

HUMAN NATURE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOUL AND BODY

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PROMPT

Compare and contrast Aquinas and Descartes on the nature of the human person and the relationship of body and soul. For Descartes, focus on *Discourse IV* and *Meditations II*. For Aquinas, focus on *Summa Theologica* First Part Question 75. Begin by explaining Descartes's view. Give him center-stage and use Aquinas as a foil. A large part of the paper is uncovering similarities and differences, and presenting them in clear and plain language for the non-expert reader. Once you have given this explanation, evaluate their relative merits. Be nuanced and balanced in your discussion. In the course of your analysis, note the merits of Descartes's account and any improvements you see him making on Aquinas's view. Also note any shortcomings that you find with Descartes's analysis where you think Aquinas is more convincing. Imagine how Descartes or Aquinas would defend themselves, and offer a final reply in favor of your view.

In Descartes's *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* and Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, fundamental questions about human nature are discussed. Descartes and Aquinas seek to understand the essence of the human person, questioning what defines the human person, namely body and soul. This is done through a thorough analysis of the relationship between body and soul, distinguishing between the two and assessing the role each has in forming the individual. According to Descartes, the soul is a separate entity from the body because it has unique qualities that distinguish it in capability and form. Aquinas, however, establishes that the soul is interconnected with the body in such a way that without it, the human person cannot be complete. While both arguments have strengths and weaknesses, I agree more readily with Aquinas's view on the unity of body and soul, because as

physical and social creatures, humans rely on their bodies to relate with the outside world. This is evident in the errors of transhumanism, a developing science that seeks to eliminate the need for a body.

In both *Discourse IV* and *Meditations III*, Descartes affirms that the soul is a separate entity from the body. He explicitly states, "Thus this 'I', that is to say the soul through which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body...."¹ He reaches this conclusion by questioning his own nature and intellect. He imagines that all his previous beliefs in which he finds the least bit of doubt are completely false, distrusting all sensory information as if he is in a dream.² Despite the recognition of unlimited uncertainties, one fact remains; he is thinking. The very reality that he is doubting the truth and searching for it reveals that he exists, establishing his first principle of philosophy I think, therefore I am, or *cogito ergo sum*.³ Likewise, if he were to stop thinking, even if all the outside world and his rejected sensory information were true, he would have no reason to believe he existed.

Relying on this first principle, Descartes goes on to claim that man is entirely a thinking thing. He is "a substance the whole essence or nature of which is simply to think...."⁴ In other words, human nature is fully comprised of intellect and has no physical dependencies, neither to a place nor a body. From where can Descartes draw this distinction? It is rather radically based on the premise that because he can and does think as *a part* of his nature, the entirety of his nature is based on this one certainty. Therefore, Descartes's claim of separation of soul and body is reaffirmed, because human nature is pure intellect, indicating no need for a physical form.

Without the need for a body, it follows that Descartes would reassess all of his fundamental beliefs in order to achieve any certainty regarding human nature. He begins his plan to uncover the truth by rejecting any previous beliefs in which he could find the least bit of doubt or skepticism, including those based on sensory information.⁵ He describes the deception of senses by providing the example of the sun and the stars. He claims that just as when one looks at these celestial bodies and sees small figures of light, this masks their true size and magnitude. He continues his skepticism of the senses by comparing his real experiences to his dreams.⁶ The dream argument states that because the imagination and

senses are at work in both states, there is no true way to distinguish between being awake and being asleep, so reality is unperceivable. Therefore, even the senses cannot be undoubtedly trusted and must be rejected, further proving the separation of soul and body.

Descartes continues the discussion of human nature by questioning why what is gathered by the senses—the images of objects—seems more clear than what is true and known by the intellect. He argues that while the senses may seem more convincing, an analogy of a piece of wax is helpful in visualizing their deception.⁷ One identifies a piece of wax because of its external, corporeal qualities, such as its color, shape, size, sound, scent, flavor, and so on. If, however, the wax is brought close to a fire, these qualities are radically altered and the wax loses its color, scent, shape, and other characteristic attributes. Despite this, the wax still exists and can be identified as the original substances. Descartes then concludes that, “the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining...rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone.”⁸ In other words, the senses play no part in establishing reality and can be separated from the mind as the body is separated from the soul. From this Descartes establishes his argument of pure intellection: that anything corporeal is perceived not by the senses, but by understanding, and nothing can be perceived more easily than his own mind.

Like Descartes’s belief in intellection, Aquinas clarifies that the soul has a primary object and action apart from the body—intellect. The soul, while connected to the body, is still able to subsist on its own because it possesses the tool to employ the highest human good, reason.⁹ Both Descartes and Aquinas then believe that the primary function of the soul is to engage intellect; however, Aquinas expands this argument. He claims that the soul has another function and that is to be the form of the body. The soul and the body are not separate entities; rather, they are unified because the soul gives the body its form. The soul then is not the only part of the person and the person is not just the soul.¹⁰ Instead, the person is composed of both body and soul.

Furthermore, Aquinas contends that soul and body are intertwined because the body provides the tools for the soul to act with intellect. These tools include the so-called raw materials or

sensory information, which the body receives from the corporeal world.¹¹ This is a striking contrast from Descartes who emphasizes distrust of imagination and the senses, therefore rejecting the body as a part of human nature and essence. What Aquinas supports, on the other hand, is that the soul is dependent on the body, and for this reason personhood goes beyond the intellect. Aquinas contends that humans are not simply *logos*, as Descartes believes but enfleshed *logos*—not merely intellect, but embodied, physical beings who participate in intellect. A helpful analogy to illustrate this connection between the soul and the body is one of a painter and his brushes. While the painter intrinsically has the capacity to create beautiful works of art because of talent and practice, he cannot completely do so without his tools. He needs his brushes, paint, a canvas, and so on to fully employ his abilities, otherwise, they will be left unfulfilled. In a similar way, the soul is inherently endowed with reason and intellect, like the painter with artistic ability. The body is like the brushes and the sensory information it provides to the soul like the paint, allowing the painter to fully employ his abilities.

While both Aquinas and Descartes form cogent arguments for the relationship between body and soul in the *Summa* and the *Meditations*, the relative strengths and weaknesses of each argument can be assessed. Aquinas's view of an incarnate *logos* is more convincing; however, it does not surpass Descartes's argument in every area. One noteworthy strength of Descartes's is his logic in beginning from the absolute fundamentals of human nature and proving the existence of the soul. Although he is often criticized for extreme skepticism because he believed he had "to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations," his argument leaves very little room for objection because of it.¹² In his proof of the existence of the soul, he is thorough in proving something seemingly elementary, although foundationally significant, as this is Aquinas's starting point. Aquinas simply assumes that his audience will understand the existence of the soul without proving it and continues to distinguish between the soul and the body from this established point.

Aquinas's argument, on the other hand, has numerous strengths that highlights the flaws in Descartes's depiction of the soul. One such strength is that Aquinas's argument provides a means

for the individual to connect with the corporeal world, illustrating the social nature of the human person. There are real inputs on which one can discern the truth, because the soul is connected to the sensory information received by the body. Descartes, on the other hand, dismisses this connection between body and soul because of distrust of the senses, and in doing so, leaves one without any lens through which to discover the world. By removing the senses, one removes the only tool for gathering information about corporeal realities, and this is demonstrated if we return to the wax argument. Descartes's logic appears sound when he claims that without understanding or "inspection on the part of the mind along" one cannot perceive the wax after it is altered by the fire; however, in the context of Aquinas's connection between the soul and the body this realization could not have been made at all.¹³ Without any sensory input, one would not be able to identify a candle in the first place or even after it changes characteristics. The sensory information, similar to the paint in the painter's analogy made previously, is what allows for the intellect to distinguish that even after changing, the candle is fundamentally the same substance.

In response to this objection, Descartes would most likely reply that sensory information can be figments of the imagination and rejected, because they lack certainty. The soul and the body then would have no need to be united because only those things perceived by the soul—intellectual certainties—bring one closer to the truth. This is demonstrated through the dream and evil genius arguments in Mediation 1, as they clearly reveal Descartes's mistrust in the senses. Descartes refuses to acknowledge any reliance the soul could have on the body because "there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep" and because there is a possibility that "not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, has directed his entire effort at deceiving me."¹⁴ From these doubts, Descartes rejects the connection between the soul and the body, emphasizing that only those ideas perceived by the mind can be true.

If this were the case, however, and one were to truly reject sensory information from the beginning of life, similar in theory to the way Descartes endeavored to forget every experience and belief he

had, it is worth pondering what the extent of one's knowledge could be. Perhaps the only remaining, discernible reality would be that they exist and the rest of the world is a void of uncertainty. The world would be comprised of nothingness because of failure to receive any external, sensory information. In response to Descartes's objection, one may then say that it is impossible to utterly destroy foundational beliefs and experiences, because the intellect cannot produce a thought without external material on which to base it. Therefore, the fact remains that the intellectual soul requires a body to provide sensory material to exist beyond nothingness and fulfill its fullest nature, similar to a painter and his tools.

The arguments presented in the text raise ethical questions regarding the nature of the human person that emphasize the importance of a detailed reading of both *Summa* and *Meditations*, especially in the context of transhumanism. Transhumanism is a developing science that seeks to advance human nature so radically that individuals will no longer be susceptible to illness or need bodies once their minds can be downloaded onto advanced digital systems. This science produces obvious ethical dilemmas because it redefines the nature of humanity, although perhaps philosophers like Descartes would not be opposed to such transformation of human life. If we are purely intellect, souls of distinct bodies, then what would be the dilemma with sacrificing our bodies in order to live fully and forever in a purely intellectual state? On the other hand, philosophers such as Aquinas would be in uproar, dictating that the complicated nature of human beings, creatures that are intellectual, physical, and social, cannot be separated from the unity of body and soul. Transhumanism simplifies the individual to a singular dimension of its nature, removing not only the ability to father key sensory information, but also the ability to interact with the world and form lasting relationships. Are these sacrifices, the separation of body and soul according to Aquinas, worth the possibility of living forever, or no longer being dependent on a human body? The arguments of the text are obviously still relevant to ethical issues today, especially in a world with unparalleled technological advancements.

Exploring both Descartes's and Aquinas's arguments regarding human nature and the relationship between the body and soul provides clarity to one who is seeking to understand two

strikingly different perspectives. Through a comparative analysis of Descartes's view, namely an intellectual distinct from the body, and Aquinas's view, a united soul and body, one can perceive instances of Descartes's faulty logic. The soul cannot perceive anything of the corporeal world without the senses, and this is one such example of faulty logic that is proposed by Descartes and refuted by Aquinas. In summation, while Descartes forms a cogent argument regarding the separation of body and soul, Aquinas's argument proponing their unity is more convincing because of human dependence on the senses.

NOTES

1. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), sec. 33.
2. *Ibid.*, sec. 32-3.
3. *Ibid.*, sec. 32.
4. *Ibid.*, sec. 33.
5. *Ibid.*, sec. 32.
6. *Ibid.*, sec. 19.
7. *Ibid.*, sec. 30.
8. *Ibid.*, sec. 31.
9. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947); *Priory of the Immaculate Conception* (Dominican House of Studies Priory, 2 Jan. 1998), Question 75, Article 2.
10. *Ibid.*, Q. 75, A. 4.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, sec. 17.
13. *Ibid.*, sec. 31.
14. *Ibid.*, sec. 19; sec. 22.