

Philosophical Influence on the Concept of “Soul” in Augustine and Aquinas

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With the spread of Christianity among Gentiles and the conversion of philosophers of the various Greek schools, there began efforts to incorporate Greek philosophy with Christianity. This is noted early in the second century AD with Justin, and the trend continued through many others, notably Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and many of the Greek Fathers of the Eastern tradition.¹ By the time of Augustine (354-430 AD) and certainly well before Aquinas (1225-1274 AD), though controversial, the tradition of adopting philosophical arguments in theology was well established. In Augustine and Aquinas, we find two of the most influential Christian thinkers throughout history. Through their adoption of philosophical arguments, philosophy has had a pervasive influence in western Christianity in ways that are not commonly understood. The purpose of this essay is to examine the influence of philosophy on the relationship between the soul and the body in these two thinkers. We will begin by noting several points of agreement between Augustine and Aquinas regarding the nature of the soul.

They agreed that the soul is created by God *ex nihilo*. The soul is created as an independent substance, not taken from God Himself or from other pre-existing material, either spiritual or corporeal.

- Augustine: "...whether the soul originates from a breath of God, or whether it is itself a breath of God, it does not emanate however from God, but it is God that created it from nothing."²
- Aquinas: "...the soul has no material part, it cannot be made out of any subject-matter: consequently it must be made out of nothing, and so created ... Therefore from God it has properly its first origin."³

They agreed that the soul is immortal and cannot die.

1 An excellent overview can be found in “La filosofia greca e la formazione dell'identità cristiana,” (“Greek Philosophy and the Formation of Christian Identity”) in the Italian journal *Annali di storia dell'esegesi*, 22/1(2004) (*Annals of the History of Exegesis*).

2 *L'Anima e la sua Origine*, at http://www.augustinus.it/italiano/anima_origine/index2.htm, an Italian translation of *The Origin of the Soul*; English translations are my own.

3 *Summa contro Gentiles*, 2.87, at http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc2_87.htm

- Augustine: “...souls ... not only live, but live a life immortal...”⁴
- Aquinas: “the human soul, of which the potential intellect is a part, is indestructible.”⁵

They agreed that the soul is not a body or corporeal substance.

- Augustine: “Therefore the soul cannot have a tendency to become body.”⁶
- Aquinas: “I answer that, the soul has no matter.”⁷

They agreed that the soul has free will, as long as it be unconstrained.

- Augustine: “...everyone that acts voluntarily, is not constrained, and everyone that is not constrained, either acts voluntarily or abstains from acting.”⁸
- Aquinas: “Therefore all intelligent agents have free will, arising out of the judgement of the understanding...”⁹

They also agree that the soul is not the “harmony”¹⁰ of the body, or a mere synthesis or tuning of its various components. For Augustine, thought is of the nature of the soul, not of the body. Were the soul a harmonization of all body elements, thought would be subject to the body. Aquinas saw that a harmony more fit the idea of a body than of a soul, but no harmony of body components could explain the soul.

- Augustine: “Thought is the soul itself, or it is in the soul ... Whatever the harmony of the body might be, it is necessary that it reside inseparably in the body as a subject ... Now the human body is subject to mechanistic process, but thought is not so subject.”¹¹
- Aquinas: “A harmony cannot move the body, or govern it, or resist the passions, as neither can a temperament. Also a harmony, and a temperament also, admits of degrees. All which considerations go to show that the soul is neither harmony nor temperament.”¹²

4 *Le Due Anime*, 2.2, at http://www.augustinus.it/italiano/du_e_anime/index2.htm, an Italian version of *Of Two Souls*; the above cite was originally a question with an expected affirmative answer in the text.

5 *Summa contro Gentiles*, 2.79, at http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc2_79.htm

6 *City of God*, XIII.2

7 *Summa Theologica*, Q. 75, Art. 5

8 *Le Due Anime* 10.14

9 *Summa contro Gentiles*, 2.48, at http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc2_48.htm

10 Plato, *Phaedo*, 84-85, 88b, 92-93. Harmonization may be seen as a precursor to certain contemporary materialist philosophies.

11 *L'Immortalità dell'Anima*, 2.2, at http://www.augustinus.it/italiano/immortalita_anima/index2.htm, an Italian version of *On the Immortality of the Soul*.

12 *Summa contro Gentiles*, 2.64, at http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc2_64.htm

There are subtle differences in the above cites that indicate that there are more substantive differences between the two than is initially evident in their similar conclusions. Augustine was committed to the Platonist tradition, directly from Plato, through his disciples and the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and others.¹³ Aquinas, on the other hand, was committed to the principles of Aristotle.¹⁴ Both Augustine and Aquinas adapted the two philosophers' positions to fit the unique tenets of Christianity. Not surprisingly, significant differences survived in the works of the two theologians.

For Augustine, consistent with Plato, the soul existed independently of the body. The soul is the source of thought; the soul, or ideal form, gives life to the body, the formed; the soul is the source of beauty, bestowing beauty upon the body. The soul is the mover of the body as a separate substance inhabiting the body; the body exists in change, or becoming, while the soul is outside change, or becoming. The soul is the immortal, independent mover of the mortal, dependent, moved body. The soul uses the body, gives life to the body and is its motivating force by which the body maintains itself.

- *“This principle is the understanding of man, the rational soul; and it is certainly not a body...”*¹⁵
- *“...I would not have been able to doubt that not only the soul, but also each body proceeds from God, had I considered with a pious and prudent spirit which is the form and that which is formed, which is beauty and that which is adorned with beauty, finally which of these things is causal and of what.”*¹⁶
- *“Thought is the soul itself, or it is in the soul. Now thought has more essence than the body. But the body is a determined, permanent being, and it is better that it be such rather than not exist. ... Now the human body is subject to the process of change; thought is not so subject.”*¹⁷

13 Augustine's defense of the Platonists is mentioned in the *Confessions*, 9.13, 9.14, 9.15, 20.26, and in *City of God*, for much of chapter VIII. Particularly noteworthy is VIII.7, in which Augustine states that Plato was speaking of the Christian God, “And the light of our understandings, by which all things are learned by us, they [the Platonists] have affirmed to be that selfsame God by Whom all things were made.”

14 Consistently throughout the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas openly differs with Plato either in principle or in name (e.g. 84.1 “...Plato strayed from the truth...”) and cites Aristotle in support of his positions. Aristotle is frequently cited simply as “the Philosopher.”

15 *City of God*, VIII.5

16 *Le Due Anime* 3.2

17 *L'Immortalità dell'Anima*, 2.2

- *“Only the being that is moved by another and which does not move itself is mortal. And the being that is not mortal is not in process of change. ... there is no movement without a permanent being ... Therefore the being that moves without being subject to the process of change cannot but be a being that lives in permanent being-ness. It is that one that moves the body in each gradation of life.”*¹⁸
- *“Its [the soul's] every tendency toward the body consists in using it, in giving it life, in manual production, or in providing for it. None of these functions would be possible were the soul not of a superior type to the body.”*¹⁹

It is clear from the above passages that Augustine envisioned that the soul and body were distinctly separate entities bound together in a Platonist model. Augustine argued that the soul is imprisoned in the body and must be delivered from it, though in difference with Platonists it was not the body or matter *per se* but its corruptibility from which the soul must be delivered.

- *“...it is not the body, but the corruptibility of the body, which is a burden to the soul. ... the body, bound as it were, in a lamentable chain...”*²⁰

Augustine argued that at death the soul of the Christian is delivered from the body, awaiting resurrection. Christ's resurrection prepared the way for his followers to fully become immortal. By the perfection of the body, it will no longer be a burden, or chain, to the soul.

- *“He [Christ] furnished an instance of the resurrection which all shall at last experience . This way purifies the whole man and prepares the mortal in all his parts for immortality.”*²¹
- *“The precise nature of the resurrection bodies ... shall be absolutely incorruptible and immortal and shall offer no hindrance to the soul's contemplation, by which it is fixed in God...”*²²

Thus we see in Augustine a “Christianization” of Plato's model of the soul as existing separate from the body, yet motivating it. There are significant differences with Plato and his followers, as these are necessary to make the doctrine coherent with the Christian Scriptures.

Aquinas, on the other hand, had a very different view that is much more Aristotelian, in which the soul is the form of the body, and must be joined to the body as its natural completion.

18 *L'Immortalità dell'Anima*, 3.3

19 *L'Immortalità dell'Anima*, 13.20

20 *City of God*, XIII.16

21 *City of God*, X.32

22 *City of God*, X.29

The human soul actualizes, expresses itself through, and even requires a body; that is its fulfillment. It is expressly the soul and body together that form a species, or the various expressions of life. The soul is the source of the intellect as well; since intellect operates through sense, it requires a body. The soul's happiness, or fulfillment, is dependent on the body for its full expression of life.

- *“...it is the notion of a soul to be the form of a body... and that matter, which it actualizes first, we call the first thing animated.”*²³
- *“The body is not the essence of the soul, but the soul by the nature of its essence can be united to the body, so that, properly speaking, not the soul alone, but the composite, is the species. And the very fact that the soul in a certain way requires the body for its operation shows that the soul is endowed with a grade of intellectuality inferior to that of an angel, who is not united to a body.”*²⁴
- *“I answer that, we must assert that the intellect which is the principle of intellectual operation is the form of the human body.”*²⁵
- *“Now it is evident that the body is necessary for the happiness of this life. For the happiness of this life consists in an operation of the intellect, either speculative or practical. And the operation of the intellect in this life cannot be without a phantasm, which is only in a bodily organ...”*²⁶

Aquinas specifically rejected the concept of the soul moving the body as described by Plato and retained by Augustine, on the basis that things with different natures cannot be said to have the same activity.

- *“Now though the soul has a certain proper motion of its own, which it performs independently of the body, namely, the act of understanding, there are however other activities common to soul and body, namely, those of fear, anger, sensation, and the like; for these only come about by some change wrought in some definite part of the body; hence evidently they are conjoint activities of soul and body. Therefore out of soul and body there must result one being, and the two cannot be distinct in being.”*²⁷

Aquinas, consistent with Christian thinking and in difference with Aristotle, argued that at death the soul could leave the body and be rejoined with its perfected body at the Resurrection.

- *“Now the soul has one mode of being when joined to the body, and another when separated from it, its*

23 *Summa Theologica*, Book I, 75.4

24 *Summa Theologica*, Book I, 75.7

25 *Summa Theologica*, Book I, 76.1

26 *Summa Theologica*, Book II, Part 1, 4.5

27 *Summa Contro Gentiles*, 2.57

nature remaining always the same. ... such a union belongs to it by reason of its nature... It is clear that it was for the soul's good that it was united to a body...²⁸

- *“But speaking of perfect Happiness, some have maintained that no disposition of body is necessary for Happiness; indeed, that it is necessary for the soul to be entirely separated from the body. Hence Augustine quotes the words of Porphyry who said that ‘for the soul to be happy it must be severed from everything corporeal.’ But this is unfitting. For since it is natural to the soul to be united to the body, it is not possible for the perfection of the soul to exclude its natural perfection.”²⁹*

Thus in a similar process to Augustine and Plato, we see that Aquinas constructed a “Christianized” concept of the soul based on Aristotle's concept of the soul as the inherent form of the body. This too required certain alterations in the philosophy of Aristotle, while remaining true to Aristotle's model.

In summary, Augustine and Aquinas found in the respective philosophies of Plato and Aristotle a basis on which to build a Christian philosophy. Augustine and Aquinas each adapted his chosen framework to fit the unique needs of Christian thinking regarding life, death and resurrection. A significant aspect of their philosophies were the natures of the soul and body and their relationship. Augustine and Aquinas carried forward the basic concepts of the soul and body of their predecessors into their systems, thus propagating and diffusing the influence of these two Greek philosophers throughout Christian thinking.

28 *Summa Theologica*, Book 1, 84.1

29 *Summa Theologica*, Book II, Part 1, 4.6