

## St. Thomas on the Unity of Substantial Form

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THE AIM of this essay is to explain and defend St. Thomas's understanding of the unity of substantial form against those who posit a plurality of substantial forms. Let me say, however, that I am not concerned primarily with the historical debate between St. Thomas and his contem-







the failure to grasp that form is not a *being*, but rather a *principle* of being, and the misconception of the formal cause as an efficient cause. St. Thomas, in fact, notes the connection:

For one thing to be another's substantial form, two conditions are required. One of them is that the form be the principle of substantial being to the thing of which it is the form: and I speak not of the effective but of the formal principle, whereby a thing is, and is called a being. Hence follows the second condition, namely that the form and matter combine together in one being, which is not the case with the effective principle together with that to which it gives being. This is the being in which a composite substance subsists, which is one in being, and consists of matter and form.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it becomes clear that while the pluriformists claim to adapt or modify the hylomorphic theory, that is, the theory that substances are constituted by form and matter as *principles* of being, they instead

however, that the soul is united to the body as its form, it is quite impossible for several essentially different souls to be in one body.<sup>12</sup>

According to Thomas, then, the doctrine of the plurality of forms is reduced to the Platonic notion of the soul as sailor in the ship since one can consistently maintain a plurality of forms only if one conceives of the soul as a mover or agent cause rather than as a formal cause.

We are left, then, with two fundamental alternatives: we can either accept the hylomorphism of Aristotle and Thomas and affirm the unity of substantial form or we can adopt the Platonic view of the soul as the sailor in the ship and posit a plurality of movers. Given these alternatives, let me outline briefly the arguments against the Platonic view of the soul as mover of the body.<sup>13</sup>

The primary argument employed by St. Thomas to show that the soul ought to be understood as the form of the body rather than merely a mover of the body is that the soul, unlike the sailor in the ship, makes the body to be the kind of body that it is. In order to see that this is so, Thomas calls attention to the composition of an artifact such as a house or a ship and a naturally organized substance such as a living body:

For the soul is the form of the entire body and of each of its parts: this must be asserted. For since the body of a human being or of any other animal is a natural whole, it will be called one because it has one form; and by this one form it is completed in a way far different from the mere aggregation or assembling of parts that is found in a house and in other artifacts of this kind. Hence it is necessary that each part of a human being and of an animal receive its existence and specific nature from its soul as from its essential form. Hence the Philosopher states that when a soul departs, neither eye, nor flesh, nor any other part of the body remains except in an equivocal sense.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of an artifact, then, the form of the whole results from a mere order or arrangement of its parts.

the form does not result from assembling the parts; rather the form is *prior* to the parts because it gives them their being. Since when the soul departs the body ceases to function and the parts corrupt, the priority of the form is evident.

That the form of a living thing gives the parts of the body their existence and specific nature is also evident from the process of growth and maturation. When a plant grows, the various parts of the plant—root, stem, leaf, flower—are produced from within the plant. Of course, this is

sperm and ovum which possess a transitional form, it is not surprising that we find something similar in the process of corruption. It seems at least plausible that the organs and individual cells of the body possess certain transitional forms that permit metabolic functions to continue for a limited time. But again, these forms are only *transitional* as is evident from the fact that the organs must be kept alive. One is merely slowing down, or arresting, the natural process of corruption.

Even if we suppose that the soul is responsible for the being of the cells and organs of the body, however, one might wonder whether one can maintain that all of the parts of the body have their being from the form of the whole. If, as the evidence of modern science suggests, a water molecule absorbed by the body remains chemically unchanged, how can we maintain that the water contained in the blood is caused by the substantial form of the whole organism?<sup>16</sup> Unlike the heart and the lungs, water does not seem to be generated from within, but assimilated from without.

This difficulty, I believe, is the most difficult to handle. One might be tempted to avoid the force of this objection by saying that water is not part of the substance of a living thing, but is merely used by a living organism as a medium in which cellular and intercellular functions can take place. One of the primary functions of water, after all, is that it is a universal solvent that facilitates the chemical reactions of other substances. The difficulty with this solution is that we are forced to say that most of the human body, roughly 80%, is not really part of the substance of you and me—a rather startling conclusion. But even if we were able to come to terms with the fact that most of us are not even half the man we used to be, we cannot stop here. Nearly all of the minerals in the human body are absorbed from without. As for the organic compounds, for example, proteins and amino acids, many of them can now be synthesized in the laboratory. If we maintain that water is not part of the substance of the human body, neither will be most of the other parts out of which it is made.

If a living organism is one substance we need an explanation of how the elements assimilated by the body can be said to derive their being from the substantial form of the whole. St. Thomas does suggest an answer. He suggests that higher forms, precisely because they are higher, are able to contain the perfections found in a lower form:

[T]here is no other substantial form in man besides the intellectual soul; and that the soul, as it virtually contains the sensitive and nutritive souls, so does it virtually contain all inferior forms, and itself alone does what-

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<sup>16</sup> See Nichols, "Aquinas's Concept of Substantial Form," 312–13.



ever the imperfect forms do in other things. The same is to be said of the sensitive soul in brute animals, and of the nutritive soul in plants, and universally of all more perfect forms with regard to the imperfect.<sup>17</sup>

According to Thomas, it is part of the perfection of a higher form that it is able to supply the perfections of a lower form. Thus, just as it causes the being and perfection of the various organs and cells of the body, so it can also cause the being of water and other simpler substances that function as parts of the body. Moreover, the fact that the body's absorption of water takes place in such a way that its chemical properties and material structure are retained need not be taken as a proof that no substantial change has occurred; it might simply be an indication that water is the kind of substance that can be easily assimilated by the human body. It is because water contains just the right properties needed by the body that its transformation can take place effortlessly and without the dramatic sensible effects that often accompany substantial change. The notion of a hierarchy of forms, then, offers at least a plausible explanation of the assimilation of water by the human body.

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<sup>18</sup> Leibniz, who is perhaps the most famous pluriformist, admits this fact. Like the