his constitution.²³ Doing so, however, would render Thomas’s reply otiose since it works only if by “Abraham’s soul” he means “Abraham’s *disembodied* soul,” rather than “Abraham’s soul in its embodied state.”

Another explicit disavowal of Stump’s position can be found in *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 11, part of Thomas’s treatise on prayer. In considering whether the saints in heaven pray for us, the fifth objection argues that since St. Peter’s soul is not St. Peter, we should not call upon him while his soul is separated from his body. We should instead call upon his soul. But the Church calls upon the person of St. Peter, not his soul. Therefore, the objection concludes, the saints do not pray for us, “at least before the resurrection.”²⁴ In reply, Thomas does not deny the objection’s assertion that St. Peter’s separated soul is not St. Peter. Rather, he takes it as a given and argues that “it is because the saints while living merited to pray for us, that we invoke them under the names by which they were known in this life, and by which they are better known to us: and also in order to indicate our belief in the resurrection, according to the saying of Exodus 3:6, ‘I am the God of Abraham,’ etc.”²⁵ Strictly speaking, therefore, our prayers, although addressed to the persons of the saints, are not heard or answered by them but by their souls (which Thomas calls “saints”), which await the resurrection of the body, not just in order that they might be complete,

²¹ *Ibid.*, q. 75, a. 2 ad 2 (5:2863).

²² *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

²³ She does just that in “Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul,” 169.

²⁴ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 11 (3:1540).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

but in order that the persons to whom they once belonged might live again.

IV. INCOMPLETE PERSONS

1. The Doings of Separated Souls

Despite the implausibility of Stump's anti-constitution interpretation, I think she is right to wonder what the disembodied soul—a thing that can delight and sorrow, think and make choices, appear to the living and answer their prayers—could possibly be for Thomas if not a person, and not just any person, but the person whose soul it was in this life. For “if,” as she says, “my soul is not *me*... then it seems that I do not survive bodily death.” Indeed, given that my separated soul will think and will with numerically the same powers I use now, it is hard to see how it will be anything other than me. When I first started to think about this problem, I thought that although Thomas could not answer that it is a *human* person, he could answer that it is a person, nonetheless. But it appears that Thomas's position on the matter will not allow me to say this, unless perhaps “person” could be used in an analogous sense, a possibility Stump does not consider. It is to this possibility that we now turn.

On this interpretation, the disembodied soul would still not be a person, but then neither would it be wholly impersonal. Rather, it would be an incomplete person, as different from a person in the proper sense of the term as an incomplete substance is from a substance. Properly speaking, even as an incomplete person, St. Peter's separated soul would not be the fisherman himself. But neither would it be something wholly unrelated to him as a person. This might be all that is needed to harmonize those passages where Thomas treats the disembodied soul as if it were a person with his clear and unambiguous teaching that, strictly speaking, the separated soul is not a person. Although separated souls cannot be completely identified with the persons to whom they belonged in this life, it is more true to say that St. Peter's separated soul is St. Peter than to say that it is not.

To be at all plausible, this solution will have to be able to explain what it is about the separated soul that compels its categorization as an incomplete person rather than a non-person. One such explanation can be found in Thomas's defense of the doctrine of the resurrection in

Book 4, chapter 81 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Of the objections brought against the resurrection, the third is the most relevant for our discussion. According to this objection, the resurrection is impossible because numerical identity cannot obtain where existential continuity is wanting. But death marks the end of a person's existence, a radical existential discontinuity between what came before and what might come after. So whatever else the person called St. Peter will be at the resurrection, he will not be the man who led the Apostles and was martyred at Rome.²⁶

Thomas begins his reply by noting that since the being or act of existence (*esse*) of matter and form must be one, it follows that "matter [can have] no actual being [*esse*] except by form."²⁷ In most cases, the being of the form is so bound up with matter as to be identical with its "concrete union with matter."²⁸ Take away the matter of a squirrel, for example, and you take away its form. But this is not true of the rational soul. Its being is not identical with its "concrete union with the body."²⁹ We know this, Thomas says, because thinking and willing are operations that no bodily organ can perform. But this can be true only if the being of the human soul exceeds the existential bounds of the body. Consequently, since the rational soul's being is not limited to the body, it can survive the death of the body. This goes for the being of the composite, too, which is the being of the person. As Thomas puts it: the being of the rational soul, "*which is that of the composite*, remains in the soul even when the body is dissolved; when the body is restored in the

²⁶ My example.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG), Bk. IV, *Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O'Neill (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1957), 305, n. 11. All quotations from the SCG are from this translation. For the full Latin text of this reply, see n. 30 below.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ The Latin from which this phrase is taken is as follows: "Nam esse aliarum formarum non est nisi in concretionem ad materiam: non enim excedunt materiam neque in esse, neque in operari." For the full text of Thomas's response, see n. 30 below.

resurrection, it is returned to the same being [esse] which persisted in the soul."³⁰

From this, it follows that the separated soul is numerically identical *at the level of being (esse)* with the person to whom it once belonged. Because the form of the human body is a subsistent form—a living soul that can exist independently of the body—its act of existence does not change when the body dies. Thomas himself concludes as much in the *Summa Theologiae*, which was written a few years after the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.³¹ In an article discussing whether the body is necessary for our happiness, he writes:

But the human soul [unlike the souls of other animals] retains the being [esse] of the composite after the destruction of the body: and this because the being of the form is the same as that of its matter, and this is the being [esse] of the composite. Now the soul subsists in its own being [esse], as stated in the First Part (q. 75, a. 2). It follows, therefore, that *after being separated from the body it has perfect being, and that consequently it can have perfect operation; although it has not the perfect specific nature.*"³²

³⁰ Ibid., 306, n. 11; emphasis added. Because of the importance of this text and the precision of Thomas's language, it is worth quoting the Latin text of his response in full: "Quod vero tertio obiicitur, quod esse non est unum, quia non est continuum: falso in nititur fundamento. Manifestum est enim quod materiae et formae unum est esse: non enim material habet esse in actu nisi per formam. Differt tamen quantum ad hoc anima rationalis ab aliis formis. Nam esse aliarum formarum non est nisi in concretione ad materiam: non enim excedunt materiam neque in esse, neque in operari. Anima vero rationalis, manifestum est quod excedit materiam in operari: habet enim aliquam operationem absque participatione organi corporalis, scilicet intelligere. Unde et esse suum non est solum in concretione ad materiam. Esse igitur eius, quod erat compositi, manet in ipsa corpora dissoluto: et reparato corpore in resurrectione, in idem essere ducitur quod remansit in anima" (in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino opera omnia*, vol. 15 [Rome: Leonine Commission, 1930], 253).

³¹ See Torrell, Saint Thomas Aquinas, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, 332.

³² Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 4, a. 5 ad 2 (2:606); emphasis added. See also *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1 ad 5.

The separated soul continues to be something whose nature is to be united with a body. It never loses its natural desire to inform a body; and not just any body, but the body it used to inform.³³ Therefore, we may say that the separated soul is, in fact, both in terms of its being and form, identical with the person whose soul it was, since it exists by the numerically identical act of existence and is what it is by the numerically identical form. Ultimately, however, the separated soul is not numerically identical with the person himself, at least not at the level of substantial being, because without the body, the human soul by itself is incapable of constituting an individual substance of a rational nature.

Such a being, if not a person, is sufficiently like one to explain how it might be able to do the kinds of things persons do. Though only an incomplete substance, the separated soul exists by the numerically identical act of existence of the human composite of which it was once a part. Moreover, as a subsistent rational form, possessing both will and intellect,³⁴ the separated soul can delight and suffer, understand and make choices, appear to the living and respond to their prayers.

At this point, someone might object that all of this leaves untouched Stump's question about the identity of Socrates' (and Abraham's and St. Peter's) separated soul and how it could possibly be anything other than Socrates himself given the fact that "the mind of the separated soul of Socrates is the mind of Socrates." In reply, we might consider a logical corollary of the incomplete person hypothesis: the possibility

³³ This last point is defended by Thomas in the *Compendium of Theology* (q. 153, 171-72): "Since the soul is united to the body as its form, and since each form has the right matter corresponding to it, the body to which the soul will be reunited must be of the same nature and species as was the body laid down by the soul at death....Furthermore, just as the same specific form ought to have the same specific matter, so the same numerical form ought to have the same numerical matter." All quotations from the *Compendium* are taken from *Aquinas's Shorter Summa*, translated by Cyril Vollert, (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2002).

³⁴ "[A]ll the powers of the soul belong to the soul alone as their principle. But some powers belong to the soul alone as their subject; as the intelligence and the will. These powers must remain in the soul, after the destruction of the body": *ST I*, q. 77, a. 8 (1:389).

that full-fledged personhood is unnecessary for subjective conscious experience. In other words, incomplete personhood might be all that is needed to explain how the separated soul of Socrates could have the mind of Socrates, and yet not be Socrates. Although missing its body, the separated soul would still be able to think and will.³⁵ As a consequence, it would also be possessed of self-knowledge, since it is through knowing its own acts that the mind comes to know itself, and there is no reason to suppose that the separated soul cannot know its own acts.³⁶

Now, because Socrates' soul is an incomplete person, the first person pronoun in "I am praying for Meletus' repentance," as well as the concept of person implicit in it, would have to mean something different when thought by Socrates' separated soul than when thought by Socrates himself. Knowing itself to be incomplete in a radically metaphysical way, Socrates' separated soul would also know that such terms as "I," "me," and "person" could apply to itself only in an analogous sense. But apply they would. When Socrates' soul says, "I am praying for Meletus' repentance," it is really saying, "I (i.e., the self-conscious subject of the acts of understanding, willing, etc., performed by me, the incomplete person of Socrates, the separated soul "ordained to the resurrection"³⁷) am praying for Meletus' repentance." In this

³⁵ The range of will acts possible to a separated soul is limited by the fundamental orientation of the will at the moment of death. As Thomas concludes at the end of a short argument in *SCG* 4, chap. 95, n. 6: "Therefore, there is not in the separated soul a will changeable from good to evil, although it is changeable from this object of will to that so long as the order to the same ultimate end is preserved" (344).

³⁶ Thomas argues that in this life the soul comes to a knowledge of itself through its acts. See *ST* I, q. 87, especially a. 1 where, among other things, Thomas says the following: "But as in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object...it understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things, through the light of the active intellect, which not only actuates the intelligible things themselves, but also, by their instrumentality, actuates the passive intellect. Therefore the intellect knows itself not by its essence, but by its act" (1:444).

³⁷ Aquinas, *ST* III, supp. q. 75, a. 1 ad 2 (5:2863).

way, the separated soul could have the mind of Socrates without being the person of Socrates.

2. Separated Souls and God's Justice

Even so, there are some things, one would think, that only a full-fledged person could do, things impossible to a separated soul, even granting its existential and formal identity with the person to whom it once belonged and its status as an incomplete person. One of these would be to suffer the punishment or reward merited not by the separated soul itself, but by the person whose soul it once was. Yet this is precisely what Thomas believed. According to the Catholic faith, after death some souls are made to suffer the pains of hell,³⁸ enjoy the rewards of heaven,³⁹ or, in preparation for their entrance into heavenly bliss, endure the cleansing fires of purgatory⁴⁰ prior to the resurrection of the body. But how can this be true when God is just? Or, as Stump puts it: “[I]f the soul of Socrates is not Socrates, then what justice is there in assigning to the separated soul either the reward or the punishment merited by Socrates, who is not the soul?”⁴¹

³⁸ “[T]he fire [of hell] of its nature is able to have an incorporeal spirit united to it as a thing placed is united to a place; that as the instrument of Divine justice it is enabled to detain it enchained as it were, and in this respect this fire is really hurtful to the spirit, and thus the soul seeing the first as something hurtful to it is tormented by the fire”: *ST Suppl. III, q. 70, a. 3* (5:2830).

³⁹ “As to the perfect Happiness, which consists in the vision of God, some have maintained that it is not possible to the soul separated from the body; and have said that the souls of saints, when separated from their bodies, do not attain to that Happiness until the Day of Judgment, when they will receive their bodies back again. And this is shown to be false, both by authority and by reason”: *ST I-II, q. 4, a. 5* (2:605).

⁴⁰ “It also happens that some men depart this life free from mortal sin but nevertheless stained with venial sin.... In the case of some perfect men sins of this kind are expiated by the fervor of their love. But in others these sins must be atoned for by punishment of some sort; no one is admitted to the possession of eternal life unless he is free from all sin and imperfection”: *Compendium of Theology, q. 182* (208).

⁴¹ Stump, “Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul,” 157.

That Thomas sees no difficulty in the suffering of separated souls is apparent from a number of passages found in works spanning his entire writing career. In the supplement to the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, which was compiled from his youthful *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* after his death, we read that “[t]he purifying of the soul by the punishment of purgatory is nothing else than the expiation of the guilt that hinders it from obtaining glory.”⁴² A decade later, in the *Compendium of Theology*, Thomas wrote:

[A]lthough some souls may be admitted to eternal beatitude as soon as they are released from their bodies, others may be held back from this happiness for a time. For it sometimes happens that during their lives people have not done full penance for the sins they have committed, but for which they have been sorry in the end. Since the order of divine justice demands that punishment be undergone for sins, we must hold that souls pay after this life the penalty they have not paid while on Earth.⁴³

And, near the end of his life, Thomas reaffirmed this teaching in the *De Malo*, maintaining that “the remission of venial sin in purgatory so far as concerns punishment is effected by purgatory, which man by suffering pays what he owes and thus the debt ceases.”⁴⁴

It is important to note that in these passages we find more than an explicit avowal of the belief that the separated souls of the dead can and in some cases do suffer; we find a clear statement of the belief that their suffering is just and in fact somehow also the suffering of the persons whose souls they were in this life. How else could Thomas say that “the remission of venial sin in purgatory so far as concerns punishment is effected by purgatory, which *man* by suffering pays what

⁴² Aquinas, *ST Suppl.* III, q. 71, a. 6 ad 3 (5:2838).

⁴³ Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, q. 181 (208).

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, q. 7, a. 11 ad 9, translated by John A. Oesterle and Jean T. Oesterle (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 303. For more on the dating of these works, see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, especially Giles Emery’s “Brief Catalogue of the Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas,” 330-61.

he owes and thus the debt ceases"?⁴⁵ Or that "souls pay after this life the penalty *they* have not paid while on Earth"?⁴⁶ If Thomas were less insistent that the disembodied soul is not the person who merited to suffer these pains, we might be tempted to conclude, on the strength of these passages alone, that the separated soul simply is the person. But not only will Thomas not allow us to say this, he also apparently sees no reason to do so.

In chapter 91 of Book IV of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, where we find a defense of the belief that souls "immediately after their separation from the body...will receive punishment or reward," Thomas argues that the body is required neither for their punishment nor for their reward:

There is, moreover, in the order of fault and merit a harmony with the order of punishment and reward. But merit and fault are fitted to the body only through the soul, since there is essentially no merit or demerit except so far as a thing is voluntary. Therefore, both reward and punishment flow suitably from the soul to the body, but it does not belong to the soul by reason of the body. There is, therefore, no reason in the infliction of punishment or bestowal of reward why the souls should wait for the resumption of their bodies; rather, it seems more fitting that, since the souls had priority in the fault or merit, they have priority also in being punished or rewarded.⁴⁷

We are able to merit punishment or reward because we are endowed with intellect and free will, powers that continue to exist in the separated soul. Because sin begins in these powers, it is only fitting, Thomas maintains, that punishment and reward in the hereafter should begin with the soul, even before it is reunited with the body.

Implicit in this proposal would seem to be the suggestion that what is morally relevant about any human being is not his personhood, but his rationality. Unlike modern notions of personhood, which tend to freight the term with moral significance, all but equating it with moral

⁴⁵ Ibid; emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Ibid; emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *SCG*, Bk. IV, c. 91, 335.

agency, the notion of personhood in Thomas's thought appears not to have anything like the same moral heft. It is surely significant that wherever he defends the belief that reward and punishment begin in the next life immediately upon the death of the body, he never considers the objection that it is unfair or vain to punish separated souls for the sins of others.⁴⁸ For Thomas, it is enough that a separated soul played an essential and principal part in the person's sins to justify its punishment. The morally relevant subject is the rational soul, not the person.

Granted all that has been said up to this point, however, one might object that it falls short of the mark by proving too much, since it would seem to make the resurrection unnecessary. After all, if the separated soul can suffer the pains of hell, endure the cleansing fires of purgatory, and enjoy the rewards of heaven, what need can there be of the body?

The answer to this question is found in Thomas's reasons for thinking the resurrection necessary. In the first place, he argues for the necessity of the resurrection from the fact that the soul is naturally ordered to inform a body. For, without the resurrection, the separated and never-dying soul would, in the long run, spend virtually all of its interminable existence frustrated, unable to inform a body. But, in a universe created by a wise, benevolent, and provident God, this could not happen. God makes nothing in vain. So although nature itself cannot effect the resurrection, God can and will. For this reason, we may consider the resurrection to have virtually all the inevitability of a natural necessity. Additionally, Thomas argues that the resurrection is also necessary on account of the body's contribution to the soul's perfection, not "as constituting the essence thereof," the way the "soul

⁴⁸ The only place Thomas comes close to espousing anything like this view is in *ST Suppl.* III, q. 75, a. 2, where he considers whether "the resurrection will be for all without exception." Thomas asserts that "the resurrection is necessary in order that those who rise again may receive punishment or reward according to their merits" (5:2864). From what follows immediately upon this sentence, however, it is most likely that Thomas was not saying that the resurrection is necessary for reward and punishment, but only that reward and punishment cannot be perfected without it.

is necessary for man's perfection," but "as necessary for [the soul's] well-being."⁴⁹

The soul never ceases to be a potentially informing form, by nature ordered to give being and structure to a living body, so that to be reunited with the body is to bring the soul to its natural perfection; it is also to increase the soul's happiness by extending it to the body.⁵⁰ What goes for delight goes also for pain. The soul's suffering is increased by the possession of a body, as Thomas makes clear in his description of the suffering of the resurrected damned, who, unlike the saints, will have bodies that are "not subtle and impassible; instead, they will remain in their grossness and capacity for suffering, and, indeed, these defects will be heightened in them."⁵¹

V. CONCLUSION

In addition to its ability to explain how the separated soul, even though not a person, can do the sorts of things persons do, the incomplete-person defense of the constitution view of the human person developed in this essay also has the advantage of not reading into Thomas's thought a modern, ethically-freighted conception of personhood. Yes, St. Peter's soul is not St. Peter. And, yes, this is important. But for Thomas it is not nearly as important as the fact that the separated soul in heaven is St. Peter's, and not just his but that part of him that was most truly himself when he was alive.

If Thomas is right, then death must be viewed in a less dismal light than we are accustomed to viewing it in. If the soul is our truest self—the being of our person and our formal cause—and if the loss of the

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 4, a. 5 (2:606).

⁵⁰ It is not, however, to increase the intensity of the soul's happiness, something Thomas is careful to note. "The desire of the separated soul is entirely at rest, as regards the thing desired; since, to wit, it has that which suffices its appetite. But it is not wholly at rest, as regards the desirer, since it does not possess that good in every way that it would wish to possess it. Consequently, after the body has been resumed, Happiness increases not in intensity, but in extent": *ST I-II*, q. 4, a. 5 ad 5 (2:606). Cf. *De Potentia Dei*, Bk. 2, q. 5, a. 10.

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, q. 176 (203).

body is only a temporary loss, as Thomas argues it must be, then the death of the body cannot be the disaster imagined by so many.

We might be surprised by this conclusion and less than satisfied with it, but I think it is a mark in its favor that it does not render death wholly transparent to reason. By drawing back a little of the thick veil that hides the hereafter from our sight, it suggests a wide and fathomless mystery. Another mark in its favor is its ability to explain how St. Paul could hope for death, as he does in his Letter to the Philippians, without at the same time denigrating the body:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.⁵²

In commenting on this passage, Thomas says that it reveals the error of holding that “the souls of the saints are not with Christ immediately after death.”⁵³ As we might expect, Thomas is careful to say that the souls of the saints, not the saints themselves, are with Christ. More importantly, he is careful to explain that St. Paul’s desire to die is from the “impulse to love God [which] moves us to be with God...not absolutely [that is, not because we wish to be separated from our bodies], but *to be with Christ*,” and this because “*to be with Christ is far better*.”⁵⁴ If we love God and are, in the words of another Thomas, “blithe to go to him,”⁵⁵ then death will be more devoutly hoped for than feared.

Notice, however, that Thomas does not say that it is better for the soul to be without the body. Neither can he do so without betraying his conviction that every soul is ordained “to the resurrection.”⁵⁶ If death is indeed something to be devoutly hoped for, then so much more the

⁵² Aquinas, *Commentary on Philippians*, chap. 1, 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, chap. 1, 70.

⁵⁴ Chap. 1, 70.

⁵⁵ St. Thomas More, in Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 162.

⁵⁶ See n. 37 above.

resurrection, not because we cannot be happy without our bodies, but because our happiness and God's justice⁵⁷ cannot be complete without them.

⁵⁷ See n. 48 above.