

The Separated Soul and the Human Person

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What happens when we die? Do our bodies go on existing while our souls cease to be? Do our *souls* go on existing while our *bodies* cease to be? Most importantly of all, do *we* go on existing, or do *we* simply cease to be?

Questions like these have been raised and wrestled with by just about every philosophical school in just about every philosophical tradition—and Thomism is no exception. Indeed, these very questions lie at the heart of what is surely the single biggest ongoing debate in recent Thomistic philosophy. For roughly the last quarter-century, philosophers in the Thomistic tradition have been arguing over the status of the human soul after death. More specifically, they have been arguing over whether the separated soul is a *person*—is it *me*?

In this paper, I would like to both present and weigh in on that debate. To that end, it will proceed in five parts. First, I will canvas and discuss the motivations behind the core positions in the debate. Second, I will identify three kinds of questions and two types of disagreement that I think it is important for participants in that debate to distinguish. Then, in the third, fourth, and fifth sections, I will do my best to answer the relevant exegetical, systematic, and speculative questions, respectively.

An Overview of the Debate

In debating the status of the separated soul, almost all contemporary Thomists align themselves with one of three core positions:

Corruptionism holds that the separated soul is not a person.¹

Survivalism holds that the separated soul is a person.²

¹ The following is the most complete and up-to-date bibliography of corruptionism available, arranged chronologically: Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 215–20; Armand Maurer, “Descartes and Aquinas on the Unity of a Human Being: Revisited,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 497–511; Leo Elders, *The Philosophy of Nature of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997), 274–84; B. Carlos Bazán, “The Human Soul: Form and Substance? Thomas Aquinas’s Critique of Eclectic Aristotelianism,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 64 (1997): 95–126; John Haldane, “The Examined Death and the Hope of the Future,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000): 245–57; Gilles Emery, O.P., “L’unité de l’homme, âme et corps, chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 75, no. 2 (2000): 53–76; Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 880–93; Patrick Toner, “Thomas versus Tibbles: A Critical Study of Christopher Brown’s Aquinas and the Ship of Theseus,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2007): 639–53; Robert George and Patrick Lee, *Body–Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 66–81; Christopher Martin, “Is There Identity of Person between a Human Being and a Separated Soul?,” *Studia theologica* 6 (2008): 249–53; Lawrence Dewan, O.P., “Saint Thomas, Metaphysics, and Human Dignity,” in *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue: Essays in Thomistic Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 58–67; Toner, “On Hylemorphism and Personal Identity,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 19 (2009): 454–73; Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: One World, 2009), 161; Toner, “Personhood and Death in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 26 (2009): 121–38; Toner, “St. Thomas Aquinas on Death and the Separated Soul,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91 (2010): 587–99; Joseph G. Trabbic, “The Human Body and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*,” *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 552–64; Toner, “St. Thomas Aquinas on Punishing Souls,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 71 (2012): 103–16; Turner Nevitt, “Survivalism, Corruptionism, and Intermittent Existence,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31 (2014): 1–14; Toner, “St. Thomas Aquinas on Gappy Existence,” *Analytic Philosophy* 56 (2015): 94–110; Stephen L. Brock, *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas: A Sketch* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 114–17; Gyula Klima, “The Problem of ‘Gappy Existence’ in Aquinas’s Metaphysics and Theology,” in *The Metaphysics of Personal Identity: Proceedings from the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, ed. Gyula Klima, Alexander Hall, and Stephen Ogden (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 119–33; Turner Nevitt, “Aquinas on the Death of Christ: A New Argument for Corruptionism,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90 (2016): 77–99; Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., “L’âme séparée,” *Revue thomiste* 116 (2016): 71–103; Adam Wood, *Thomas Aquinas on the Immateriality of the Human Intellect* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 266–77; Nevitt, “Survivalism versus Corruptionism: Whose Nature? Which Personality?,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 10 (2020): 127–44.

² The following is the most complete and up-to-date bibliography of survivalism

Incompletionism holds that the separated soul is an incomplete person.³

available, arranged chronologically: Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 51–52; Christopher M. Brown, *Aquinas and the Ship of Theseus: Solving Puzzles about Material Objects* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Stump, “Resurrection, Reassembly, and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul,” in *Die menschliche Seele: Brauchen wir den Dualismus?*, ed. Bruno Niederbacher and Edmund Runggaldier (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2006), 154–60; Brown, “Souls, Ships, and Substances: A Response to Toner,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2007): 655–68; Jason T. Eberl, “Do Human Persons Persist between Death and Resurrection?” in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009), 188–205; Christina Van Dyke, “Not Properly a Person: The Rational Soul and Thomistic Substance Dualism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009): 186–204; David Oderberg, “Survivalism, Corruptionism, and Mereology,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012): 1–26; Stump, “Resurrection and the Separated Soul,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 458–66; Jeffrey E. Brower, *Aquinas’s Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 279–310; Mark Spencer, “The Personhood of the Separated Soul,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 12 (2014): 863–912; Spencer, “What Is It Like to Be an Embodied Person? What Is It Like to Be a Separated Soul?” *Angelicum* 93 (2016): 219–46; Jeremy W. Skrzypek, “Complex Survivalism, or: How to Lose Your Essence and Live to Tell about It,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 91 (2017): 185–99; Spencer, “The Separated Soul: Disability in the Intermediate State,” in *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Scott Williams (New York: Routledge, 2020), 235–57; Spencer, “Survivalist, Platonist, Thomistic Hylomorphism: A Reply to Daniel De Haan and Brandon Dahm,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 10 (2020): 177–84; Eberl, “Surviving Corruptionist Arguments: Response to Nevitt,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 10 (2020): 145–160; James Dominic Rooney, O.P., “Survivalism, Suitably Modified,” *Thomist* 85 (2021): 349–76; Stump, “The Nature of Human Beings,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 126–50.

³ The terms “incompletionism” and “incompletionists” are my own, but I introduce them as necessary for a joint-carving taxonomy. The following is the most complete and up-to-date bibliography of incompletionism available, arranged chronologically: Giuseppe Butera, “Incomplete Persons: Thomas Aquinas on Separated Souls and the Identity of the Human Person,” in *Distinctions of Being: Philosophical Approaches to Reality*, ed. Nikolaj Zunic (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 61–80; Melissa Eitenmiller, “On the Separated Soul according to St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 17, no. 1 (2019): 57–91; Daniel De Haan and Brandon Dahm, “Thomas Aquinas on Separated Souls as Incomplete Human Persons,” *Thomist* 83 (2019): 589–637; De Haan and Dahm, “After Survivalism and Corruptionism,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 10 (2020): 161–76; Kendall A. Fisher, “Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Incompleteness of the Human Soul,” *The Thomist* 86 (2022): 53–89, especially note 11. It is also plausible to interpret Cajetan as an incompletionist *avant la lettre*; see *In III Summa theologiae* [ST], q. 6, a. 3 (Leonine ed. 11:98a-n2).

To motivate each of these views, I would like to present what I take to be a few central arguments in favor of each. I will not discuss these arguments in detail, nor will I even take much time to explain them. My goal is simply to show that none of the three core positions is either *obviously* right or *obviously* wrong.

So, without further ado, why be a corruptionist? Here are three arguments:

The Simplest Argument

1. I die.
2. Dying is corrupting.
3. I corrupt.

The Mereological Argument

1. No proper part is identical to the whole of which it is a part.
2. The soul is a proper part of the human person.
3. The soul is not identical to the human person.

The Essential Part Argument

1. Nothing continues to exist after losing one of its essential parts.
2. At death, the human person loses one of its essential parts.
3. At death, the human person does not continue to exist.

These are by no means the only arguments in favor of corruptionism. But I have picked them because they draw attention to two important aspects of the corruptionist position: first, it is deeply intuitive, as the simplest argument makes clear; second, it is metaphysically robust, as the mereological and essential-parts arguments make clear.

What about survivalism? Why be a survivalist? Here, again, are three arguments:

The Proper Operations Argument

1. Whatever engages in operations proper to a human person is a human person.
2. The separated soul engages in operations proper to a human person (e.g., knowing and loving).
3. The separated soul is a human person.

The Moral Argument

1. The only thing that God punishes for my wickedness and rewards for my good deeds is *me*.
2. God punishes the separated soul for my wickedness and rewards the separated soul for my good deeds.
3. The separated soul is me.

The Intercessory Prayer Argument

1. Only persons can be the agents and objects of intercessory prayer.
2. Separated souls can be the agents and objects of intercessory prayer.
3. Separated souls are persons.

These, again, are by no means the only arguments in favor of survivalism. But, like the basic arguments in favor of corruptionism, these survivalist arguments draw attention to two important points: the first is that the corruptionists do not have a monopoly on metaphysical foundations, as the proper operations argument shows; the second is that the debate also has ethical and ecclesiological ramifications, as the moral and intercessory prayer arguments show.

The third position—which I am calling incompleteness—attempts to split the difference between the corruptionists and the survivalists. Rather than thinking of personhood as binary—that something either *is* or *is not* a person—the incompletenessist holds that personhood is *graded* or comes in degrees. It is possible to be a person *completely*, or *perfectly*, or *simpliciter*,

but it is also possible to be a person *incompletely*, or *imperfectly*, or *secundum quid*. On this view, the corruptionists are right to deny that the separated soul is a person *simpliciter*, but wrong to deny that it is a person *secundum quid*. Likewise, the survivalists are right to affirm that the separated soul is a person *secundum quid*, but wrong to affirm that it is a person *simpliciter*.

So, why prefer incompleteness? Once again, I offer three arguments:

The Inference to the Best Explanation Argument

1. If the hypothesis that the separated soul is an incomplete person best explains what corruptionism and survivalism get right and what they get wrong, then we should adopt the hypothesis that the separated soul is an incomplete person.
2. The hypothesis that the separated soul is an incomplete person does best explain what corruptionism and survivalism get right and what they get wrong.
3. We should adopt the hypothesis that the separated soul is an incomplete person.

The Criteria Argument

1. If the separated soul meets Aquinas's three criteria for being a person, but in an incomplete way, then the separated soul is an incomplete person.
2. The separated soul does meet Aquinas's three criteria for being a person, but in an incomplete way.
3. The separated soul is an incomplete person.

The hoc aliquid Argument

1. If the separated soul is an incomplete *hoc aliquid*, then the separated soul is an incomplete person.
2. The separated soul is an incomplete *hoc aliquid*.
3. The separated soul is an incomplete person.

These arguments in support of incompleteness may have less intuitive force than the arguments in support of corruptionism and survivalism, but what they lack in intuitive force they make up for in nuance and attention to detail. Incompleteness requires the participants in the debate to read Aquinas's *corpus* both widely and carefully, and to draw connections between passages that the survivalists and the corruptionists typically leave unconnected.

So, what position should we adopt? What view should we hold? Should we be corruptionists, or survivalists, or incompletenessists? Before we can answer these questions, there is a bit of ground-clearing and stage-setting that remains to be done. And we will do it the way Aquinas would have wanted: by drawing some distinctions.

Kinds of Questions and Types of Disagreements

One aspect of the contemporary debate over the status of the separated soul that has often been commented upon, but rarely been clarified, is the question of what the debate is actually *about*. That may seem like an obvious place to start, but the fog of war is as real on the intellectual battleground as it is on the physical battleground, and the reality on the ground is that, in this battle, we seem to have a moving target. So, we should try our best to clear the fog of war.

We can start by distinguishing between three kinds of questions and two types of disagreement, the conflation of which only contributes to the confused character of the contemporary debate. The three types of questions I want to distinguish are as follows:

First, we have *exegetical questions*. Exegetical questions usually take the form "Did *x* think *P*?" So, in our case, the exegetical question would be: "Did St. Thomas think that the separated soul is a person?" This is a historical question and its answer involves a close reading of the texts—ideally with minimal commentatorial intervention or deviation from what the thinker actually said.

Second, we have *systematic questions*. Systematic questions usually take the form "Should *x* have thought *P*?" So, in our case, the systematic question would be "Should St. Thomas have thought that the separated soul is a person?" This is something of a mixed, historico-philosophical question, for its answer involves drawing out the implications of a thinker's more basic principles and commitments in order to see whether either the proposition under discussion or its negation is entailed by the principles which he held.

Third, we have *speculative questions*. Speculative questions usually take the

form “Should *we* think *P*?” or “Is *P* true?” So, in our case, the speculative question would be: “Is it true that the separated soul is a person?” This is a purely philosophical question, and like the systematic question, its answer involves drawing out the implications of more basic principles and commitments in order to see whether either the proposition under discussion or its negation is entailed by those principles. But, in the case of speculative questions the principles we start with are adopted because we take them to be true, not because we take them to have been held by some other thinker.

When we consider the application of these question-types to our present topic, it is easy to see why the debate over the status of the separated soul seems to have a moving target. If the answer to the systematic question is “yes” but the answer to the speculative question is “no,” then Aquinas will lead us away from the truth rather than towards it—not a welcome result for the Thomist. Likewise, if the answer to the exegetical question is “yes” but the answer to the systematic question is “no” (or vice-versa), then Aquinas’s thought would be inconsistent—also an unwelcome result for the Thomist. Thomists will be vindicated in their Thomism only if the answers to all three questions align. And so, corruptionists, survivalists, and incompletonists all have a vested interest in showing (a) that Aquinas held their position (or at least that he did not deny it), (b) that their position follows from Aquinas’s more basic commitments (or at least is consistent with them), and (c) that their position is true.

Now that we have distinguished these three kinds of question, I would also like to distinguish two types of *disagreement*, namely, (1) substantive disagreement and (2) verbal disagreement. A disagreement is *verbal* if it is a disagreement over how we use our words or what we mean by the words we use. A disagreement is *substantive* if it is a disagreement over the things meant and referred to by our words.

Suppose, for example, that philosopher *A* and philosopher *B* are engaged in a debate over materialism. If philosopher *A* defines materialism as the view that only material things exist, while philosopher *B* defines it as the view that only material things exist *at the fundamental level*, then their disagreement is verbal—it is a dispute over what we should mean by the word “materialism.” Moreover, it is possible that their disagreement is *merely* verbal. For, if they both think that only material things exist at the fundamental level but that immaterial things exists at some non-fundamental level, then philosopher *B* will say that materialism is true and philosopher *A* will say that materialism is false, even though they both agree about all the facts on the ground. There will be a *substantive* dispute between philosophers *A* and *B* only when they disagree about the relevant facts, such as whether there are only material

things at the fundamental level, or whether there are any immaterial things at the non-fundamental level.

This distinction between substantive and verbal disagreements cuts across our threefold distinction of questions. Thus, we can have verbal and substantive disagreements over exegetical questions; we can have verbal and substantive disagreements over systematic questions; and we can have verbal and substantive disagreements over speculative questions. As we proceed to tackle these three question-types in turn, we should pay attention to the sort of disagreement that is taking place.

The Exegetical Question

Did Aquinas think that the separated soul is a person? Of our three concrete questions, this is the one that strikes me as having the most straightforward answer. It is also the question on which we find the most widespread (though not universal) agreement. All corruptionists, all incompletonists, and even some survivalists admit that, according to Aquinas the separated soul is *not* a person. Nevertheless, to the extent that there *is* disagreement over this question, the disagreement is substantive. I am not aware of any survivalists who take themselves to mean something different when they assert “Aquinas thought that the separated soul is a person” from what corruptionists mean when they deny it.

So, what did Aquinas think? The definitive text, from this exegetical point of view, can be found in Aquinas’s commentary on the First Letter to the Corinthians. Aquinas interprets St. Paul’s claim that “if we have hope in Christ only in this life, then we are the most miserable of all men” (15:19) as part of an argument for the resurrection. The argument goes like this: if the Corinthians’ hope is not a hope in the resurrection, then they will be the most miserable of all men; but if they are the most miserable of all men, then their faith is in vain; thus, if there is no resurrection, the Corinthians’ faith is in vain.⁴

But Aquinas thinks there is an obvious objection to this argument: resurrection is not required to render the sufferings that Christians undergo in this life worthwhile. All we need, Aquinas’s imagined objector argues, is the guarantee that our souls will experience bliss after death.⁵ As long as my soul enjoys the vision and love of God forever, any pain or suffering that I undergo in this life will be worth it—regardless of resurrection.

⁴ Thomas, Aquinas, *Super I Cor* 15, lec. 2, no. 923.

⁵ *Super I Cor* 15, lec. 2, no. 924.

Aquinas's reply goes like this:

Man naturally desires *his own* salvation. But the soul, since it is a part of the man, is not the whole man; and I am not my soul. Thus, even though *the soul* attains salvation in the afterlife, nevertheless *I*—or any man—do not.⁶

In the face of passages such as these, the standard exegetical move on the part of the survivalist is to distinguish between identity and constitution. They will grant that the separated soul is not *identical* to the person, but nevertheless insist that it does *constitute* the person. The idea is that, in this present life, I am constituted by the union of my body and my soul. After death but prior to resurrection, I will be constituted by my soul alone. And finally, upon resurrection, I will once again be constituted by body and soul together.

This interpretive strategy does work to undermine the corruptionist interpretation of other passages in Aquinas's *corpus*.⁷ But it does not work here. The reason is because the thing doing the argumentative work in this passage is not the non-*identity* of the separated soul and the person, but rather the fact that the bliss experienced by my separated soul is not *my own*. If survivalism were true and my separated soul *were* to constitute my person, then its bliss *would* be my own. That is the whole point of the "moral argument" for survivalism. But it is precisely this point that Aquinas denies.

This passage also poses an exegetical problem for incompleteness. For, Aquinas does not say that I am *incompletely* my soul, or that I am only my soul *secundum quid*; he simply says that I am not my soul. More importantly, if incompleteness were true, then my soul's postmortem bliss would nevertheless be *my* postmortem bliss—even if we had to qualify that claim with the word "incompletely." Perhaps the incompletenessist could interpret Aquinas's argument as saying that it is the *complete* person who desires his own salvation, but the soul is not the *complete* person, and so the salvation of the soul is insufficient for the salvation of the *complete* person. But the

⁶ *Super I Cor* 15, lec. 2, no. 924: "Alio modo quia constat quod homo naturaliter desiderat salutem sui ipsius, anima autem cum sit pars **corporis** hominis, non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego; unde licet anima consequatur salutem in alia vita, non tamen ego vel quilibet homo" (emphasis added in English trans.). Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. I have omitted the *corporis* following *pars* and preceding *hominis* in my translation, since I take it to be a textual error—perhaps due to the appearance of *corporis* in the next sentence. Aquinas does not think that the soul is a part of the body. Rather, he thinks that the soul and the body are both parts of the man.

⁷ See, for example, *In III sent.*, d. 5, q. 3, a. 2, corp.; *In IV sent.*, d. 43, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 1, ad 2; *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 2, obj. and ad 14; *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1, obj. and ad 5.

danger of eisegesis with such a reading is strong, and I find it unsurprising that most incompletionists have simply granted the exegetical point to the corruptionists.⁸ So, at least with respect to our first question, the laurel goes to corruptionism.

The Systematic Question

Regardless of whether Aquinas *did* think that the separated soul is a person, we can still ask whether he *should* have thought that the separated soul is a person. In other words, is the personhood of the separated soul entailed by his more basic philosophical and theological commitments?

Among survivalists, there is a diversity of opinion. Most, like Eleonore Stump and James Dominic Rooney, think that the answer to this systematic question is “yes.” They claim, for example, that Aquinas’s commitment to the truth of biblical passages like the parable of Dives and Lazarus entails that the separated souls of those two people are—or at least *constitute*—those two people. Otherwise, we could make no sense of the parable.⁹ When faced with the charge that this would render Aquinas’s thought inconsistent (for it would make the answer to the systematic question “yes” when the answer to the exegetical question is “no”), they either respond as Stump does, by doubling-down on the exegetical point and insisting that, *pace* all appearances, Aquinas *was* a survivalist, or they respond as Rooney does, by saying that the disagreement is merely verbal: when Aquinas denied that the separated soul is a person, he was using “person” in a technical, metaphysically perspicuous sense, but when survivalists affirm that his more basic principles entail survivalism, they are using “person” in an ordinary, metaphysically non-perspicuous sense.¹⁰ There are, however, other survivalists, like Mark Spencer, who think that the answer to the systematic question is “no.” According to Spencer, *some* of Aquinas’s basic commitments are compatible with survivalism, but *others* are not. Spencer does not, however, think that this makes survivalism un-Thomistic. Rather, he thinks that survivalism will be Thomistic *to the extent* that it adopts the principles held by Aquinas that *are* compatible with survivalism.¹¹ By way of summary, then, we can say that *some* survivalists think there is no tension between the answers to the

⁸ E.g.: De Haan and Dahm, “Thomas Aquinas on Separated Souls,” 632: “. . . concede that the exegetical case for corruptionism is indestructible.”

⁹ See, e.g., Rooney, “Survivalism,” 355–57.

¹⁰ See Rooney, “Survivalism,” 355.

¹¹ See Spencer, “Survivalist, Platonist, Thomistic Hylomorphism” (throughout).

exegetical and systematic questions, *some* survivalists think there is merely verbal tension, and *some* survivalists concede that the tension is substantive.

Among corruptionists, the answer to the systematic question is far simpler: “no.” According to them, Aquinas should *not* have thought that the separated soul is a person, given his more basic commitments. When survivalists appeal to texts like the parable of Dives and Lazarus, corruptionists respond by appealing to Aquinas’s practice of “synecdoche”—the exchanging of names between parts and wholes.¹² Thus, even though St. Peter’s separated soul is not really St. Peter, we can and do call it “St. Peter” because it was the most important and noble part of him when he was alive. Likewise, in response to the moral argument, corruptionists maintain that the punishment or reward of the soul for the deeds of the person is perfectly consistent with Aquinas’s general theory of reward and punishment. As his treatment of original sin makes clear, Aquinas thinks that persons can be, and are, justly penalized for sins they have not committed.¹³ A fortiori, an enduring *part* of a person can be justly penalized for the sins of that person. As such, all corruptionists hold that there is no tension between their answers to the exegetical and systematic questions.

To my mind, however, the most interesting development with respect to the systematic question is the challenge posed to corruptionism by Daniel De Haan and Brandon Dahm, the leading incompletionists. Their challenge is simple: they want to see corruptionists give a full metaphysical account of the separated soul that is both true to Aquinas’s principles and substantively different from that of the incompletionists. The reason they throw down this gauntlet is because they are convinced that any authentically Thomistic account of the separated soul must be one that acknowledges *in fact*—even if not in name—the reality of incomplete persons.

Why are they so confident? De Haan and Dahm begin their argument for incompletionism by identifying what they take to be Aquinas’s three core criteria for personhood: (1) subsistence, (2) rationality, and (3) completeness. They then go on to identify five relevant kinds of completeness: operational completeness, existential completeness, formal completeness, suppositional completeness, and essential completeness. The *subsistence criterion* requires the person to be a *hoc aliquid*, a concrete individual that neither has its being in another nor is predicated of another; the *rationality criterion* specifies that

¹² See, e.g., Toner, “Personhood and Death,” 123–27, and Nevitt, “Aquinas on the Death of Christ,” 85–86, 97–98. For texts in which Aquinas explicitly invokes this principle, see *In III sent.*, d. 11, q. 1, a. 3, corp.; *De veritate*, q. 13, a. 5, ad 3; *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 9, ad 1; *ST I*, q. 118, a. 2, ad 1; II-II, q. 175, a. 6, ad 1; III, q. 75, a. 8, corp.

¹³ See, e.g., *ST I-II*, q. 87, a. 7, corp.

this *hoc aliquid* must have a rational nature; *operational completeness* requires that it be able to engage in non-defective activities; *existential completeness* requires that it be existentially independent; *formal completeness* requires that it possess its proper formal principle; *suppositional completeness* requires that it be the proper subject of accidents; and *essential completeness* requires that it possess a complete nature.

Armed with these criteria, De Haan and Dahm then take metaphysical stock of the separated soul. As they rightly point out, no separated soul is ever *just* a separated soul. Each one is an immaterial form that stands in a nested series of act–potency composition relations: first with its proper *actus essendi*, then with accidental qualities like intellect and will, and finally with proper operations like knowing and loving. Since the separated soul is a *hoc aliquid*, it satisfies the subsistence criterion. Since rational operations are proper to it, it satisfies the rationality criterion. Since it can engage in perfect acts of knowing and loving, it has operational completeness. Since it exists through itself, it has existential completeness. Since it lacks matter but not form, it has formal completeness. And since it is the subject of accidents, it has suppositional completeness. The only point on which it falls short, then, is essential completeness—for the separated soul is not in possession of the complete nature proper to it. Thus, the separated soul completely satisfies criteria (1) and (2), and incompletely satisfies criterion (3). Thus, De Haan and Dahm hold that Aquinas’s principles make room for—even require—what can justly be called “incomplete persons.” And any Thomist who denies this will either be quibbling about words or substantively departing from some aspect of Aquinas’s metaphysics.

Thus far, no corruptionists have picked up the gauntlet thrown down by the incompletenessists. I will be the first.

I have three objections to De Haan and Dahm. The first is that they have cooked the books, insofar as their list of criteria for personhood is both redundant and arbitrary. Moreover, it is redundant and arbitrary in precisely the way that it needs to be for the separated soul to “score high,” so to speak, on a measure of personhood. We can start with the redundancies. What De Haan and Dahm call existential, suppositional, and formal completeness—all of which they attribute to the separated soul as marks in favor of its high degree of personhood—are cases of double-counting. This is because existential and suppositional completeness are already part of the subsistence criterion, while formal completeness is part of essential completeness. When we get rid of these redundancies, the result is a “minus three” on the separated soul’s scorecard.

Furthermore, their list of criteria is *arbitrary*. This is because there are

other perfectly plausible measures of completeness that they have left out of consideration. For example, if we are going to include formal completeness, why not also include material completeness, such that a thing is materially complete if and only if it has all the elements of its proximate or proper matter? Likewise, if we include a sense of “operational completeness” that focuses on act *tokens*, why should we not also include a sense of “operational completeness” that focuses on act *types*, such that a thing will have type-operational completeness if and only if it can engage in all the various *kinds* of actions characteristic of its proper nature. If we included material completeness and type-operational completeness in our measure of personhood, that would mean a “minus two” for the separated soul.

The apparent clarity of De Haan and Dahm’s list of criteria, then, might be functioning like a moment of misdirection in a magic trick. Aquinas never gives an itemized list of criteria for personhood—and he certainly does not give their itemized list of criteria for personhood. What Aquinas *does* do is clarify and defend Boethius’s definition of “person” as “an individual substance of a rational nature.” And when he does so, he makes it clear that the separated soul is not an individual substance:

The soul is a part of the species of man; thus, even if it were separated it could not be called “an individual substance” (i.e., a hypostasis or primary substance), since it would still retain the nature of being able to be united [with the body]—likewise, neither a hand nor any other part of the man [is called “an individual substance”]. As such, neither the definition nor the term of “person” belongs to it.¹⁴

De Haan and Dahm will surely reply by interpreting Aquinas as saying that the separated soul fails to satisfy the completeness criterion with respect to essential completeness, and so cannot be called a *complete* person. But that is not what Aquinas says. What he says is that the separated soul does not satisfy the definition of “person,” and that it fails to do so precisely because it is not an individual substance. To shift our attention away from what Aquinas says and focus it instead on how the separated soul subsists and the kinds of completeness that it *does* have is simply to turn our attention away from what matters.

That is a first objection. Here is a second: suppose, for the sake of argument, that the incompleteness criteria are correct. Suppose, too, that, if something fails to satisfy those criteria perfectly, then it will not be a *complete*

¹⁴ ST I, q. 29, a. 1, ad 5.

person, but if it is able to satisfy them *imperfectly*, then it will be an *incomplete* person. Granting all this, the incompletionists still have not given us a principle for determining what degree of perfection or criteria-satisfaction is required for incomplete personhood. My power of reason satisfies some of their criteria. My hand satisfies others. But I presume that no incompletionist would want to call either my power of reason or my hand an incomplete person. And if that is correct, then incompletionism is doomed to be ad hoc. Why should we think that *some* of the things that partially satisfy the definition of “person” are incomplete persons, while other things that partially satisfy the definition of “person” are not? There is no principled reason for making such a distinction. Moreover, I see no reason to think that this ad hoc view follows from Aquinas’s more basic principles.

Here is a final objection. Suppose the criteria are correct. Suppose, too, that we ignore all the items that fulfill fewer of the criteria than the separated soul. There is still a counter-example: Christ’s human nature subsists, is rational, has operations proper to it, is not existentially dependent in the manner of an accident or a part, and is both formally and essentially complete. The only thing it lacks is the completeness characteristic of a supposit.¹⁵ And so, it has as much (if not more) of a right to be counted as an incomplete person than the separated soul does. But that means that incompletionism entails semi-Nestorianism, for it entails that in Christ there is a *complete* divine person and an *incomplete* human person. Speaking for myself, I do not think semi-Nestorianism follows from Aquinas’s more basic philosophical and theological commitments. And thus, I also do not think incompletionism follows from Aquinas’s more basic philosophical and theological commitments.

Before moving on to the speculative question, I would like to address one final point regarding this debate between incompletionists and corruptionists over the systematic question. It has to do with the *kind* of debate that we have been having. One might think that it is a merely verbal dispute: where Aquinas had just one term, “person,” the incompletionists introduced two terms, “complete person” (corresponding to Aquinas’s “person”) and “incomplete person” (corresponding to a set of things that Aquinas did

¹⁵ For purely dialectical purposes, I am here granting the incompletionists the distinction between the subsistence criterion and suppositional completeness, even though as a matter of fact I think this distinction collapses (see my first objection). If the distinction were to be maintained, then the way to do it would be to say that anything that subsists (e.g., both primary substantial wholes and primary substantial parts) satisfies the subsistence criterion, but only some of those things (e.g., primary substantial wholes and separated souls) have suppositional completeness.

not have a word for); then, on behalf of the corruptionists, I critiqued the notion of “incomplete person” for being inadequate *as a bit of ideology*. But, when it comes to the metaphysical facts on the ground, the two parties are in agreement.

Though plausible, I think this interpretation of the dispute is wrong. The disagreement is not merely over whether the notion “incomplete person” is coherent, or adequately defined, or metaphysically useful. The disagreement is over whether the notion “incomplete person” carves nature at the joints. Does it elucidate and illuminate an irreducible part of Aquinas’s ontology, or does it rather encourage us to think of a *per accidens* collection of items as if they were *per se* unified, and to attribute to things in the world properties that they do not possess? I think the answer is the latter.

Lurking behind that judgment is a further suspicion: I suspect that there is a substantive difference between incompletionists and corruptionists with respect to how we understand Aquinas’s metaphysics of essence. The judgment that something can be operationally, existentially, formally, and suppositally complete while nevertheless being essentially *incomplete* strikes me as a dangerous depreciation of the central role played by essence in Thomas’s metaphysics. In contrast, I am inclined to say that essential incompleteness will entail a sort of operational, existential, and supposital incompleteness, since operation follows being and being follows essence. Insofar as the essence is “that in which and through which a being has being,” any change in *modus essentiae* will result in a corresponding change in *modus essendi*, which in turn will result in a corresponding change in *modus suppositi*, which in turn will affect the kinds of operations a supposit can engage in. But whether or not a change in essence has this cascading effect is a substantive matter of metaphysics, not a verbal issue in semantics.

The Speculative Question

Regardless of whether *Aquinas* should have thought that the separated soul is a person, should *we* think that the separated soul is a person? Is it *true* that the separated soul is a person?

Of our three questions, I think this one is the hardest to answer. It is hard to answer not only because, as we saw in the first section, there are plausible arguments supporting each of the three core positions, but also because each position comes with a bullet to bite and a bitter pill to swallow. That is something that everyone involved in the debate needs to be upfront and honest about. No matter where we pitch our tents, and no matter how good we may think our reasons are for taking the sides that we do, we should not

delude ourselves into thinking that we can leave the fray unscathed. Victory comes with a cost.

So, what are the costs that each side has to pay, the bullets that each side has to bite, the bitter pills that each side has to swallow?

In the case of corruptionism, I think it is the intellectual and affective reprogramming—or revision—that the position requires of its adherents. Every time I turn to a saint in prayer, every time I look forward to the beatific vision, every time I offer mass for a deceased relative, I have to do so with a little asterisk attached. Because it is not *really* the saint that I am turning to—it is just a part of the saint; it is not *really* me who will experience the beatific vision after I die and before I rise—it is just a part of me; it is not *really* my relative that I am offering mass for—it is just their soul. And I think any corruptionist who is not caught up in a breathtaking exercise in self-deception will have to admit that *that feels wrong*—even if we think it is right.

In the case of survivalism, the bullet we have to bite is death. When I grieve the loss of a loved one, the grief I experience is categorically different from the sorrow of saying goodbye—even when I know that I will never see the other person again. Likewise, when I experience dread in the face of death, that dread is categorically different from the fear I experience in the face of, say, an amputation. It is an *existential* angst, and we call it that for a reason. But if I am a survivalist, I have to say that this phenomenology is misleading, for I have to say that the precise thing I fear and grieve is impossible. Death is simply not as bad as I take it to be—even if it is still bad. And I think that any survivalist who is not caught up in a breathtaking exercise in self-deception will have to admit that *that feels wrong*—even if we think it is right.

In the case of incompleteness, the bitter pill is *me*. In all my ups and downs, all my trials and triumphs, all my rises and falls, the one unchanging constant is *me*. I can lose my hand to an accident, my heart to a girl, my cool to an insult, my confidence to criticism, and my memory to old age; but what I *cannot* do is lose my *self*. If I am an incompletenessist, however, I have to give up my confidence in those claims. For it turns out that *I* can be both complete and incomplete—not just in my parts, not just in my principles, not just in my properties, but in my very *person*. And I think that any incompletenessist who is not caught up in a breathtaking exercise in self-deception will have to admit that *that feels wrong*—even if we think it is right.

It is, I think, that feeling of wrongness that lies behind Spencer's core critique of De Haan and Dahm's incompletenessism. "The real debate," Spencer says,

is not over whether the *anima separata* meets technical criteria for being a person. The real problem is over whether *I* have naturally knowable reasons to hold that *I* will survive death. . . . What I most want to know is whether *I* in the sense of this person—this unique, incommunicable, and irreducible whole, this most perfect thing in nature—will survive death.¹⁶

That is, indeed, the question. And its answer is “no.” I cannot be *who* I am without being *what* I am. And *what* I am is not my soul. Thus, as Aquinas said so long ago, “I am not my soul.”

Spencer disagrees. Severing the necessary connection between essence and person, he advocates a partly Thomistic, partly Platonic metaphysics according to which it is *natural* for persons to have different essences at different times—that is, to hold their essences contingently. He does so in part for theological reasons, in part for phenomenological reasons, and in part to avoid having to add an asterisk to his prayers.

For *my* part, I am willing to accept the asterisk. It is simply *not* natural for the essence of something—let alone the essence of a *person*—to change. Essences are not naturally contingent. And I am willing to revise my attitudes toward the dead to preserve that central metaphysical truth.

I also think that, of the three bitter pills, this is the one that is easiest to swallow. If we have to pick between (1) getting our attitudes toward souls in the afterlife wrong, (2) getting the badness of death in this life wrong, and (3) getting the irreducibility of our personhood in either life wrong, then choosing (1) is the best option. That is because answering the question of whether the separated soul is a person requires us to speculate up to and beyond the limits of what is naturally knowable. The veil of death has, indeed, been torn open by the resurrection of Christ, but it has not yet been fully parted. Thus, even when viewed under the light of revelation, what lies *beyond* the veil remains obscure. It remains a mystery.

I do want to treat the souls of the dead as persons. I cannot help but think of them *as if* they were persons. But I also think this might simply be because my heart and my head are reaching out to realities they cannot yet touch—reaching into realms they cannot yet enter—and in so doing are getting caught in the tangle of a tattered veil that has yet to fully fall. If I have to choose between making a mistake about things that are better-known in this world or dimly-known in the next, I will choose to get the better-known right every time. Because *this* I know for certain: small mistakes on this side of the veil can lead to big ones on the other. N.V.

¹⁶ Spencer, “Survivalist, Platonist, Thomistic Hylomorphism,” 182–83.