

PART I

FIRST PRINCIPLES
AND THE HUMAN PERSON

A Weakness in the “Standard Argument” for Natural Immortality

Don T. Asselin

Not so long ago, gangster films, pirate films, and westerns climaxed when the executioner said, “May God have mercy on your immortal soul.” Today, alienation from the eternal forms a crisis in moral philosophy. By eternal, I mean both the eternal, intelligible world of truth and the eternal being who is God. But in our age, the possibility of communion with eternal truth, whether in knowing truth in the arts and sciences or in resurrected life in God, is roundly dismissed. To the Catholic mind, this attitude bespeaks man robbed of the dignity of supernatural life. It shows revelation and right philosophy, divorced. Opposing divorce, Catholic philosophers have long fought this attitude by demonstrating the immortality of the soul.

Laudable as this is, problems remain. This paper urges a reconstruction of one Thomistic demonstration of the natural immortality of the soul. It is the argument from the immateriality of intellectual functions and from the principle, *agere sequitur esse* (ASE), to the natural incorruptibility of the soul. I do not deny any premise in the demonstration, nor again its conclusion. Rather, I urge that the ASE principle, in this argument, does not explain why the human soul, of itself, must survive what we call bodily death. More thinking needs to be done, if the standard argument is to be made both purely philosophical and demonstrative. One over-all motive, then, is polemical. It is to get us to study our opponents, following the example of St. Thomas.

To speak of his precept, two problems afflict the standard argument. The first, stated here in only one of several ways, is that immaterial

functions do not entail that the human intellect is subsistent and must survive bodily death. The second problem, discussed in passing, is that extra-philosophic appeal to bodily resurrection is required to demonstrate immortality in the broader, more interesting sense: vital activity, natural to the soul, after bodily death. For the most part I shall use “natural immortality” loosely, to indicate necessary survival of bodily dissolution, or natural incorruptibility, alone.

The Immaterial Function Argument

As presented in the *Summa Theologiae*, incorruptibility of the human soul follows its subsistence, in this manner: It is impossible that a subsistent form cease to exist, because being belongs to a form, which is an act, in virtue of itself; and what belongs to something, in virtue of itself, is inseparable from it. But being belongs to a subsistent form of itself, which is to say that being cannot be separated from a subsistent form; and the human soul is a subsistent form.¹ On whether the human soul is subsistent, St. Thomas notes that its knowledge of all corporeal things means that the soul cannot itself be corporeal. And:

Therefore the intellectual principle which we call the mind or the intellect has an operation *per se* apart from the body. Now only that which subsists can have an operation *per se*. For nothing can operate but what is actual: *wherefore a thing operates according as it is. . . .* We must conclude, therefore, that the human soul, which is called the intellect or mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent.²

The natural immortality of the soul, its necessary *per se* existence, and so its incorruptibility, follows from subsistence. Behind this, Premise 1 affirms that intellection is an incorporeal function, and Premise 2 that as something acts, so it is. Thus, if the soul acts in an incorporeal manner, it must be incorporeal; if incorporeal, it is not subject to corporeal dissolution, and so survives corporeal dissolution, which the death of a man is. And Premise 3, the subsistence premise, says that only what exists of itself (subsists) can operate of itself, because only what is actual can operate. But to operate means to exist, and to operate *per se* means to exist *per se*; thus nothing that operates *per se* can lose its existence, because its existence is

¹ST., I, 75, 6.

²ST., I, 75, 2.

inseparable from it. In itself the human soul is directly ordered to existence; it is naturally immortal.

Prominent Thomists regard this argument as the superior philosophical demonstration.³ Gilson claimed that of the several arguments St. Thomas collected to demonstrate natural immortality, "Most . . . stress the incorporeal nature of understanding and its act, and rightly so." He also wrote that "if it is agreed that the soul exercises such an incorporeal operation, its existence as an incorporeal nature is thereby established and its immortality possible; but its immortality is more than possible, it is certain, if this immaterial substance is actuated by an act of being of its own."⁴

Now let us grant the second consequence just quoted from Gilson. Natural immortality is certain, if this immaterial substance is actuated by an act of being of its own. This consequence depends upon the soul being an incorporeal nature, from which its immortality is possible. What is the evidence that the soul is an incorporeal nature? It is that the soul has a *per se* intellectual operation, and the ASE principle. But here the cogency of the argument reduces to the ASE principle, to its own intelligibility and cogency. Accordingly, belief in the natural immortality of the soul lies open to an objection, namely, that the ASE principle cannot be demonstrated against one who would deny it in this case; and if not, then plainly the natural immortality of the soul may be demonstrated only as a possibility, not as a necessary philosophical result.

But why might someone deny the ASE principle in this case? Why, if not because something that has an immaterial intellectual operation is not *ipso facto* an immaterial subsistent entity? Indeed, in our own time this is precisely the position of the substance monist/property dualist. Such thinkers concede that mind-brain identity theories need to be substantially qualified, in order to explain the property differentiation between electro-chemical brain states and the apparently immaterial properties of sensation and intellection. They concede that brain and mind states are not identical in every respect, namely, that they are virtually identical, but that mind properties are immaterial.

³See, for example, George P. Klubertanz, S. J., *The Philosophy of Human Nature* (New York: Appleton, 1953), pp. 307–09, 312–13; Etienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960 and the reprint edition (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1978), pp. 205–11; and Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), pp. 323–24.

⁴Etienne Gilson, *ibid.*, p. 211.

They argue that mind properties immaterially supervene on brain properties.⁵ Let us call this the supervenience thesis. It says that immateriality of the intellect supervenes on immaterial functions, part of intellect's structure, insofar as this structure's containing immaterial functions constitutes the intellect's being immaterial.⁶ From the thesis nothing follows about the mind as an independent substance that is immaterial. On the contrary, the only consequence that must follow is that certain intellectual beings have immaterial properties; we need not conclude that they are subsistent intellects.⁷

The Thomist in us rises to counter-punch. Has not the substance monist/property dualist made out the Thomistic position to be a substance dualism, whereas it is no such thing? But is this punch well aimed? The objection itself says only that the ASE principle does not necessarily hold in this case. Substance monism/property dualism is not an absurd or unintelligible position on the mind-brain question. More, even if it cannot finally silence its critics, it affects our problem. For example, if the human soul has immaterial functions, by extension of substance monism/property dualism logic, it is possible that the soul is an immaterial subject. In other words, substance monism is not the only necessary result of admitting property dualism. Its proponents usually maintain that it is the best position, citing what to them is massive evidence for physicalism. But just as something that is

⁵For a recent exposition, see William Seager, *Metaphysics of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 136, 174–88, and 197–201. Seager aims to develop a theory of mind-brain relation that is quite minimally physicalist (p. 201) and that is neither (i) an identity theory, nor (ii) a creeping dualism (epiphenomenalism), nor again (iii) a stout dualism, (parallelism). Seager regards the general evidence of physicalism overwhelming. Simultaneously, he thinks that differentiation between psychological (intentional) states and physical (motivating-sensation) states is undeniable. Given the general evidence of physicalism and the evident weaknesses of both identity theory and dualism, Seager proposes that mind-states constitutively supervene upon brain-states (pp. 198–201; for his general definition of constitutive supervenience, see following note). My point is not that Seager's or any similar view is intrinsically more defensible than the Thomistic view needed to make natural immortality a necessary philosophical conclusion. It is that without an adequate defense of the ASE principle, or without something equivalent to it, objections that arise from a position like Seager's cannot be answered.

⁶Thus Seager: "property P of X constitutively supervenes on a set of properties, Z, of X's constituent structure, S, just in case S's having Z constitutes X's having P", *ibid.*, p. 177.

⁷Nor does Richard J. Connell's position on mind-brain identity answer objections that arise from supervenience-theories of mind-brain relation; see Connell, *Substance and Modern Science* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988), pp. 122–38. Connell demonstrates a real distinction between brain properties and sensation, but he does not demonstrate the non-corporeality or virtual immateriality of sensation against the supervenience thesis.

material might have an immaterial function, so something that has an immaterial function might itself be immaterial; and thus it might survive death. But in outlasting the body, it is not necessarily, naturally immortal; and even if it were, the result is not necessarily linked to immateriality.

Parallel issues in Plato's *Phaedo* indicate as much. Plato finally appeals to the nature of the soul as an absolute that, as absolute, cannot admit its opposite.⁸ That is, if the soul's nature is to live, then it cannot admit death. The soul's causing the body to live (as in the discourse on causation, 100b–107a) is stated as a brute fact. Nothing of the earlier argument about the indissolubility of what lacks physical parts enters the later statement; immateriality is not necessary to this final appeal. Accordingly, the objection that the soul might not forever outlive body (87d–e) remains unanswered. Therefore, by parity of reason it remains possible that the soul is not naturally immortal simply because it is immaterial.

Without resolving the problem about the ASE principle itself, we have an impasse between our objector's position and the Thomistic immaterial function argument. Immaterial function does not entail natural immortality, if the ASE principle does not apply here.

The Cogency of the ASE Principle Directly Considered

Of course, only a fool would deny the principle outright. The Toronto Blue Jays won the World Series. Their playing baseball and not hockey partly states the cause. Everyday causal explanations resemble this. Shovels dig better than rakes, being for removing and not gathering. Fire heats, being hot; ice does not, not being hot. Brisk air is cool and dry. It refreshes. St. Thomas and Thomists deploy the ASE principle frequently in philosophical psychology, metaphysics, and theology. It functions as a conceptual foundation of the many *quia* argumentations from visible effects to invisible causes; it is invaluable in the Thomistic panoply.

Does this global utility transfer to the case at hand? When St. Thomas demonstrates the unity of the divine attributes, for example, he uses the ASE principle in the following fashion: Everything that is truly predicated of God is God. For if something acts in a

⁸Cp. *ST.*, I, 75, 5.

certain manner (as God), it must be in a certain manner (God). Let us suppose that at this extreme, the ASE principle is unassailable. At another extreme, for example, with the everyday causal relationships just mentioned, it is equally unassailable. But let us note something about these extremes. With the unity of the divine attributes, we make an entailment about a being that by (nearly?) universal admission is immaterial and naturally immortal. The inference goes from a mode of being to a being the same in kind. The same is true of the everyday causal relationships. At each extreme the ASE principle is perfectly intelligible. The attribute in question and the being in which it inheres naturally befit one another. Accordingly, the ASE principle functions as a necessary principle at each extreme.

With the attribute or property of immateriality of the soul, it need not function this way. The principle is only possible here, where two acts of the soul are critical: the soul animates and rules the body and it has its own immaterial operations of knowing. On neither account must we find the fitness between property and entity that we found before. The natural immortality of God is directly, necessarily intelligible to us in light of there being in Him certain—no, all—perfections without His being a body. From countless experiences, we know the connection between fire being hot and its heating something. Natural science only confirms the point with its more polished explanations. The problem, obviously, is that there is no necessary, natural connection between something's having these two critical acts, animating/ruling a body and having subsistence-grade immaterial knowing operations. In our case the ASE principle permits a possible inference from the latter property to subsistent, immaterial being; so it permits a possible inference to natural immortality. But it does not compel the conclusion.

Cajetan Redivivus?

In 1513, Seventh Session of the Fifth Lateran Council, Cajetan refused to affirm Pope Leo X's (then reiterated) condemnation of those who taught that the human soul is mortal.

Cajetan himself intended to teach nothing of the sort. Instead, he urged that no purely philosophical demonstration of the contradictory can be regarded as indubitable.⁹ To this, Leo said that demonstrating

⁹Cajetan's position evolved in this manner. His first formal writings (1503 and 1507) on the topic agreed with St. Thomas; Cajetan demonstrated immortality by appeal to the spirituality

the immortality of the soul taught by the Catholic faith ought to be possible.¹⁰ Agreed. So the position taken here is not exactly like Cajetan's. The point remains that the immaterial function argument does not require the conclusion that the soul must be immortal of its nature. But perhaps it is small beer so to disavow Cajetan. A favored authority in general, his position on this question has been rejected by the majority of Thomists. The dependence of the immaterial function argument upon the subsistence premise is the reason.

The Subsistence Premise

The subsistence premise again says that only what exists of itself (subsists) can operate of itself, because only what is actual can operate. But the human soul operates of itself; it must exist of itself. And if it does, then its existence cannot be separated from it, i.e., it cannot pass out of existence. Joseph Owens says that "the force of the argument lies in the impossibility of separating being from itself."¹¹

Two evidences are necessary for this reading of the subsistence premise. One is a general appeal to the direct existence of immaterial form, its independence of matter for existence¹² so that, as in *De*

of intellectual and volitional functions. By 1509, when preparing his *De Anima*, he agreed with Averroës that dependence on phantasms indicates that only active intellect is immortal. Besides the incident at the Lateran Council, three times later (1527, 1528, and 1534), he denied that immortality can be demonstrated in a purely philosophical manner. Each occasion was commentary on Scripture. If "[t]he reason for Cajetan's change of view is still far from certain," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw, 1967), 2:1054B, it is reasonable to probe concepts such as supervenience to illustrate the non-necessary force of the philosophical proof.

¹⁰For a brief account, see Etienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, p. 217.

¹¹Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, p. 324, n. 4. It is necessary to note the specific reasoning, according to which it is impossible to separate existence from the soul (as subsistent form). At least as Owens presents it, this argument explains spirits as necessary beings. It yields inseparability via substantial incompositeness. The perspective is a metaphysics of existence, wherein existing is the immanent, substantial act of the spiritual being. As Owens elsewhere admits, this line of inference does not entail immortality of the soul: "What the [inseparability] argument demonstrates with metaphysical cogency is only the soul's indestructibility. . . . But Aquinas seems to have kept this demonstration strictly in the order of substance. He gives no satisfactory indication of extending it to vital activity in his own reasoning", Owens "The Inseparability of the Soul from Existence," *The New Scholasticism*, 61 (1987), pp. 249–70, 269–70. I do not here take up the separate question, suggested by Owens, whether Aquinas himself studiously avoided making a direct application of the inseparability argument to immortality. The point remains that the majority in the Thomist tradition would have made such a direct application, thinking that Aquinas would warrant the move.

¹²Vd. *De Ente et Essentia*, c. VI, 4.

Potentia: “Where the form itself subsists in being, in no way will it be able not to be, just as being cannot be separated from itself.”¹³ Here, incompositeness provides the link. The other is that individual soul is precisely such an immaterial form directly ordered to existence. Only this can yield natural immortality of the individual soul as a necessary conclusion of philosophy.

Nor does this second evidence lack foundation. Developing it St. Thomas turns the tables on the Averroists. He notes that it is precisely the individual man who knows; thus by implication, it is precisely the individual soul that itself has operations independent of the body. The Averroists do not want anything like an unqualified denial that the individual man knows. With St. Thomas they would understand the truth, and the truth is as Aristotle said: “This man understands, because the intellectual principle is his form.”¹⁴ With the second statement, however, St. Thomas asserts an essential, irreversible dependence of the act of understanding upon the soul’s being the form of the body. The soul, he reasons, is the form of the body. Otherwise, we must deny an obvious truth, namely, that “each one is conscious that it is himself who understands.”¹⁵ For the soul is the knowing power, and if bodily it would not do what it can do: know all bodies.

But without independent evidence of the soul’s subsistence, the Thomist’s opponent is free to make a move such as pleading supervenience to explain the immaterial process of knowing all bodies. This, he might say, is what some bodies are able to do, and to do it, they must have an immaterial property. But, he might continue, it is not absolutely necessary to the individual’s knowing all bodies that the specific knowing power be both a subsistent intellect and the form of the body; only the latter is necessary, and it is compatible with supervenience. In Question 76, article 1 of the *Summa*, St. Thomas undertakes to demonstrate both relations. That is, if the man is to know all bodies, his knowing power must be both the form of the body and a subsistent intellect. Yet the arguments in article 1 expressly demonstrate only the necessity of the first relationship. The demonstration of the subsistence of the intellect there is an analogous one. It goes

¹³*De Potentia*, V, 3c; quotation from Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, p. 324, n. 6.

¹⁴*ST.*, I, 76, 1.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

from comparison between corporeal forms to the conclusion that the noblest form of body must have an operation and a power in which corporeal matter has no share whatever.¹⁶ Nor will it suffice to appeal to Question 75, article 2: this again had demonstrated subsistence from immaterial functions. These latter the Thomist's opponent concedes without necessarily conceding subsistence.

In other words, the cogency of the subsistence premise reduces to the cogency of the ASE principle. But the necessity of the ASE principle in reference to this hylomorphic composite remains as questionable here as it did in the earlier analysis. True, it remains possible that the whole man knows, because his individual soul of itself is a subsistent form, as it must be if it knows all bodies. But natural immortality remains a necessary philosophical conclusion only on condition of the necessity in this case of the ASE principle.

Two Objections Answered

To all this defenders of the standard argument might reply that they do not focus any link whatever between something's everlasting life and its existence being inseparable from itself. In other words, they might concede the purely logical possibility that the demonstration does not yield a necessarily true philosophical principle. On the other hand, they might continue, the question before us is not the necessity of things from a purely logical standpoint—or to put it similarly, but in St. Thomas's own words, the question is not what God can do, but what belongs to the nature of things as they actually are.¹⁷ Accordingly, St. Thomas is talking about the sorts of beings and operations that we know. I mean ourselves and our souls, insofar as their operations make them known to us. In this locale, it is inconceivable that, if something acts of itself in a non-corporeal manner, it be anything but a necessary existent, and thus naturally immortal. There are no other spaces in created reality for such beings to be, except that left open for the human soul. The human soul does everything that such a being needs to do; and no other being does. But we have already exposed the weakness of this objection, by noting St. Thomas's appeal to the nobility of the human soul. This explains the fitness of

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*ST.*, I, 76, 5, ad 1.

the individual soul's having what it takes to be naturally immortal. It does not demonstrate the cause.

Secondly, someone might object that in doubting the absolute necessity of the link between the individual soul's knowing and its existence being inseparable from itself, we are implying that the soul owes its existence to something besides itself. We might imply, for example, that the body is what makes the soul exist and act. With Aristotle I have assumed that the relation goes in the other direction. But there is no incompatibility between defining the soul as the first act of a potentially living body and denying that one of individual soul's processes entails that it is a subsistent form. Nor is denying this entailment the same as denying that the individual soul is a subsistent form. It is only to deny the necessary implication between exercising immaterial functions and being a subsistent form. Nor is any of this to deny that existence is inseparable from the individual soul. It is to concede the real possibility; it is to point to a logical flaw in the standard proof; and it is to invite rebuttal, or reconsideration and reconstruction.

Reconstructing the Argument

The standard argument wants the operations of the intellect to explain both a) that the intellectual principle is united to the body as its form and b) that the soul must be a subsistent form, having operations in no way shared by corporeal matter. Neither by itself nor alongside the subsistence premise does the ASE principle require the link, though it permits the link. One possible reconstruction is to present a knockdown demonstration of the falsity or incoherence of the supervenience thesis. This would be to demonstrate that nothing bodily can give rise to immaterial operations that are not themselves necessarily the product of an individual subsistent form. Here the virtual immateriality of sensation is evidence, but it forms a double-edged sword. One edge cuts toward making subsistence credible; the other, toward making the immateriality of intellect only a high degree of virtual immateriality. Success in this option would reconstruct the standard argument fully. But it would be difficult to achieve, because, as just noted, concluding to an individual intellectual form is much easier than manifesting individual intellectual form as subsistent.

A second reconstruction, partial but more promising, is of the ASE principle itself. It comprises two phases. In one, the initial exaggerated use of the ASE principle in metaphysics is granted, but then the principle is amplified with evidence from natural philosophy,

accumulated especially around the relation between cognition and becoming.¹⁸ In the second and converse phase, the denial of the ASE principle becomes less and less plausible. In this reconstruction, natural-philosophical evidence builds up to the ASE principle and makes objections to it rebuttable. But Cajetan-like reserve must be included in this picture. Unless countermoves are made, the initial concession removes the standard argument from the category of necessary and purely philosophical proofs, where Thomists since Cajetan have assigned it. Equally important, appeal to the resurrection probably remains necessary to demonstrate immortality as vital activity natural to the separated soul.

This suggests a tacit ambiguity that affects the whole problem of natural immortality. Doubtless, the primitive expectation we have of the argument is proof of life, not mere existence, of the separated soul. Thus, a third reconstruction suggests itself. It begins with the premise that for a living being, to be *is* to live.¹⁹ But the arguments presented and analyzed so far seem to imply, erroneously, that this is not so. That is, they imply that one can demonstrate natural immortality, but that one does not thereby demonstrate anything more than post-mortem existence of the soul; and this is absurd, because the soul exists simply to live. But where immortal life itself is concerned, the reconstruction might continue, everyday knowing in the arts and sciences, not to mention the pious desire for a holy life, present themselves as undeniable instances. They are only continued after body/soul separation. The soul continues to live simply as the living principle. One item immediately removes this third reconstruction from the main arguments considered so far: it jettisons Aristotelian hylomorphism. This may be a sound move. But it is one that many Thomists would be loathe to make. Notice, too, that Thomists now ally themselves with Plato. In this case, they lie open to the *Phaedo*-objection already mentioned: that something that is living principle is not *ipso facto* everlasting.

This all suggests a set of questions: Supposing that a valid, purely philosophical demonstration of personal immortality were to be produced, what difference would Thomists think it should make? Would we use it independently of revelation? Should we?²⁰

¹⁸The natural philosophy part of this reconstruction was suggested to me by Ralph McInerny.

¹⁹Marc Griesbach suggested this element of the third reconstruction.

²⁰In addition to those mentioned in notes 18 and 19, thanks go to Thomas J. Burke, Jr., James Stephens, and Donald Westblade for helpful discussion and criticism of this paper.