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## Chapter 9: Persons, Souls, and Life After Death

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### §1. Two Rival Versions of Thomistic Hylomorphism: Corruptionism and Survivalism

It is evident to each of us that he or she engages in a variety of mental activities. It is also evident to each of us that he or she presently has a body. But what is this entity which thinks, senses, remembers, etc. and presently has a body? Put more simply, what are we? What are human persons? Philosophers both past and present have proposed a variety of different answers to this question. Of the theories defended in our contemporary context, several, including Thomistic Hylomorphism, Animalism, Constitutionalism, and Emergent Individualism, can claim to be “neo-Aristotelian” in one respect or another.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will focus on just one of these contemporary neo-Aristotelian theories: Thomistic Hylomorphism, a theory inspired by Thomas Aquinas’s hylomorphic account of what we are, which in turn was inspired by Aristotle’s hylomorphic account of what we are.

Like other hylomorphists, Thomistic Hylomorphists maintain that human persons are enduring individuals “composed of” or “constituted from” (in a to be specified sense of the term) matter (*hylē*) and a certain kind of substantial form (*morphē*). Thomistic Hylomorphists add that human persons differ from other material substances in that human persons have substantial forms which can exist without informing a body. Adopting the Aristotelian use of the term “soul,” Thomistic Hylomorphists call the substantial forms of living things “souls” and the substantial forms of human persons “intellective (or rational or human) souls.” For the purposes of this chapter, we can define Thomistic Hylomorphism as the conjunction of the following four theses:

- (A) Human persons are enduring individuals “composed of” or “constituted from” (in a broad, to be specified sense of the term) matter and a certain kind of substantial form (viz., an intellective soul).
- (B) Human persons have certain powers (including all of their mental powers, e.g., their powers to think, to sense, to imagine, etc.) at least partially in virtue of having the kind of souls that they do. (In the traditional Aristotelian jargon, a person’s soul is a “principle” (*archē, principium*) of his or her mental powers).
- (C) Human persons are not identical to their souls.
- (D) The souls of human persons can continue to exist separately, i.e., without informing a body, after the persons to which these souls belong die.

These four claims leave unanswered many further questions, questions as the following: just what kind of entity is a substantial form?; how exactly are we to characterize the body (or underlying matter) informed by such a form?; what exactly is the “informing” relationship holding between a human person’s form (or soul) and matter (or body)?; and in what sense exactly is a human person “composed of” or “constituted from” this form (or soul) and the matter

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<sup>1</sup> For a good comparative overview of these different theories, see Loose, Menuge, and Moreland (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*.

informed by it? Though questions such as these must be answered to arrive at a fully fleshed-out version of Thomistic Hylomorphism, the points made in this chapter do not require any particular answers to these questions. For that reason, I make no attempt to answer them here.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of this chapter is the fourth of the aforementioned four theses, viz., the Thomistic Hylomorphist's claim that the souls of human persons can continue to exist separately, i.e., without informing a body, after the persons to which these souls belong die. Much of the recent scholarly discussion of Thomistic Hylomorphism has centered on this thesis and, more specifically, the question of whether human persons can continue to exist along with their souls after they die or whether only their souls can continue to exist in this separated, disembodied, post-mortem state. Two rival groups of Thomistic Hylomorphists have formed, Survivalists and Corruptionists, with the following opposed views:

**CORRUPTIONIST THOMISTIC HYLOMORPHISM:** The souls of human persons can continue to exist separately, i.e., without informing a body, after these persons die, but these persons cannot exist without their souls informing a body and hence cannot continue to exist after their souls separate from their bodies at their deaths.

**SURVIVALIST THOMISTIC HYLOMORPHISM:** Not only the souls of human persons but also human persons themselves can continue to exist after their souls separate from (i.e., cease to inform) their bodies at their deaths. While in this separated state, these persons have souls but no bodies.

In some cases, discussion of these two rival views has centered on the correct *interpretation of Thomas Aquinas*, the figure whose ideas are the inspiration for all contemporary Thomistic Hylomorphists.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, however, the discussion has focused not on the historical and exegetical question of whether Aquinas was a Survivalist or Corruptionist but on the grounds contemporary Thomistic Hylomorphists have to favor one position or the other, regardless of which position Aquinas himself might have held. It is to this latter discussion and not the former discussion that this chapter aims to contribute.

On the one side, contemporary Corruptionists have offered several philosophical objections to Survivalism. For example, some Corruptionists have argued that (a) Survivalism requires that a human person could be composed of just one proper part, viz., a soul, and that (b) this is inconsistent with the allegedly true mereological principle that nothing can have just one proper part.<sup>4</sup> Other Corruptionists have claimed that Survivalism requires an implausible and

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<sup>2</sup> For two discussions of these questions informed by developments in contemporary science, see chapters 1 and 2 of this volume.

<sup>3</sup> For recent arguments for a Corruptionist interpretation of Aquinas, see Toner, "Personhood and Death in St. Thomas Aquinas"; Toner, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Death and the Separated Soul"; Nevitt, "Aquinas on the Death of Christ"; and Nevitt, "Survivalism vs. Corruptionism: Whose Nature? Which Personality?". For recent arguments for a Survivalist interpretation of Aquinas, see Stump, "Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul"; Stump, "Resurrection and the Separated Soul"; and Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, ch.13. References to other authors engaged in this exegetical dispute can be found in these works.

<sup>4</sup> For a prominent articulation of this objection, see Toner, "On Hylomorphism and Personal Identity." For one prominent Survivalist response to this objection, see Oderberg, "Survivalism, Corruptionism, and Mereology."

decidedly un-Aristotelian rejection of the idea that having a body (or matter) is part of the essence of a human being.<sup>5</sup>

On opposite side, Survivalists have argued that Corruptionism is inconsistent with the religious beliefs often held by Thomistic Hylomorphists. One such objection claims that (a) Corruptionism is consistent with the traditional Judeo-Christian belief in a non-immediate bodily resurrection only if human persons can cease to exist for a time before beginning to exist again at a later time and that (b) this is problematic because having such “gappy existence” is impossible.<sup>6</sup> Another religious objection charges that Corruptionism is inconsistent with the traditional Christian belief that human persons (and not just their souls) will experience, between their deaths and bodily resurrection, a disembodied afterlife or interim state in which such persons, among other things, undergo purgation in Purgatory, offer intercessory prayers for the living, and, in the case of the saints, enjoy a beatific communion with God.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter makes a new contribution to this debate by developing a heretofore undiscussed and, in my view, decisive objection against Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphism. In particular, I argue that if the central claim of Corruptionism were true, i.e., if it were true that human persons cannot exist without their souls informing a body, this would undermine the grounds on which all Thomistic Hylomorphists, including Corruptionists, rely to justify their claim that our souls can continue to exist after our deaths. If I am right, then Thomistic Hylomorphists have grounds for thinking that our souls can continue to exist after our deaths only if they allow, as Survivalists do and Corruptionists do not, that we human persons can continue to exist after our deaths, with souls but no bodies. It follows that Corruptionists face a choice: give up a central thesis of Thomistic Hylomorphism, viz., the thesis that our souls can continue to exist separately from our bodies after our deaths, or give up their Corruptionism and become Survivalists.

## §2. The Overall Argument

Corruptionists maintain that human persons cannot exist disembodied, i.e., without their souls informing a body. But I claim that if this were true it would undermine the grounds which all Thomistic Hylomorphists, including Corruptionists, have for believing that our souls can continue to exist after our deaths. In this section, I present the overall argument for this thesis. In §§3-4, I defend the argument’s key premise in further detail.

My argument has two parts. The first part begins with an uncontroversial observation:

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<sup>5</sup> For a clear articulation of this objection, see Nevitt, “Survivalism vs. Corruptionism: Whose Nature? Which Personality?”. In response to this objection, Survivalists often claim that, while having a body is “normal” for human beings, human beings’ surviving the loss of their bodies is no more impossible than human beings’ surviving the loss of significant parts of their bodies (e.g., all their limbs). See, e.g., Brown, “Some Advantages for Thomistic Solution to the Problem of Personal Identity beyond Death,” 249-256; Eberl, *The Nature of Human Persons*, 206-208; Eberl, “Surviving Corruptionist Arguments: Response to Nevitt”; and Feser, “Aquinas on the Human Soul,” 138-144.

<sup>6</sup> For an example of an author pushing this objection, see Brown “Some Advantages for a Thomistic Solution to the Problem of Personal Identity beyond Death.” For Corruptionist rejoinders, see Toner, “Personhood and Death in St. Thomas Aquinas,” 131-132, and Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*, 74-81.

<sup>7</sup> For authors pushing this objection, see Hershenov and Koch-Hershenov, “Personal Identity and Purgatory,” 440-443; Stump, “Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul”; Stump, “Resurrection and the Separated Soul”; Feser, “Aquinas on the Human Soul,” 144; and Brown, “Some Advantages for a Thomistic Solution to the Problem of Personal Identity beyond Death.” For a Corruptionist response, see Toner, “St. Thomas Aquinas on punishing souls.”

- (1) The Thomistic Hylomorphist's claim that a human person's soul can continue to exist separately, i.e., without informing a body, after the person's death depends for its justification on the claim that a human person's soul is the principle of a power, viz., the power to think, which can be exercised without the soul's informing a body.

The "power to think" in question is the power to formulate concepts of universals or kinds (e.g., the concept of a dog, the concept of color, the concept of a circle, etc.); to entertain, assent to the truth of, or deny the truth of propositions employing these concepts (propositions like *all dogs are mammals*, *Fido is a dog*, *shapes and colors are properties*, etc.); and to reason using these concepts (e.g., *Fido is mammal since Fido is a dog and all dogs are mammals*). For simplicity, I simply refer to this power as the "power to think." Thomistic Hylomorphists, following Aquinas, hold that, unlike all of our sensory powers (e.g., our powers to see, hear, imagine, etc.), whose exercise necessarily depends on one or more parts of the body (e.g., the eye, the ear, etc.) undergoing certain changes, our *power to think* can be exercised even in the absence of any such body-involving changes. From this, Thomistic Hylomorphists infer that this power to think is one which can be exercised without one's soul informing a body at all, and, from this in turn, Thomistic Hylomorphists infer that the soul, as the principle of ground of a power which can be exercised without the soul's informing a body at all, is something which can exist without informing a body. (To be clear, I'm not claiming here that this is a sound argument but only that this accurately reflects the Thomistic Hylomorphist's grounds for claiming that human souls can exist separately, i.e., without informing a body).<sup>8</sup>

Next, consider that

- (2) Thinking can occur only if something can do the thinking in question; thinking requires a thinker.

Like any other mental activity, the occurrence of thinking requires that something performs the activity, i.e., the thinking, in question. This is self-evident and needs no further defense.

From (1) and (2), it straightforwardly follows that

- (3) The Thomistic Hylomorphist's claim that a human person's soul can continue to exist separately, i.e., without informing a body, after that person's death depends for its justification on the claim that there is something which can exercise the relevant power to think while the soul is not informing a body. (From (1) and (2)).

This is conclusion of the first part of my argument.

The second part of my argument consists in showing that, if Corruptionism were true, Thomistic Hylomorphists would have no basis for claiming that there is something which can exercise the relevant power to think while the soul is not informing a body. First, consider that

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<sup>8</sup> Thomistic Hylomorphists, following Aquinas, typically claim not only that our power to think can be exercised without a body but also that our power *to will* can be exercised without a body. Throughout this chapter, I focus on the power to think. But I note here that the problems for Corruptionism discussed in this chapter are only made worse when one brings into consideration not only the power to think but also the power to will. For some indications of this, see n.17 and n.18 below.

- (4) Given Corruptionism, human persons cannot exercise the relevant power to think while their souls are not informing a body.

The central claim of Corruptionism is that human persons cannot exist while their souls are not informing a body. Since one cannot think while one does not exist, it follows straightforwardly from Corruptionism that human persons cannot exercise the relevant power to think while their souls are not informing a body.

But if human persons cannot exercise the relevant power to think after their deaths, what else can? The only other candidate for this post-mortem thinker is the person's separated soul:

- (5) If there is something which can exercise the relevant power to think while the soul is not informing a body and this something is not the human person to which the soul previously belonged, it is the soul itself.

However, I claim that

- (6) There is no reason to believe that the souls of human persons can think (i.e., exercise the relevant power for thinking), either while informing a body or while not informing a body.

This is likely to be the most controversial premise of the argument. I defend it in §§3-4 below. For now, I observe that, if true, (4), (5), and (6) imply that

- (7) Given Corruptionism, Thomistic Hylomorphists have no reason to believe that there is something which can exercise the relevant power to think while the soul is not informing a body. (From (4), (5), and (6)).

This concludes the second part of the argument.

Combining the conclusions of the two parts of the argument (viz., (3) and (7)), we reach the overall conclusion:

- (8) Given Corruptionism, Thomistic Hylomorphists have no reason to believe that a human person's soul can continue to exist separately, i.e., without informing a body, after that person's death. (From (3) and (7)).

In other words, if it were true, as Corruptionists claim, that human persons cannot survive the separation of their souls from their bodies, this would undermine the grounds which all Thomistic Hylomorphists, including Corruptionists, invoke to justify their belief that our souls can exist separately from our bodies after our deaths.

As I indicated above, the step in this argument most likely to be challenged by Corruptionists is (6). All Thomistic Hylomorphists maintain that there is something which can think while the soul is separated. Indeed, the first part of the argument ((1)-(3)) makes clear that Thomistic Hylomorphists *must* maintain this, for it is implied by the grounds they offer for believing that the souls of human persons can exist without informing bodies. Survivalists insist that this disembodied thinking thing is the human person: while the soul is informing a body, the thing which can think is the human person; likewise, Survivalists claim, the thing which can

think while the soul is *not* informing a body is the same human person.<sup>9</sup> Corruptionists, however, cannot accept this: as (4) makes clear, the Corruptionist thesis that human persons cannot exist without their souls informing a body entails that human persons cannot think without their souls informing a body (since nothing can think while it does not exist). So, as (5) indicates, if Corruptionists are to sustain their claim that something can exercise the relevant power to think after our deaths, they must claim that this something is the separated soul itself.

As a matter of fact, if one reviews of the literature, one will see that all Corruptionists say exactly this: that separated human souls can think, i.e., exercise the relevant power to think. But Corruptionists are divided about how exactly to explain this claim. Some Corruptionists maintain that human souls can think both after our deaths, once separated and no longer informing a body, *and* before our deaths, while still informing a body.<sup>10</sup> Other Corruptionists, however, maintain that human souls can think only after our deaths, once separated and no longer informing a body.<sup>11</sup>

In what follows, I discuss each of these positions in turn. In §3, against the first Corruptionist position, I argue that not only is there is *no reason to believe* that we have souls which can think prior to our deaths but also there is *good reason not to believe* this, given its deeply counterintuitive implications. In §4, I build on this by arguing, against the second Corruptionist position, that if there is no reason to believe that our souls can think prior to our deaths, then there is also no reason to believe that they can think after our deaths.

### §3. Both My Soul and I Think: A Baseless and Counterintuitive Claim

It is evident that we human persons can engage in a variety of mental activities. Each of us is aware that he himself thinks, senses, imagines, remembers, etc. Thomistic Hylomorphists accept this datum of experience and add that we have such powers, e.g., to think, sense, imagine, remember, etc., at least partly in virtue of having the souls that we do (see claim (B) in §1). In the case of our “sensory” powers (i.e., our powers to see, hear, imagine, etc.), Thomistic Hylomorphists see no reason to claim that our souls themselves have the powers in question. In other words, our having the souls (or substantial forms) that we do at least partially grounds our having the relevant powers in a way similar to the way in which a material object’s having mass grounds its power to exert an attractive force on other material objects. Just as the material object’s mass itself doesn’t exert the attractive force but rather the material object, by virtue of having mass, exerts the attractive force, likewise our having the souls that we do at least partially grounds our having the powers to see, hear, imagine, etc. without our souls themselves having

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Eberl, *The Nature of Human Persons*, 34-35; Feser, “Aquinas on the Human Soul,” 144; Oderberg, “Survivalism, Corruptionism, and Mereology,” 8; Stump, “Non-Cartesian Dualism and Materialism Without Reductionism,” 512; Brower, *Aquinas’s Ontology of the Material World*, 285-286; and Brown, “A Thomistic Solution to the Problem of Personal Identity beyond Death,” 252-253.

<sup>10</sup> See Fisher, “Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Too-Many-Thinkers Problem”; Fisher, “Operation and Actuality in St. Thomas’s Argument for the Subsistence of the Rational Soul”; Klima, “Aquinas’ Balancing Act: Balancing the Soul Between the Realms of Matter and Pure Spirit”; Klima, “Aquinas on the Union of Body and Soul”; and Toner, “Personhood and Death in St. Thomas Aquinas.”

<sup>11</sup> See Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, ch.11; Haldane, “The Examined Death and the Hope of the Future”; Haldane, “A Thomist Metaphysics,” 104-106; Haldane, *Reasonable Faith*, ch.11; Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*, 66-74; and Toner, “St. Thomas Aquinas on the Problem of Too Many Thinkers.”

these powers. We can see, hear, imagine, etc., because we have the souls that we do, but not because our souls themselves are things which can see, hear, imagine, etc.

But what of our intellects? That is, what of our “power to think” as I have been using the term? Survivalists claim that, just like our sensory powers, our power to think is a power possessed by us in virtue of our having the souls that we do but exercised by us human persons alone, not by us *and our souls*. We have this power to think because we have the souls that we do but not because our souls themselves have this power to think; rather, again, just as an object’s mass grounds its power (and tendency) to exert a certain attractive force without the mass itself exerting that attractive force, likewise according to the Survivalist one’s having a human or intellective soul grounds one’s having the power to think without one’s soul itself having that power to think. Now some Corruptionists partly agree with this claim: they maintain that, while informing bodies and hence parts of human persons, human souls *do not and cannot think*; only the persons to which they belong can think. But these Corruptionists add that our souls can think after our deaths, *once separated from a body and (according to the Corruptionist) no longer part of a human person*. I address this Corruptionist position in the next section (§4). In this section, I first address those Corruptionists who maintain that our souls don’t just think when separated but *can and do think even now, while informing our bodies and parts of us human persons*.

Is there any basis for claiming that our souls can think even now, prior to our deaths? Some Corruptionists would appeal here to the fact that our souls can think while separated. The idea is that if our souls can think while separated, then surely they can also think now. Kendall Fisher, for example, a Corruptionist interpreter of Aquinas, writes, “if the soul is *the understander* [i.e., the thinker] after death, there seems to be no principled way to rule it out as *an understander* [i.e., a thinker] during life.”<sup>12</sup>

Now, if one’s aim were to show that Aquinas thinks that our souls can think even now, before our deaths, such an argument might work, or at least might work if one could show that Aquinas thought that our souls can think after our deaths (I take no stand on the correct interpretation of Aquinas here). But if the Corruptionist’s aim is the one under discussion here, viz., to provide a reason or basis to believe that our souls can think prior to our deaths, then this argument can succeed only if we already have a reason to believe that our souls can think after our deaths. But this won’t do since, as I’ll argue in §4, the order of justification must go the other way around: without a prior reason to believe that our souls can think before our deaths, there is no reason to believe that our souls can or will acquire the power to think after our deaths, when they cease to inform a body.

Could Corruptionists invoke Aquinas’ claim that the power of thought “is in the soul as its subject”? In a well-known passage in his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues,

Some of the operations of the soul are performed without a corporeal organ, as in the case of thinking (*intelligere*) and willing (*velle*). Hence, the powers which are the principles of these operations are in the soul as their subject.<sup>13</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Patrick Toner, a Corruptionist interpreter of Aquinas and a contemporary advocate for Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphism, claims that “It is plain that

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<sup>12</sup> Fisher, “Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Too-Many-Thinkers Problem,” 108.

<sup>13</sup> *ST I.77.5.corpus*, my translation.

St. Thomas holds that the subject of the operations of knowing [i.e., thinking] and willing is the soul.”<sup>14</sup>

Such an argument might again work to show that *Aquinas* thought that our souls can think before being separated (though, again, I take no stand here on the correct interpretation of *Aquinas*). But, again, if the aim is the one under discussion here, viz., to provide a reason to believe that our souls can think (before or after our deaths), then the argument fails. It fails because the claim that the relevant kind of thinking can be performed without a corporeal organ in no way suggests that there is an incorporeal part of me that can engage in such thinking, or that the form/soul by virtue of having which I can engage in such thinking itself can engage in such thinking.

Some Corruptionist authors seem to believe that what thinks must be incorporeal if thinking does not require the involvement of any corporeal organ. Thus, for example, Kendall Fisher writes,

If intellectual operations cannot be carried out in or through something corporeal, they must be carried out by the soul alone. Thus the soul must be...the part of the human being that performs the intellectual acts.<sup>15</sup>

If the claim that “intellectual operations cannot be carried out in or through something corporeal” is taken to mean that nothing corporeal can perform these operations, then this claim implies that whatever performs these operations is incorporeal, which may in turn be taken to imply that we must have an incorporeal part which thinks, a part which may perhaps then be identified as one’s soul. But Thomistic Hylomorphists hold that we human persons are corporeal and that, as is evident to all of us, we can and do perform the intellectual operations in question. Given this, no Thomistic Hylomorphist can consistently claim that our souls can think on the grounds that nothing corporeal can think, for such a claim would imply that we, who the Thomistic Hylomorphist believes are corporeal, cannot think. On the other hand, if the claim that “intellectual operations cannot be carried out in or through something corporeal” is taken to imply only that the relevant kind of thinking does not necessarily involve bodily changes of one sort or another, we’re back to where we were in the preceding paragraph: this claim in no way supports the idea that our souls, the constituents by virtue of which we have such a power, can think.<sup>16</sup>

Again, Corruptionists may claim that the nature of thought is such that only something which is not wholly material, i.e., does not have only material subsistent parts, can think. Such a claim is arguably implicit in certain kinds of Thomistic arguments for thesis that the exercise of our power of thought does not necessarily involve any corporeal organ or body-involving process. Such arguments invoke the idea that, just as seeing eventually involves a certain kind of

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<sup>14</sup> Toner, “Personhood and Death in St. Thomas Aquinas,” 128.

<sup>15</sup> Fisher, “Operation and Actuality in St. Thomas’s Argument for the Subsistence of the Rational Soul,” 195.

<sup>16</sup> Gyula Klima defends a Thomistic view according to which “strictly speaking only the intellectual soul does the activity of thinking” (“*Aquinas’ Balancing Act: Balancing the Soul Between the Realms of Matter and Pure Spirit*,” 37). According to Klima’s proposed view, human persons do not *really* think but can be *said* to think, or at least can be said to think if one accepts the scholastic idea that “a whole is properly denominated by any attribute of its part which can apply only to the part in question” (37). The problem here is that it is clearly false to claim that human persons do not *really* think. We’re all aware of our own thinking, and yet we could not be aware of our own thinking if we did not really think but only could be *said* to think because we have souls that think. For this reason, any view which denies that we really think (and maintains that we can only be *said* to think) should be rejected.



event (viz., the “reception of a sensible form”) which takes place in one’s body (in particular, in one’s visual organ), thinking essentially depends on a certain kind of event (viz., the “reception of an intelligible form” or storage of a concept) which cannot take place in anything corporeal and thus must take place in something incorporeal, specifically an incorporeal subsistent part of oneself which is identified as one’s soul. If this claim were true, it would imply that, since human persons can think, human persons must have an incorporeal subsistent part. But, even granting all of this, all of this provides no more reason to believe that this incorporeal subsistent part can think than the claim that my hearing essential depends on certain events in my ear implies that my ear can hear (i.e., have auditory experiences).

It is impossible to anticipate every argument which might be invoked to justify the claim that we have souls (understood in the Aristotelian way) which can think. Nevertheless, enough has been said to show that it is doubtful that any such argument will succeed. That is, it is doubtful that there is any reason for Thomistic Hylomorphists, or any other theorists who posit Aristotelian souls, to believe that, unlike our sensory powers, which we possess in virtue of having the souls that we do without our souls themselves having such powers, our power to think is not just a power which we have in virtue of having the souls that we do but also a power which our souls themselves have.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the situation is even worse for Corruptionists who make such a claim, for it is claim which is not only *baseless* but also *deeply counterintuitive*. The problem is analogous to the one which Thomistic Hylomorphists would face if they were to claim that our souls can see, hear, imagine, or exercise any of our other, non-intellectual mental powers. The souls in question, Aristotelian souls, are not us but constituents of us; we human persons are not identical to these souls, which are not us but rather forms possessed by us. If one were to claim that we have such souls and that these souls can see or hear or imagine, then there would be two entities, ourselves and our souls, which can see, hear, or imagine where we pre-theoretically think that there is only one (viz., just ourselves). Likewise, Corruptionists who claim that our souls can think prior to our deaths are committed to there being two entities which can think, ourselves and our souls, where we pre-theoretically believe that there is only one (viz., just ourselves). For this reason, such Corruptionists face a version of the much-discussed *too-many-thinkers* problem.<sup>18</sup>

But is there really a problem here? Some authors have contended that there isn’t. Richard Swinburne, for example, writes in response a *too-many-thinkers* objection advanced by Eric Olson,

[I]f we (embodied on earth) are not mere souls although our souls think, then there are two thinking things—I and my soul....I argue that this is unparadoxical, since there is only one act of thinking going on—I think, in virtue of my soul thinking. Olson admits (his p. 76) that ‘there are some properties we have in a derivative sense. We are tattooed insofar as our skin is tattooed’, but he seems to think this unimportant. However, innumerable similar examples can be adduced...The reason these examples do not have paradoxical consequences is because the different descriptions (‘I being tattooed’ and

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<sup>17</sup> The same point can be made concerning our power to will. There just is no reason to think that, unlike our sensory powers, our power to will is not only a power which we have in virtue of having the souls that we do but also a power which our souls themselves have. Again, such a claim in no way follows from the idea that the power to will is a power whose exercise does not require the involvement of any corporeal organ.

<sup>18</sup> In the same way, those who would claim that our souls can *will things* face a possible *too-many-willers* problem.

‘my skin being tattooed’) are descriptions of the same event, since the descriptions mutually entail each other.<sup>19</sup>

Though Swinburne is not a proponent of Thomistic Hylomorphism but of a certain kind of substance dualism, nonetheless what Swinburne says here in defense of his substance dualist view could be adopted by Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphists who claim that we have souls understood in the Aristotelian way (i.e., substantial forms) which can think prior to our deaths.

And yet this won’t do, for there are two serious problems with Swinburne’s claims. First, Swinburne seems to believe that there aren’t too many thinkers if the person’s act of thinking can be identified with her soul’s act of thinking. But even if one grants that this identification can be made, this is not enough to claim that there is only one thinker, for even if a person and her soul were to perform all the same acts of thinking, each act of thinking would still be performed by two non-identical things, the person and her soul, i.e., two thinkers. Second, a related problem confronts Swinburne’s claim that the event of my thinking a thought and the event of my soul’s thinking that thought are “the same event” if I think the thought in virtue of my soul thinking the thought. Since I am not my soul, even if we think the same thought, the event of my thinking that thought has a different constituent than the event of my soul’s thinking that thought, and so these events are not the same event. Moreover, it doesn’t help for one to define a notion of “same event” according to which two events can be “the same event” even if they have different individuals as constituents (as Swinburne does elsewhere in his book): this does nothing to solve the problem since my thinking a certain thought’s being “the same event” in this sense as my soul’s thinking that thought doesn’t imply that there is only one individual (i.e., one thinker) thinking that thought.

But perhaps these criticisms reflect a misunderstanding of Swinburne’s position. Perhaps his claim is not that there is really only one thinker but instead that, while there really are two thinkers, “this is unparadoxical, since there is only one act of thinking going on – I think, in virtue of my soul thinking.” This judgment is allegedly supported by the tattoo analogy. In other words, the idea is that the claim that I think in virtue of having a soul which thinks no more creates a problem of too many thinkers than the claim that someone is tattooed in virtue of having skin which is tattooed creates a problem of too many tattooed things.

Before criticizing this idea, it is worth noting that Kendall Fisher defends a similar position in response to the objection that Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphists would face a too many thinkers problem if they claim that human persons have souls which can think. Fisher writes,

In order to have too many thinkers, we must have two distinct thinkers. To have two distinct thinkers, we must have two distinct things. But it is misleading, at best, to characterize soul and human being as two distinct things....When one thing is part of a larger whole, the two are nonidentical, but they are only distinct to the extent that the whole exceeds the part. My arm is nonidentical with my elbow, but it is not distinct from my elbow. So if my elbow is bruised or scraped, my arm is bruised or scraped. While there are two nonidentical bruised or scraped subjects – arm and elbow – to the extent that they are bruised or scraped, they are numerically one...[In the same way,] while a human being is not identical with her soul, or indeed with any incomplete part of herself, she is not utterly distinct from it either...to the extent that the part operates, it is identical

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<sup>19</sup> Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, 236.

with the whole. Since the human being is partly her soul, soul and human being are not distinct candidate understanders [i.e., thinkers].<sup>20</sup>

Like Swinburne, Fisher argues that the claim that a person thinks in virtue of having a soul which thinks is no more problematic than other cases (like her scraped elbow case) in which we claim that a whole has a certain property in virtue of having a part with that property. But Fisher also goes further than Swinburne insofar she asserts there's no problem not simply because there is just one act of thinking going on but more precisely because the person and her soul are not really numerically two thinkers but rather are numerically one thinker insofar as to the extent that it is thinking the soul is not distinct from the person.

However, there are two problems with the ideas proposed here by Swinburne and Fisher. First, Swinburne and Fisher's analogies don't show that the claim that we have souls which think is any less counterintuitive than it initially appears. While there are cases (like the tattooed skin and scraped elbow cases) where we do pre-theoretically believe that a whole has certain property in virtue of having a part with that property, our pre-theoretical views about thinking are not like this: none of us pre-theoretically believes that there is some part of him or her that thinks (or senses or imagines or engages in any of other mental activities we pre-theoretically think we alone, and no part of us, engage in). Thus, Swinburne and Fisher's drawing attention to the fact that there are cases of wholes having properties in virtue of having parts with those properties does nothing to make the claim that we think in virtue of having a soul which thinks any less counterintuitive.

A second and, in my view, even more decisive problem for Swinburne and Fisher's positions is that there are some thoughts (including thoughts involving the application of universal concepts) which human persons think but which nothing non-identical to those persons can think. For this reason, in such cases it cannot be maintained that the person thinks the relevant thoughts in virtue of his or her soul's thinking those thoughts.

I have in mind here *first-personal thoughts*. Consider, for example, my thought *I am a human being*. According to both Swinburne's substance dualism and Thomistic Hylomorphism, I am not my soul, and so it is not possible for my soul to think that very first-personal thought; if I have a soul which thinks, it can only think first-personal thoughts about itself, not me. In general, any first-personal thought which I think is not one which it is possible for my soul (or anything else non-identical to me) to think. Consequently, none of the first-personal thoughts I think are thoughts which I could be thinking in virtue of my soul's thinking those very thoughts.

Conversely, any first-personal thoughts which one's soul can think are not thoughts which one can oneself think. If, for example, a person's soul were to think the first-personal thought *What am I?*, a thought which is about that soul, the person could not also think that very first-personal thought, for the only first-personal thoughts the person can think are about herself, not her soul. For this reason, in addition to its being untenable to claim that a person thinks all the thoughts he or she thinks in virtue of having a soul (non-identical to her) which thinks those thoughts, it is also untenable to claim that a person can think any thought which her soul can think if she has a soul (non-identical to her) which can think.

These observations allow me to make clearer just how strange it is to claim that we have proper parts which can think (regardless of whether these proper parts are Aristotelian souls, Swinburnian souls, or anything else). To posit such parts truly does introduce additional thinkers, thinkers which do not and indeed cannot think all of the thoughts which the human

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<sup>20</sup> Fisher, "St Thomas Aquinas and the Too-Many-Thinkers Problem," 120.

persons to which they belong think, and which can (and presumably do) think thoughts which the persons to which they belong cannot think.<sup>21</sup> I count myself among those who find any view which has such an implication to be incredible.<sup>22</sup>

But though it is important to show (against those who, like Fisher and Swinburne, would claim otherwise) that the claim that we have souls which can think really does conflict our pre-theoretical beliefs, this doesn't get to the heart of the issue. In the course of developing a theory, we sometimes realize that there are good reasons to renounce one or more of the pre-theoretical beliefs with which we began. I grant that this is so and, for this reason, maintain that the real issue is not whether it is counterintuitive to believe that we have souls which can think but rather whether there is any good reason to believe that we have such souls.

I have argued above that, in the case of the Aristotelian souls posited by Thomistic Hylomorphists, there is no such reason. I add here that the points just made about first-personal thought allow for a further sharpening of that argument. To see this, note that once it is granted that some of our thoughts (viz., our first personal thoughts) are not thoughts which we think in virtue of having souls which think those thoughts, it becomes even harder to see what reason there could be to maintain that the rest of our thoughts are thoughts that we think in virtue of our having souls which think those thoughts. If we can think first-personal thoughts "on our own," i.e., not in virtue of having souls which think these thoughts, why can't we also think non-first-personal thoughts "on our own," i.e., not in virtue of having souls which think these thoughts? And if the Thomistic Hylomorphist doesn't have any reason to suppose that we think our thoughts in virtue of having souls which think those thoughts, what other reason could there be to suppose that we have souls which can think? None, I claim.

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<sup>21</sup> A referee suggested that the theorists criticized here could claim that a human person's first-personal thoughts ambiguously refers to either the person or her soul. For example, according to this suggestion, the first-personal pronoun "I" in a human person's thought "I am a human being" would ambiguously refer to either the person or her soul, just as the noun-phrase "the person in the next room" can, in a situation where there is more than one person in the next room, ambiguously refer to one of those persons. One can think of it this way: the first-personal pronoun denotes *the one thinking this thought* and so if there are two things thinking this thought, the person and her soul, the pronoun is ambiguous in its reference. This suggestion would resolve the problem discussed in the main text above if indeed it were true that human persons' first-personal thoughts are ambiguous in this way.

The problem with this is that it is evident to all of us that our first-personal thoughts are not ambiguous in this way. The proposed solution only works by denying that we have an ability we all believe we have, namely, an ability to think unambiguous first-personal thoughts about ourselves (and to do so without employing disambiguating noun-phrases such as "I, the person, ..." or "I, the human being, ..."). We all ordinarily believe that when we think first-personal thoughts like "I am hungry," "I am a human being," or "I am not a soul," these thoughts are unambiguously about ourselves. Those who adopt the referee's suggestion must pay the steep cost of denying this. Beyond this, they must accept even stranger consequences, such as that *a human being* who thinks "I, the soul thinking this thought, am not a human being" is thinking a true thought; given the view in question, this is a perfectly legitimate disambiguation of the human being's allegedly ambiguous first-personal thought "I am not a human being."

Could one maintain that only persons and not their souls can think first-personal thoughts? One should not be misled by the term "first-personal" into thinking this is a plausible position. On the contrary, this position is hopelessly ad hoc: anything which can think can surely think about its own thinking and hence can think first-personal thoughts. (It is worth mentioning here that Aquinas would agree with this, for he (rightly) holds that one way that the capacity for thought differs from other cognitive capacities is that it is a self-reflexive capacity: whereas, for example, one cannot hear one's hearing, anyone who can think can think about her own thinking. See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk.2, c.49).

<sup>22</sup> Contemporary theorists often use the fact that a rival theory implies the existence of too many thinkers as grounds for rejecting that theory. The most well-known example of this is Eric Olson's thinking-animal argument for animalism (see Olson, *What are We?*, ch.2).

#### §4. Our Souls Can Think Only After Our Deaths: Another Baseless Claim

In §2, I noted that some Corruptionists maintain that human souls can think both when separated and when unseparated, whereas other Corruptionists maintain that human souls can think only when separated: prior to our deaths, we human persons, not our souls, can think; however, once separated at our deaths, our souls come to have a power they did not have before, namely, the power to think. I turn now to this latter position and argue that it too is baseless: if there is no reason to believe that our souls can think prior to our deaths, then there is no reason to believe that they can think after our deaths.

Consider first a proposal offered by Patrick Toner, a leading contemporary defender of a Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphism. Adopting an idea from Aquinas, Toner claims that our souls can think once separated but not before because in becoming separated our souls come to have a different “mode of being” and hence “a different mode of action.”<sup>23</sup> For now, let it be granted that whether a thing has the power to think is (or can be) determined by its “mode of being.” The problem with Toner’s proposal is that he offers no reason to believe that human souls can change from having a mode of being according to which they cannot think to having a mode of being according to which they can think. We have seen that there is no reason to believe that our souls have the latter mode of being prior to our deaths. What reason then is there to suppose that they can or will acquire it when they become separated at our deaths? It is, of course, true that if our souls can continue to exist in a separated state after our deaths, then they can change from informing a body to not informing a body. If one likes, one can describe this change as a change in the soul’s “mode of being.” But claiming that our souls can undergo such a change in no way supports the claim that our souls can undergo the *relevant* change in “mode of being,” i.e., a change from not being able to think to being able to think.

What advocates of this position need is some reason to think that our souls changing from informing a body to not informing a body can result in our souls changing from not being able to think to being able to think. John Haldane, another contemporary proponent of a Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphism, may be thought to provide such a reason when he writes,

Now the question is whether in the case that A/B ceases to exist certain of its powers might be transferred to A, which, though hitherto merely virtual, might now emerge as actual. To fix this idea think of compound pigment colours such as brown, and the claim that red, say, exists virtually but not actually in this compound. What that means is that, certain conditions obtaining, the brown pigment might be destroyed but red pigment is precipitated out. Might this provide a model for the post-mortem existence of a subject of abstract thought?...[Thomistic Hylomorphists maintain that] there are powers of the living human body (the power of abstract thought), and other powers which are subservient to it, which are not necessarily exercised through any part of the body, i.e. they have no bodily organ. That being supposed it cannot be objected that such powers could not be exercised by some precipitated non-physical substance *because* they require a material embodiment. So if thought is an immaterial activity exercised ante-mortem through the operation of A/B [the human person, composed of (A) a human soul and (B) matter], there is no contradiction involved in supposing that it might continue post-

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<sup>23</sup> Toner, “St. Thomas Aquinas on the Problem of Too Many Thinkers,” 220.

mortem but be transferred from the hitherto actual substance A/B to the hitherto merely virtual but then actual substance A [the person's soul].<sup>24</sup>

Patrick Lee and Robert George, two other prominent proponents of Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphism, cite Haldane's discussion with approval and sum up the position thus: "given that the human act of understanding is not itself an act performed with a bodily organ... [the] powers of understanding (conceptual thought) and willing *could* be transferred to a nonphysical substance that "precipitated out" at death, namely, the separated human soul."<sup>25</sup>

Let it be granted that in some cases a power can be transferred from a whole to a former part of that whole which survives the whole's destruction. The question is whether there is any reason to believe that a human person's power to think is such a power. The problem is that, for all that they say, Haldane, Lee, and George offer no reason to believe that this particular transfer of powers can occur. Even if there are certain cases where a power can be transferred from whole to a surviving former part when the whole is destroyed, this alone provides no reason to suppose that *any* power of a whole can be transferred to a surviving former part or, more importantly, that such a transfer can happen in the specific case under discussion, viz., a case involving human souls and the power of thought.

Here the Corruptionist might think it relevant to note, as Haldane, Lee, and George do, that thinking (according to Thomistic Hylomorphists) does not necessarily involving any corporeal organ. But while this claim indicates the absence of one kind of obstacle to the power to think being transferred from a person to his soul at death, it doesn't yet provide a reason to believe that such a transfer is possible. The mere fact that one kind of obstacle to such a transfer is absent does not show that the transfer is possible.

What about Haldane's pigment case? Might that provide some argument by analogy for believing that the power to think could be transferred from a person to her soul upon the person's death and the separation of her soul from her body? One problem here is that it's not clear that the pigment case is a case where a power is being transferred from a whole to a former part/constituent of the whole: what power is it exactly that the brown pigment has that is transferred to the surviving red pigment? But even setting this worry aside, there is a crucial disanalogy between the two cases. In the case of the red pigment, we have independent knowledge of samples of red pigment which are not constituents of brown pigment. In particular, we know of such samples that they have certain powers (e.g., the power to appear red). Given this, even if we've never observed any red pigment that has been precipitated out from some brown pigment, we can nonetheless have reason to believe that, if the red pigment in some brown pigment were "precipitated out," it would gain certain powers (e.g., the power to appear red) which it did not have (or at least could not manifest) while a constituent of the brown pigment. In the case of the human persons and their souls, however, we have no independent knowledge of human souls which are not constituents of human persons. *A fortiori*, we have no independent knowledge (or reason to believe) concerning such separately existing souls that they have, or are such that they could have, the power to think. For this reason, unlike in the case of the red pigment, we have no basis for thinking that if a human soul were to become separated

<sup>24</sup> Haldane, *Reasonable Faith*, 158. See also Haldane, "The Examined Death and Hope for the Future," 254-255, and Haldane, "A Thomist Metaphysics," 104-106.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Lee and Robert George, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*, 73.

from the human person to which it presently belongs, it could or would gain certain powers, like the power to think, that it did not have while a constituent of the person.<sup>26</sup>

This brings me to a further problem with both Toner's proposal and Haldane, Lee, and George's idea: Corruptionists cannot appeal to the claim that our souls can exist separately to support their claim that our souls can think once separated. To see this, note that the Corruptionist's claim that a human person's soul can exist separately depends for its justification on the claim that something can exercise the relevant power of thinking even while the soul is not informing a body (see (3) in §2 above). Since Corruptionists deny that human persons can exist without their souls informing a body, the only candidate for this separated thinking thing is the soul itself (see (4) and (5) in §2 above). Thus, the Corruptionist's claim that a human person's soul can exist while not informing a body depends for its justification on the claim that the soul can think while not informing a body. Given this, the Corruptionist cannot appeal to the former claim to support the latter claim; such a move would be viciously circular.

In short, I don't see any way for Corruptionists to justify the claim that even though our souls cannot think before our deaths, they can think after our deaths.

## §5. Concluding Remarks

Edward Feser, a prominent proponent of Survivalist Thomistic Hylomorphism, has argued that Corruptionist Thomistic Hylomorphism is incoherent on the grounds that it is incoherent to suppose that a soul, understood in the Aristotelian way as a substantial form, can persist after the substance to which that soul belongs has ceased to exist. Feser writes,

[T]he human being is the substance of which the soul is a form. So, if the human being ceases to exist at death, then that means that the substance of which the soul is the form ceases to exist at death. And in that case, how could the soul carry on? How could a form exist apart from the substance of which it is the form?<sup>27</sup>

Such an argument is not likely to persuade any Corruptionists, for Corruptionists will say in response that a form can exist apart from the substance of which it is the form if the form can act apart from the substance of which it is the form. All Thomistic Hylomorphists agree that a thing exists in the manner in which it acts: if a thing can act under certain conditions, then it can exist under those conditions. Thus, Feser's argument won't move Corruptionists as long as they can justifiably claim that human souls can act (and, in particular, think) independently of informing a body.

It is this Corruptionist claim which I have challenged above. I have argued that there is no basis for thinking that the Aristotelian souls Thomistic Hylomorphists believe in are things which themselves can think, either now (while informing a body) or after our deaths (when they have ceased to inform a body). And yet the Thomistic Hylomorphist's belief that these souls can continue to exist after our deaths depends for its justification on the claim that these souls are each a principle of a power, a power to think, which can be exercised even after our deaths. For this reason, if Thomistic Hylomorphists are to maintain their belief that a human person's soul can continue to exist after that person's death, they must believe that something else, besides the separated soul, can exercise the relevant power to think after the person's death. The only other

<sup>26</sup> The same disanalogy features in the molecule example used by Lee and George in *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Feser, "Aquinas on the Human Soul," 144.

candidate for such a post-mortem thinker is the person to which that soul formerly belonged. Thus, if Thomistic Hylomorphists are to maintain their belief that our souls can persist after our deaths, they must reject Corruptionism and instead maintain, as Survivalists do, that we too can persist (and think) after our deaths, with souls but without bodies informed by those souls.



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