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## Revisiting Joseph Novak's Critique of Aquinas' Incorruptibility of the Soul

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### Abstract

Central to St. Thomas Aquinas' metaphysical doctrine is the question of human soul. While making effort with a view to interpreting and understanding Aquinas' account of human soul, several scholars and commentators have held divergent views as to what Aquinas really meant. One common interpretation by some commentators such as Patrick Aspell and Anthony Kenny is that Aquinas seems to hold a monistic view in his account of human soul with an Aristotelian pedigree. The other is that Aquinas seems to adopt a dualistic view on the ontological operation of human soul which embraced platonic heritage. Thus, due to Aquinas' inconsistency coupled with interpretational problem that bedeviled his works, several fallacies were associated to his treatise of the incorruptibility of human soul. For instance, Robert Pasnau accused Aquinas for committing what he called "content fallacy"<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, in Joseph Novak's analysis of Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* where he defended incorruptibility of human soul, Aquinas was charged with the "fallacy of equivocation". The main concern of this paper is to examine Joseph Novak's view on the Aquinas incorruptibility of the soul with the aim of showing whether Aquinas was guilty of the fallacy that Novak accused him of committing or not.

### Introduction/ Background

Right from the time of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the question of hylemorphism (a philosophical doctrine that conceives human being as a compound of matter/body and form/soul) has become a matter of serious discussion for thinkers and scholars. It claims that after death that the soul survives. Tracing the history from Aristotle to the modern time, the question of the incorruptibility (indestructibility) of the soul is not a novel one. People who are conversant with the history of philosophy will accept that one of the aspects of Aquinas' works which distinguishes him from other scholars is defense of the incorruptibility of the soul. Aquinas' analysis stands in-between the ancient views and the modern views on this subject matter. In fact, Novak argued that, if

Aquinas' argument for the soul's incorruptibility is correct, then the standard picture of Aquinas' relation to modern philosophy must be altered.<sup>2</sup> Novak argued this way because, for him, one must come to see Aquinas as a scholar who paved the way for later traffic in epistemology and even philosophy of mind which made modern philosophy to find its roots in the transformed Aristotelian approach of Aquinas. Thus, the adoption of Aristotelianism by men like Aquinas in the thirteenth century involved the critical re-thinking of the philosophy of Aristotle in such a way that an imposing synthesis of theology and philosophy resulted in many of his works.

The paper is divided into four main sections. First section is devoted to the exposition on the background to the discussion of the subject matter. Section two focuses of the Aquinas' arguments in defense of the incorruptibility of human soul. The third section discusses Joseph Novak's criticism of Aquinas' incorruptibility of human soul. Meanwhile, the fourth section assesses Novak's account/interpretation of Aquinas in order to show whether he really committed the fallacy of equivocation with which he was charged.

### **What Is The Issue?**

Before providing a detailed analysis of Aquinas' discussion of the incorruptibility of the soul, it is pertinent to examine the issues that surround this discussion. Focusing on the ontological nature of the soul, one fundamental question that comes to mind is, "Is human soul a material substance or immaterial substance?" For a dualist like Plato, human soul is purely immaterial, separate and distinct from the body. Thus, treating human soul in this regard had already shown that the soul cannot disintegrate or be corrupted with the body since it is believed that body and soul are two different entities that make up human being. Meanwhile, on the contrary, a philosopher like Aristotle believed that a soul is a subsistence part of human substance. Thus, the soul is an integral part of human substance. Now, the problem that anybody who is holding Aristotelian view is likely going to encounter is on the question of how to defend the view that the soul does not disintegrate with the body.

Focusing on Aquinas' views on the incorruptibility of the soul, Aquinas claim to be a thoroughgoing Aristotelian, yet his works have platonic heritage. Aquinas argument is that 'human soul is not subject to corruption upon the dissolution of the compound.'<sup>3</sup> In other words, the soul does not die with the body. Chapter 79 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* presented a brief summary of Aquinas argument in defense of the incorruptibility of the soul. Aquinas mainly gave preference to Aristotle's hylomorphic theory of man to the Platonic-Augustinian view of the soul using the body. Here are some arguments that Aquinas presented to support the incorruptibility of the soul.

### **Aquinas' Arguments in Defense of the Incorruptibility of the Soul**

Aquinas presented some proofs to establish the incorruptibility of the soul. How did he present the proofs? And what are his arguments adduced to support this claim? Aquinas' argument can be formulated in this syllogistic pattern.

- (a.)      whatever is *per se* subsistent is indestructible  
            The human soul is *per se* subsistent  
            Therefore: The human soul is indestructible (and therefore, incorruptible).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Aquinas' argument is that the nature of the existence of human soul is such that it is *per se* subsistent. In other words, human soul is such that it can exist by itself. The argument now boils down to the fact that whatever that is self-existent is indestructible due to the fact that it does not owe its existence to the existence of something else. This can be interpreted to mean that this argument that Aquinas advanced to support the incorruptibility of the soul tallies with the Pythagoreans transmigration of the soul where it was established that the soul does not die with the body because the soul is self-existence. Following Aspell's interpretation of Aquinas, Aspell argues that since the intellectual soul "has its own activity in which the body takes no intrinsic part," apprehending "objects universal and incorruptible as such," it must be subsistent and incorruptible.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas also presented the second argument thus:

- (b.)      Every intellectual substance is incorruptible  
            The soul of man is a certain intellectual substance.  
            Therefore: The human soul is incorruptible.<sup>6</sup>

Going by the activities and the nature of human soul, it is believed that human soul is an intellectual substance. Scholars had earlier identified the employment of this connection to the works of Plato even long before the time of Aquinas. In *Phaedo*, to be precise, Plato had argued that the soul was unchanging like the Forms it knew and therefore it too was eternal.<sup>7</sup> Plato's argument can also be presented in a form of syllogism:

- Human soul is unchanging  
Anything that is unchanging is eternal  
Therefore, human soul is eternal.

What Plato's point which Aquinas inherited drives at is that anything that is eternal is incorruptible. Human soul is eternal. Therefore, human soul is incorruptible.

- (c.) Another proof by Aquinas is that whatever is received in something is received in it according to the manner of the thing in which it is. The forms of things, however, are received in the possible intellect according as they are actually intelligible. However, they are actually intelligible to the extent that they are immaterial, universal, and consequently incorruptible. Therefore, the possible intellect is incorruptible.<sup>8</sup> The argument was schematized as follows:

Immaterial universals (forms, ideas) are received by an immaterial, cognitive power.

Mind receives immaterial universals.

Therefore: Mind is an immaterial cognitive power and therefore incorruptible.<sup>9</sup>

One major point raised by Aquinas in support of his claim is that, if immaterial entities are not destructible, the characteristic of incorruptibility should follow directly upon immateriality, for if matter is the principle of corruption as he holds in *Summa Theologiae* 1.104.4.co<sup>10</sup> something without matter is incorruptible. To put Aquinas' argument in a better perspective following the way he stated it, if something is incorruptible, then there is no potency for non-being, since matter is the principle of corruption in a thing. Analogously, one can argue from the divisibility of an object to its corruptibility. If something has no parts, it would be incapable of dissolution.

In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas also raises certain argument by analogy in support of the incorruptibility of the soul. For Aquinas,

The truth of intelligible, just as it is incorruptible, so, as concerns its own nature is eternal. This is because it is necessary and whatever is necessary is eternal... from the incorruptibility of intelligible truth the soul is shown to be incorruptible according to being. Therefore by similar reasoning from its [truth's] eternity the eternity of the soul is able to be demonstrated.<sup>11</sup>

The above argument may be putting Aquinas analysis into a tight corner in the sense that the necessity of the intelligible truth is not sufficient to establish the incorruptibility of the soul. Besides, it is not obvious whether there are no human beings whose souls could not apprehend eternal truth. If there is at least one human being whose soul could not apprehend intelligible truth, then Aquinas argument will be false.

### **Novak's Criticisms of the Aquinas Incorruptibility of the Soul**

The leading idea in Joseph Novak's criticism is that Aquinas committed the 'fallacy of equivocation'<sup>12</sup> in his theorizing on the rational soul which is the human soul. Thus, Novak identified three main expressions with multiple meanings which Aquinas used in an ambiguous manner when presenting his arguments in establishing the incorruptibility of the soul without stating the proper sense in which he used those terms. The terms referred to are: "forms of things", "universal" and "immaterial." Given that these three key terms formed the foundation upon which Aquinas rests his argument on the incorruptibility of the soul, Novak concluded that it is the absence of proper clarification of these terms that brought confusion and lack of clarity into the works of Aquinas on human soul. For instance, describing soul in terms of 'form of a thing' is

ambiguous in the sense that, form of a thing could be subject to multiple interpretations depending on the sense in which you want to use it. In the first place, the *forms* can be understood in the; [1] ‘Platonic sense of transcendent non-material entities’. Or, [2] they can be understood in ‘Aristotelian sense of species as natural kinds’. The problem that Novak noted against Aquinas is that, if the forms are understood in either of the two ways, the statement that the forms are incorruptible that Aquinas mentioned in the proof of the incorruptibility of the soul receives a ready interpretation. The former sense (platonic sense) is obviously not a viable option since the Aristotelian-Thomistic does not endorse a Platonist epistemology.<sup>13</sup> The second terminology which could also be interpreted in various ways is the term ‘immaterial’.

In the first sense, a thing is said to be immaterial if and only if it is a non-physical object which exists in an extra-mental or non-cognitive way. For Aquinas, God, angels, and human souls are immaterial. In the second sense, a thing would be said to be immaterial if and only if it exists without particularizing physical conditions in a cognitive way.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, from the above interpretation, Aquinas has committed the fallacy of equivocation because he did not specify the sense(s) in which the term ‘immaterial’ was used in his proof for the incorruptibility of the soul. So far, are the arguments presented by Novak against Aquinas really tenable or not? The next section attempts to address this question.

### **Is Aquinas really consistent?**

In assessing Aquinas’ view on the fallacy of equivocation charged against him by Joseph Novak, three important questions are inevitable here. First, is Aquinas really consistent? If the answer is yes, then, he did not commit the fallacy. But if the answer is no, it will then be obvious that he committed the fallacy. At the same time, can we really say that Novak’s interpretation is wholly right? If no, where did he get it wrong since one cannot foreclose the possibility of misinterpretation? Precise answers to the above questions will help us to do justice to this aspect of the paper. From a logical point of view, equivocation is classified as a formal fallacy. It means a misleading use of a term or a word with more than one meaning or sense. Thus, from all indications as presented in Novak’s analysis, Aquinas rightly committed this fallacy of equivocation because for the following reasons. First, he was not consistent in the use of the terms he employed in his analysis on human soul. Second, he confuses the usage of some of the key terms which he employed to form the basis of his defense of the incorruptibility of the soul. This brought lack of clarity to his works. Novak restated Aquinas argument in this manner:

- “1). Whatever is received in something is received according to the mode of the receiver.
- 2). Intellect (mind) is a power of the soul.
- 3). Mind is the receiver of forms.
- 4). Forms are received in the mind as they are actually intelligible.
- 5). Forms as they are actually intelligible (ideas) are immaterial.<sub>2</sub>
- 6). Ideas are received in the mind as they are immaterial<sub>2</sub>.
- 7). The mode of existence of the mind is, then, immaterial<sub>1</sub>.
- 8). What is immaterial<sub>1</sub> is incorruptible.
- 9). The mind is incorruptible.
- 10). The soul is incorruptible.”<sup>15</sup>

According to Novak, the problem with the proof should now be obvious. Aquinas has committed an equivocation: because step 6 and 7 contain two different senses of the term ‘immaterial’.<sup>16</sup> To put the point straight, Aquinas confuses the usage of the term ‘immaterial’ in his argument because the sense(s) in which he used the term was not clearly specified.

The point may be made clearer by considering this view. One problem embedded in Aquinas work is the difficulty he faced in explaining how the soul could be the single substantial form of the body and depend upon sense experience for the performance of intellectual functions without sacrificing its substance and immortality due to its incorruptibility nature. Nevertheless, it is true that Aquinas attempted to respond to this charge. In his response according to McLean and Aspell,

Aquinas reasoned that something is corruptible either by itself (*per se*) or accidentally through the corruption of something else on which it depends for existence. But neither of these alternatives is true of the rational soul as analysis of its activities shows it to be a spiritual and subsistent form. Whereas, the soul of the brute whose sensory powers are determined by a specific bodily object indicates that it is subject to material conditions, the rational soul, which can abstract and universalize the nature of all bodies, shows to be spiritual form.<sup>17</sup>

Having established this distinction, one may be right to conclude that Aquinas was guilty of inconsistency in his analysis of human soul. As a matter of fact, a cursory look at the above quotation suggests<sup>18</sup> that substantial forms are not abstract entities, and that every substantial form, not only human souls, contain element of concreteness on which Aquinas builds his theory of the soul’s subsistence. The attendant problem for Aquinas now is the problem of holding a

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hybrid view of human soul as noted by Anthony Kenny because ‘nothing can be both abstract and concrete at the same time’.

Furthermore, in Aquinas’ view, man as the subject of knowing is a hylemorphic composite (i.e man is a compound of matter and form), he thus argued that individual form or soul is not subject to corruption upon the dissolution of the compound. In fact, Aquinas accepted the Aristotelian doctrine that the soul is the form of the body. However, the problem with this view is that it stands in contrast or contravenes the metaphysical rule which holds that “to be a form is to be enmattered”<sup>19</sup>. Questions are sometimes raised in respect to whether Aquinas’s Aristotelian commentaries furnish good evidence regarding Aquinas’s own views. This is reasonably so because of the Aquinas’s new way of understanding Aristotle. For Robert Pasmau, when Aquinas is engaging in line-by-line exposition of the Aristotle’s texts then one has to be very cautious. But when Aquinas interrupts his literal commentary to raise special philosophical questions, one can with confidence treat the view expressed by Aquinas as his own view.<sup>20</sup>

However, an ardent supporter or a loyalist to Aquinas may want to defend Aquinas that he may not have committed this fallacy until we are able to clarify these fundamental questions. First, is the problem about the incorruptibility of the soul a linguistic problem or an ontological problem? ...it may be argued that if the problem is properly discussed through reference to the facts to existing thing, this will be purely an ontological problem which will not involve such fallacy. But the occasion where the fallacy of equivocation can said to be committed is when the problem is about the use of language where one view could be confused for another. I want to argue in my own view that whichever way we may be looking at it, the crucial point is that the fallacy was committed because the question of existence is involved in such a way that it shows the absurd consequences which follow from confusing logical problem with ontological problem. And in other words, there is a way in which semantic problem can lead to metaphysical misconception.

The same fallacy of equivocation also occurs in Aquinas work as Copleston actually presented it. For Copleston,

It has been pointed out that Thomas accepted the Aristotelian doctrine that the soul is the form of the body. It is the one rational soul of man which makes the human body a human body, and which is the principle of its vital functions and of sensation. But once given this conception of relation of the soul to body, it might seem that a grave difficulty arises in regard to immortality. If the soul is naturally the form of the body, must it not perish at death?<sup>21</sup>

The problem with the above quotation is that, the sense in which Aquinas uses the word 'form' here is not clear and thus marred the presentation of his argument. One sense of interpreting it is to see it as a structure of the body. Another sense is to interpret it as the likeness/image of the body. If the form of a thing is considered as its structure, then logically, the form of such a thing will perish with the thing. For instance, if we take the form of a table to be its structure, then the structure of a table which is its form is bound to perish with the table upon dissolution. But on the other hand, if a form of a table is seen as its likeness/image, the form will not be destroyed upon the dissolution of the table. It is obvious that forms being incorruptible or even 'eternal' is more essential to this reading of Aquinas. Joseph Novak as well specify other three possible senses which can be given for the 'forms of a things' when they are considered as pertaining to this mental order. "1) The forms of things could be objects of minds. 2) Dispositions in the mind. 3) Acts of knowing."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the fact that Aquinas did not specify the sense in which the form was used here amount to a misleading usage of a term which is a pointer to the fallacy of equivocation.

Although, Aquinas attempted response to defend the view that the soul does not die with the body, but his account is not strong enough to do away with Novak's accusation of the fallacy of equivocation. Thus, Aquinas view is not strong enough to guarantee the philosophical coherence of his genuinely Thomistic view according to which a soul which is essentially a form can persist without the body. In Copleston's explanation,

St. Thomas answers that the rational soul, although the form of the body, must be a spiritual or immaterial form. That it transcends matter can be known by an inspection of its activities; for it is capable of knowing all kinds of bodies and is not confined to a restricted field in the same way that the power of vision is confined to the perception of the objects as coloured. The mind can know material essences, and it can, in addition, reflect on itself. It must therefore be immaterial.<sup>23</sup>

The problem with the above view is that, if the soul is capable of cognition and intellectual activities, and yet retain its identity as the form of the body, what kind of form will it be? Or given the polysemic nature of the *form*, what kind of form will Aquinas be referring to?

Since Forms are parts of substances and not themselves full-blown substances, when they survive the dissolution of the body which they once informed, they do not thereby lose their status as forms insofar as they retain their natural inclination toward union with matter - which Aquinas calls a form's "nature of unibility"<sup>24</sup>

To rescue Aquinas from possible misinterpretations in the hand of commentators in which Novak was one, Eduardo Zachia commented on the above view that,

When Aquinas says that the soul is essentially the form of a body he does not mean that in each and every instant during which it exists a soul has to be in a state of actuality with regard to informing some parcel of matter. Just like being a builder does not entail the uninterrupted activity of building, so the continuous activity of informing matter is not what makes a soul an 'informer'. Rather, as long as the separate human soul is able to retain its capacity to inform a body - and provided that this capacity is brought to actuality once the appropriate conditions are restored - there will be nothing wrong in saying that something whose nature is to inform a body is also capable of independent existence.<sup>25</sup>

Eduardo may be right to some extent because one cannot foreclose the possibility of misinterpretation from different commentators on Aquinas, but the argument still remains that, the ways in which Aquinas employed some specific terms with which he was able to rest his argument in defense of the incorruptibility of the soul are unclear and misleading. Thus, Aquinas is not totally free from the fallacy of equivocation. It should be noted that Aquinas himself had earlier accused Averroes of misinterpreting Aristotle when Averroes interpreted Aristotelian doctrine to mean that immortality belongs only to the separate active intellect which is one in all men. Because Averroes had tried to argue for the existence of a single soul in all men on the basis of the universality of the things understood by the mind, Aquinas refused to admit this interpretation because the intellectual life of one man differs from that of another man. I think Aquinas should be commended for that. Nevertheless, that does not mean that Aquinas himself is completely exonerated from misinterpreting Aristotle too at some point.

One other area where majority of scholars began to have issues of inconsistency with Aquinas is basically on his analysis of the operations of the souls. Aquinas mainly described human soul as an immaterial entity but later ascribed to the soul the operation/functions that a concrete material entity should perform. Thus, such kind of view is absurd since nothing can be both abstract and concrete at the same time.<sup>26</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, interpretation problem is one problem that cannot be put aside when considering Aquinas works especially in the hands of the modern commentators. One cannot readily foreclose the tendency of misinterpreting

Aquinas' work by some of these modern scholars. But if everything said about Aquinas is true, then it may be argued that even if Aquinas himself were to be alive to see all these criticisms, he will have seen the problem or flaws with his postulation and proof for the incorruptibility of the soul. But all the same, Aquinas' treatise of the incorruptibility of soul is very vital to modern philosophy because it helps the contemporary scholars to understand the medieval scholars view on the subject matter. Although, whether Aquinas' proof has a Platonic or Aristotelian heritage is not before us here, but one important point to note is that, his proof for the incorruptibility of the soul is not a wholesale innovative idea that is peculiar to him.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See Robert Pasnau, "Aquinas on the Content Fallacy" in *The Modern Schoolman*, vol.75 (1998): 293. 'Content fallacy' is a name for the mistake in reasoning that comes from conflating two kinds of facts: facts about the content of our thoughts, and facts about what shape or form our thoughts take in our mind.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph A. Novak, "Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul" in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): p.417

<sup>3</sup>Aquinas SCG,1650

<sup>4</sup>Joseph A. Novak, "Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul" in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): 406

<sup>5</sup>George McLean and Patrick J. Aspell. *Medieval Western Philosophy: The European Emergence.* (Washington: Library of Cataloging-in-Publication,1999) p.190.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph A. Novak, "Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul" in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): 407

<sup>7</sup>See the *Phaedo*, 78b-80b. David Gallop's comments in *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford, 1975) provide criticism of the argument.

<sup>8</sup>This argument is also stated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> *sed contra* of *QDA* 14- 'the human soul is completely immaterial; this is obvious from the fact that it receives the species of things immaterially. Therefore the soul is incorruptible.'

<sup>9</sup>Joseph A. Novak, "Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul" in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): 407

<sup>10</sup>Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, q. 45, art. 3 ad 2

<sup>11</sup>Aquinas SCG, 1650

<sup>12</sup>Equivocation is classified as a formal fallacy. It means a misleading use of a term or word with more than one meaning or sense (by glossing over which meaning is intended at a particular time).

<sup>13</sup>ST I 84.1.CO;SCG II 84 (1531).

<sup>14</sup>Joseph A. Novak, "Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul" in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): 409

<sup>15</sup>Joseph A. Novak, "Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul" in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): 410

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> George McLean and Patrick J. Aspell. *Medieval Western Philosophy: The European Emergence*. (Washington: Library of Cataloging-in-Publication,1999) p.190.

<sup>18</sup> See a published PhD thesis. Eduardo Isdra Zachia, *Aquinas on the Hybridism of Human Souls*.(Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2013)p.xi

<sup>19</sup> Eduardo Isdra Zachia, *Aquinas on the Hybridism of Human Souls*.(Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2013)p.ix

<sup>20</sup> Robert Pasnau, “Aquinas on the Content Fallacy” in *The Modern Schoolman*, vol.75 (1998): 294

<sup>21</sup> Copleston F.C., *Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction*. (Mineola/ New York: Dover Publications Inc.,2001) p. 94

<sup>22</sup> Joseph A. Novak, “Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul” in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 4 (1987): 408

<sup>23</sup> Copleston F.C., *Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction*. (Mineola/ New York: Dover Publications Inc.,2001) p. 94

<sup>24</sup> Cf. ST 1a Q29a1ad5, where Aquinas explains that, because the soul - despite its subsistence - is only a part of the human substance, even in its separate state it cannot lose its ‘*natura unibilitatis*’

<sup>25</sup> Eduardo Isdra Zachia, *Aquinas on the Hybridism of Human Souls*.(Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2013)p.200

<sup>26</sup> See Kenny, Anthony, ed. *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969)

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See the Phaedo, 78b-80b. David Gallop’s comments in Plato’s Phaedo (Oxford, 1975) provide Criticism of the argument