

Self-Knowledge and a Refutation of the Immateriality of Human Nature: On an Epistemological Argument Reported by Razi

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ABSTRACT: The paper deals with an argument reported by Razi (d. 1210) that was used to attempt to refute the immateriality of human nature. This argument is based on an epistemic asymmetry between our self-knowledge and our knowledge of immaterial things. After some preliminary remarks, the paper analyzes the structure of the argument in four steps. From a methodological point of view, the argument is similar to a family of epistemological arguments (notably, the Cartesian argument from doubt) and is vulnerable to the same objection that can be raised against that form of reasoning. The last section points out that the argument can be used indirectly to highlight the weakness in some arguments for the claim that there is something immaterial in human beings.

VARIOUS FORMS OF ARGUMENT have been employed to derive a number of metaphysical distinctions from certain epistemological insights. An ancient example of this kind of argument occurs in Plato's *Phaedo* 74, where there is an argument that claims to show that "sensible equality" cannot be the same thing as the "form of equality" because the former admits of doubts whereas the latter does not:

Don't equal stones and sticks, the very same ones, sometimes appear equal to one [*or* at one time], but not to another [*or* at another]?

Yes, certainly.

But did the equals themselves ever appear to you unequal, or equality inequality?

Never yet, at any rate, Socrates.

Then those equals, and the equal itself, are not the same.

By no means, Socrates, in my view.¹

In the Latin medieval tradition, Thomas Aquinas's famous *intellectus essentiae* argument in his *De Ente et Essentia* is an epistemological argument for his metaphysical thesis of the real distinction of existence and essence in creatures:

¹*Phaedo* 74b8–c6, trans. David Sedley in "Equal Sticks and Stones" in *Maieusis: Essays on Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), p. 76.