



## Immortality in the Aristotelian Christian Tradition

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### Abstract

In Christian Aristotelianism and Thomism, immortality is not endless continuity in time after death but assimilation and participation in God's eternity. Life of the Saved does not undergo changes *per se* since there is no passage of time in eternity. For Aquinas, the subjects of immortality are, on the one hand, the resurrected human beings and, on the other, the subsistent souls, which should not be confused with substances proper. Personal identity and thus the resurrected body's identity *form substantial individuals*. In Aristotelian hylomorphism - presupposed by the two theses, the *materia* is not mattered in the modern sense, but rather potentiality.

### Keywords

Immortality, Eternity, Aristotelian, Christian tradition.

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## **Introduction**

Among modern theologians and Christian philosophers until thirty of forty years ago, it was fashionable to ignore or minimize the question about immortality. According to them, the notion of immortality does not fit into the biblical tradition. Instead of believing in the immortality of the human soul, Christians should rather believe in the resurrection of the whole human being.

In the days immediately after the Council Vaticanum II, even the hope of resurrection was relegated into the realm of subjective spirituality. Questions as to the identity of the resurrected body were considered misleading: relevance is only the inner attitude of the believer. Even the mind - body relation was considered a problem only for those influenced by the Greek way of accounting for the human person. In contrast, there is no duality between the soul and the body in the biblical tradition.

The theological tendencies of those days strongly diverged from the traditional catholic doctrine stressing the immortality of the soul. The Council Lateranense V, e.g., had declared the contrary belief a plague: “...*contra huiusmodi pestem... damnamus et reprobamus omnes asserentes, animam intellectivam mortalem esse, aut unicam in cunctis hominibus...*” (D 738)

Nowadays, things have changed again. We are once again confronted with an intense debate, especially among analytic philosophers of religion, on the presuppositions or implications of the soul's immortality. In this paper, we want to concentrate on one aspect of the debate: how we tackle immortality depends on how we account for the nature of time and eternity.

### **1. Immortality and time**

In the discussion on immortality, philosophers nowadays normally

presuppose the modern notion of time and have, thus, limited resources to solve several puzzles of immortality. Although the modern relativistic notion of space – time differs from the Newtonian account of time, both modern approaches to the nature of time differ widely from the Aristotelian: Thomistic one.

In science, for representing processes and changes, it has proven extremely helpful to work with four dimensions: in addition to the three spatial dimensions, depth, length, and height, scientists add the fourth temporal dimension, which allows the representation of various relevant states at different time instances. They thus work with the so – called four – dimensional space – time – system.

Philosophers of time discussing whether the successful use of this space – time – system implies that not only events but all entities are spread out in time too or not. According to the first position – called “*perdurantism*” or “*eternalism*” – every actual entity is spread out in time like a process or an event and thus composed of temporal stages: parts. According to the second position – called “*endurantism*” or “*actualism*” – in addition to four – dimensional events, there are also three – dimensional *endures continuants*. According to this last position, things – human persons included – move in time and thus remain. As such, they are fully present at each moment of their existence.

Perdurantists viz. eternalists consider space and time on a par. However, their difficulties are due to the disanalogies between space and time stemming from our practical rationality and emotional attitudes. In our lives, we presuppose “the fact” that something has happened, is happening, or will happen as the reason for what we do and how we feel.

Should we account for immortality *paternalistically* or *ritualistically*? Does everlasting life consist of an infinite extension in time or an unending ongoing *now*? It seems that especially protestant theologians think of God's reality and immortality actualistically. They tend to oppose and reject eternalism.

The presuppositions of this modern debate are alien to the Aristotelians and Thomists. They share a different account of the nature of time: time is the *measure of change*. Thus, there is no change, and there is no passage of time.

### 1-1. Eternity

According to the Aristotelian and Thomistic accounts, God's eternity is not an endless succession of moments. God is eternal in not undergoing any change. According to this classical understanding of eternity, God has no before and after. Nowadays, we are so acquainted with the modern notion of time that it seems impossible to have continuity with no succession, with no before and after.

The Aristotelian notion of eternity (*ratio aeternitatis*) follows from immutability, as the idea of time (*ratio temporis*) follows from movement. Hence, as God is to the highest degree immutable, it belongs to Him to be eternal in the highest sense (S.th. I, q.10, a. 2, c). That God has no beginning and no end should thus not be interpreted as endless existence in time but as being entirely outside time. In this sense, His eternity has no succession, being *simultaneously whole* (*ipsa aeternitas successione caret, tota simul existens*) (S.th. I, q.10, a. 1, c).

The common conception of eternity as never-ending time is due to our experience of the flowing *now* (nunc) being, on the one hand always the same and on the other continuously changing. We are always in the now, but continuously this changes since it moves from

one moment to the other. However, it would be wrong to conceive God as a now that stands still.

Thomas interprets in this sense the saying of Boethius "the now that flows away makes time, the now that stands still makes eternity;" (*De Trinitate, iv*). According to our apprehension, the "now" that stands still makes eternity. As the apprehension of time is caused in us by the fact that we apprehend the flow of the "now," so the apprehension of eternity is caused in us by our apprehending the "now" standing still (S.th. I, q.10, a. 2, ad 1). From this, it does not follow that God is in a now that stands still. The way something is apprehended should not be confused with how it is in itself.

However, even within the Aristotelian tradition, it is difficult to grasp the difference between time and eternity adequately. Aquinas, therefore, mentions various objections, which seem very plausible to us today. If, e.g., we always are in the now, so must God be in the now; otherwise, He could not be real. There must be a relation between the now in our temporal sense and the now of God.

Aquinas derives the answer to the various objections against the difference between eternity and infinite time from his account of the essence of eternity, which is, in the words of Boethius, "totally simultaneous" (*totum simul*). Eternity consists of the *total simultaneous presence at once* (*aeternitas est tota simul, non autem tempus*) (S.th. I, q.10, a. 4, c). It is possible to deduce the other main differences between eternity and endless time from this notion.

Those theologians, who account for God's eternity as lasting permanence in time, evidently see the soul's immortality too as an endless continuation in time. However, this leads to various problems, which can be avoided by the Aristotelian understanding of eternity as the absence of time and its positive account in the tradition of

Boethius, understanding eternity as “*totum simul*”.

Nowadays, we are confronted with an ongoing debate on the nature of time, ignoring time's dependence on change stressed in the Aristotelian tradition. On the one hand, we have – as seen – four – dimensionalists or eternalists and on the other three – dimensionalists or actualists. The discussion among analytic philosophers of religion on immortality seems to take for granted the presuppositions of the modern notion of time and completely to ignore the Thomistic peculiarities of eternity and thus to ignore immortality conceived as being outside time.

### 1-2. Immortality and aevum

The Thomistic notion of immortality does not mean survival and consequent everlasting existence. For the Saved, it consists in the participation (*participatio*) in the eternity of God. The *visio beatifica* of the *beati* consists in unification with, and assimilation to, the reality of God. The technical term for immortal beings' status is “*aevum*.” Aeviternity (*aevum*) is a problematic notion, but it might help spell out the idea of immortality as participation in God's life as being outside time. “*Aevum nihil aliud est quam aeternitas quaedam participata....*” (Comm. Sent. I, d.19, q. 2, a.1 ad1)

Aeviternity means eternity and time (*medium inter aeternitatem et tempus*). Time has "before" and "after"; aeviternity in itself has no "before" and "after," but “before” and “after” can be annexed to it (*aevum autem non habet in se prius et posterius, sed ei conjungi possunt*); while eternity has neither "before" nor "after," nor is it compatible with it at all (S.th. I, q.10, a.5, c).

The account Thomas gives presupposes that duration in being (*permanentia, duratio*) has different degrees. It is highest if it is entirely alien to change. Eternity excludes any change and thus measures the

highest degree of duration. Some things recede from duration to such an extent that they consist of change. Time, all movements measure these things, and all things corruptible. Nevertheless, others, i.e., the *aeviternal*, recede less from duration in being, for their being neither consisted in change nor is the subject of change (*quia esse eorum nec in transmutatione consistit, nec est subjectum transmutationis*), nevertheless they have change annexed to them either actually or potentially (*tamen habent transmutationem adjunctam, vel in actu, vel in potentia*) (S.th. I, q.10, a. 5, c).

Crucial for this Thomistic position is the distinction between *per se* immutability and *accidental* change via some “adjunction”: immortal beings conceived as “aeviternal” are *per se* not in time, and their permanence is “totum simul,” even though they are not eternal as God is, because “before” and “after” are compatible with them (*aevum est totum simul, non tamen est aeternitas; quia compatitur secundum prius et posterius*) (S.th. I, q.10, a.5, ad 2) Of God we can predicate only properties which do not imply change and thus time (pure attributes); of the *aeviternal* we can say that they understand and have affections connected to a before and after. But even in this case, we should not overlook that *per se*, for all *aeviternal*, immortal souls included, and there is no difference of past and future.

## 2. Subjects of immortality

What is immortal? The resurrected personal being or the human soul? Since the whole personal being is called to enjoy “happiness” (*beatitudo*) in God, it is plain that the resurrected person is endowed with immortality. For Thomists, the human soul guarantees the resurrected person's identity.

For many Christians, the subject of immortality is the soul taken to be a spiritual substance. They seem to adhere to some or other

version of substance dualism of soul and body. The Thomistic account, on the contrary, seems to be neither dualistic in the complete sense nor monistic. Aquinas certainly is not a substance – dualist in the modern Cartesian sense. On the other hand, because of the thesis that the human soul guarantees the resurrected identity, he cannot escape dualism.

Aquinas' notion of the human soul is Aristotelian but diverges from it in various ways. It might be that not all the passages referring to the human soul in the large *Corpus Thomisticum* are consistent, but some of his views on the human soul might still help clarify the tricky questions concerning immortality, viz., the hope of resurrection.

Aristotle defines the soul as the *form* of a natural body, which potentially has life (De Anima II, 1, 412a 21) and as the *first actuality* of a natural body that has life potentially or that has organs (De Anima II, 412a 29f and 412b 5f). In Aristotelian scholastic philosophy, it was thus commonplace to conceive the soul as the individual *forma substantial* of a natural body. This conception of the soul presupposes Aristotelian ontology with substances (endurers or continuants) and *hylomorphism*, the ontological doctrine that each individual is “composed” of *matter* and *form*. Thomas shares this approach. For him, the soul being the principle of the life of a body or organism, is its *act* (*corporis actus*). Thomas explicitly says: like heat, which is the principle of calefaction, the soul is not a body, but an act of a body (S.th. I, q.75, a.1 c).

### **2-1. The subsistent intellectual soul**

The Thomistic notion of the human soul, on the one hand, implies that it is not a substance proper. On the other hand, Thomas stresses that the soul can exist independently, being subsistent (*subsistence*) and that it is separable (*separabilis*) from the body. The subsistence and separability are essential for the identity of the resurrected human being as a whole.



According to Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition, what survives death, being subsistent and separable, and thus guarantees the resurrected person's identity is, however, not the whole human soul. Only that part of it is responsible for the intellectual or rational acts of the human person. The whole soul cannot exist independently and is not separable from the body.

Why should the principle of understanding and knowledge be that part of the soul which survives death? The Thomistic argument boils down to the following intuition: Since human beings can in principle know all kinds of things (*omnia*), the intellectual principle cannot be body - like. If it were, its determinate nature would impede knowledge of all bodies (*quia natura determinate illius organi corporei prohiberet cognitionem omnium corporum*) (S.th. I, q.75, a.2 c). The intellectual principle or the intellectual soul must be different from any biological organ, any merely organic function. It has operations *per se* apart from the body. But only that which subsists or exists on its own can have operations *per se*. Thus, the intellectual soul is incorporeal and subsistent (*...eo modo aliquid operatur quo est... Relinquitur igitur animam humanam... esse aliquid incorporeum et subsistens*) (S.th. I, q.75, a.2 c).

Occasionally Aquinas concedes that it is better to say that the human being knows instead of saying that the human soul knows as is better to say that the architect constructs instead of saying that the art of architecture constructs. "*Sed sicut melius est dicere quod aedificator aedificat, non ars, licet aedificator aedificat per aedificativam artem, sicut fortasses melius est dicere quod anima non misereatur neque addiscit, neque intelligit, sed homo per animam*" (In De Anima, I, l.X, nr.152) or "*Sed magis proprie dicitur quod homo intelligat per animam.*" (S.th. I, q.75, a.2, ad 2) However, the subject of knowledge is something that does not depend on the body and has the capacity of knowledge *per se*.

For Aquinas, the human soul is something particular. However, "particular thing" (*hoc aliquid*) can be understood in two senses. Firstly, for anything subsistent; secondly, it subsists and is complete in its specific nature. Therefore, the human soul can be called "this particular thing" in the first sense, as being something subsistent, but not in the second. (*Sic igitur cum anima humana sit pars speciei humanae, potest dici hoc aliquid primo modo, quasi subsistens; sed non secundo modo*) (S.th. I, q.75, a.2, ad 1).<sup>1</sup> A hand, for instance, is a "hoc aliquid" but not a substance.

The intellectual soul is the subject of intellective operations but is not identical to the human person. Thomas tries to be charitable to those taking the soul to be the individual human endowed with a body but rejects the Platonic understanding of the soul: man is not his soul (S.th. I, q.75, a.4, c). Especially P. Geach stresses that the immortal soul is not identical with the resurrected human person. It is evident – he says – that the surviving soul is not the person who died but a mere remnant of him. Geach quotes Aquinas' dictum in his Commentary on I Corinthians 15, "anima mea non est ego," and continues: "If only souls are saved, I am not saved, nor is any man. If sometime after Peter Geach's death there is again a man identifiable as Peter Geach, then Peter Geach again, or still, lives: otherwise not." (Geach, 2000, p. 727).

## 2-2. The incorruptible intellectual soul

Aquinas takes the incorruptibility of the rational soul as a sign of the following argument: the senses do not apprehend reality, except under the conditions of "here" and "now," whereas the intellect

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1. see: Quaestio unica *De Anima* in: Quaest, Disp., art.1.

apprehends it *absolutely* and for all time. Since everything naturally aspires to be in its manner (*suo modo esse desiderat*), everything with an intellect naturally desires always to exist. Nevertheless, a natural desire cannot be in vain. Therefore the intellectual soul must be incorruptible. (*Unde omne habens intellectum naturaliter desiderat esse semper. Naturale autem desiderium non potest esse inane. Omnis igitur intellectualis substantia est incorruptibilis*) (S.th. I, q.75, a.6, c). The decisive reason for the thesis of the incorruptibility of the intellectual soul is, however, that it is not a “*compositum*.” Being something on its own, which exists *per se* and being only *forma* (*forma tantum*), cannot fall apart and thus not go out of existence. Only “*composita*” can cease to exist, as only these can be dissolved into their parts.

The thesis of the soul’s incorruptibility presupposes its *separability* from the body. The common opinion is that Aristotle already held the intellectual principle's separability thesis. Explicitly, however, Aristotle states this only for the, and according to the main interpreters, the universal and not the individual principle as part of the individual human soul. Besides, for Aristotle, it seems clear that the soul as an act cannot be separated from the subject of the act and *formae* always are *formae* of some matter or other: “That, therefore, the soul or certain parts of it, if it is divisible, cannot be separated from the body is quite clear... .” (De Anima, 413a 3f).

In his comment of Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Aquinas tackles the objections against immortality, stemming from the thesis that the soul is the first actuality of the human organism. In particular, he looks for hints in *De Anima* at the possibility of separating those aspects of the soul, which are responsible for the intellectual acts. He is eager to identify them to defend the immortality of at least one part of the human soul stressing the difference between the and the rest of the soul: they might be divine and unaffected (In De Anima, Nr. P. 166).

Aquinas concedes that most potencies and capacities of the human soul are not separable from the body but stresses the exception of intellectual capacities. The intellectual capacity is of a different kind “...videtur quod sit alterum genus animae ab aliis partibus animae, idest alterius naturae, et alio modo se habens...” (In De Anima, Nr. P. 268). Nowadays, the arguments for the separability of one part of the soul, i.e., the intellectual principle, are not convincing because of their presuppositions, which we no longer share. However, the arguments for the “*subsistentia*” and “*in corruptibilitas*” can be taken as valid arguments against the naturalistic programs of reduction of the mental to the physical. The human capacities and powers are such that they cannot be assigned to bodies conceived physicalistically.

In order to save immortality, what we need is something guaranteeing the personal identity of the risen human person. This cannot be the physical body but must be the individual *forma substantialis*.

### 3. Hylomorphism

There is a significant difference between the notion of body in a physicalistic sense and organism in Aristotelian philosophy. The physicalistically conceived bodies are for the Aristotelian fictions or the results of abstractions. Human bodies, as presupposed by physicalists and most dualists in mind: body debate, do not exist. Human bodies of daily life are organisms, and if they exist, they are alive, having various capacities.

On the other hand, in Aristotelian hylomorphism, people's bodies are not the *material* of humans. They are already *composita*. Aristotelian hylomorphism should not be taken as the doctrine of the relation between *matter* in the modern sense and *function* in modern

functionalism. It is somewhat concerned with the relation between *potencies* and *actualities*.<sup>1</sup>

These short remarks should suffice to see that the context of the Aristotelian tackling of the mind – body problem differs from the modern one. Contemporary discussions of the problem presuppose a different conception of matter, i.e., that of the sciences of physics and chemistry. Their origins are due to the new scientific method explained by Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes. Primarily Descartes argues for a single, uniform matter for everything. Its essence is an extension and nothing else.

Cartesian bodies cannot thus have substantial forms. For Descartes, the soul is not the individual form or nature of a physical body, nor is mental activity the body's natural activity. The soul must be something completely different. On the one hand, Descartes' new scientific treatment of the body made discoveries of the body's functioning possible; on the other hand, the mechanical principles he used to account for bodily functioning could not account for the higher functions of the organism, like thought.

In Aristotelian philosophy, the soul is, as we have seen, the actuality of the organism or its *forma substantialis*. Nowadays, we call it "sortal" or "sortal determination." However, the human soul is not the general sortal but the *sortal token*, i.e., the individual *forma substantialis* of an organism. Our talk about living beings presupposes – as Aristotle did – that as soon as an individual loses this sortal determination, i.e., its form token viz. its soul, it ceases to exist. To lose one's soul is tantamount to dying.

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1. see below.

### 3-1. Aristotelian form and matter

Substantial forms in the Aristotelian tradition are not attributes and thus cannot be predicated contingently. Substantial form as actuality is neither a contingent disposition nor function nor a contingent complex of such dispositions or functions. The relation between form as actuality and its matter is an essential one. The form becomes one with the matter means that matter as potentiality gets actual. The medieval comments on Aristotle stress this point. Aquinas, e.g., comments: that matter is one with the form is to say that matter is in the act. “*Ostensum est ... quod forma per se uniat materia, sicut actus ejus; et idem est materiam uniri formae, quod materiam esse in actu.*” (In De Anima, Nr. P. 234).

Aristotle, in fact, explicitly rejects the thesis that the soul is something like *harmony*, i.e., the view that it is form understood as some contingent configuration or a complex relational property, which holds together the different parts and functions of the body. This is puzzling only for those who tend to interpret Aristotelian forms functionalistically. The functional order is multiplied realizable for functionalism and has compositional plasticity. The relation between a functional order and a physical system is thus a contingent one. However, the Aristotelian text suggests that even single mental states are intimately associated with specific body parts or organs.

For Aristotle, there is no general concept of physical matter, no one kind of matter for all-natural objects (as in the modern understanding of Descartes). What counts as a matter varies from case to case. Aristotle’s conception of matter is thus not congenial to a contemporary type of physicalism. Each living being has a unique kind of proximate matter that is idiosyncratic to just that kind of being. The powers and potentialities of the proximate matter are unique to it.

We have seen that for Aristotle, there cannot be a mind - body problem in the Cartesian sense: the matter of the body is like “animal matter”: it has the living functions built-in at the ground level. The proper matter for sentient beings is essentially alive, essentially capable of awareness: a not alive body is for Aristotle, a body in name only. It is not a body at all, just as an eye, which cannot see, is not an eye. The material constituent of the animal depends for its very identity on its being alive, in - formed by psyche. There is no such thing as face or flesh without a soul in it (See: also: De Generatione Animalium, 734b 24).

Aristotle conceives of matter as *potentiality*. But potentialities are not as real as their realizations. Thus they cannot be basic. As mere potentialities, they are “posterior” to actualities. Actuality is “prior” to capacity even in time (1049b 18 - 25). Moreover, if, in general, actuality is “prior” to potentiality, then substance or form must be “prior” to stuff.

### 3-2. Identity conditions

In Aristotelian ontology, the living substances, i.e., the individuals having souls as their actualities, are the fundamental entities or the primary units. They are continuants: endurers in time and have, therefore, diachronic identity. They act and cause through their actions various changes in the world.

In Aristotelian ontology, things and living substances like animals are not identical with the material they are made of or the sum of their parts. The kind of composition, their dispositional properties, tendencies, potencies, powers, and mode of activity are constitutive. These potencies, types of activity, and identity - and persistent - conditions, i.e., the conditions of coming to be and passing away,

depending on their *sortal* or *forma substantialis*.

The identity – and persistence – conditions of organisms, humans included, are not results of conventional posits or linguistic conventions, but given. One has, thus, to distinguish between the stuff making up a substance and the sortally determined substance or living being itself, between the *materia* and the *compositum*. The tree and the aggregate of cellulose molecules that constitute that tree are not the same, even though they occupy the same region.

If we conceive the human body or organism physicalistically – based on the modern notion of matter – and of the self, viz. the human soul functionalistically, we are faced with a dilemma: either we must opt for a reductionistic variant of naturalism or a version of dualism. On the other hand, if we accept a kind of Aristotelian hylemorphism interpreted as doctrine of potency and actuality, we have an alternative.

Within Aristotelian ontology, the soul is the ultimate sortal determination or the individual *forma substantialis*, i.e., the first actuality of the living individuals. Their identity – and persistence – conditions depend on this *forma*. Within this ontological framework, we can accept the thesis that human persons' identity – and persistence – conditions depend on their soul. It is the soul that guarantees the risen human body's identity.

### Conclusion

We have tried to defend the view that immortality in the Christian sense should not be interpreted as endless continuity in time after death but as assimilation and participation in God's eternity. God's eternity differs from endless time in "*totum simul*" outside time.

For Thomas, the subject of immortality is the subsistent and



separable intellectual soul and the transformed human individual after the resurrection of the dead. The intellectual soul is not identical with the human individual but guarantees its identity and persistence.

Since there is no *per se* change in God's eternity and the "aevum" of the Saved, I share that it is not necessary to assume continuity in the existence of one part of the soul between bodily death the general resurrection. It might be more consistent to assume that *per se*, death and resurrection coincide.



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