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**The End of (Human) Life as We Know It:
Thomas Aquinas on Persons, Bodies, and Death**

Abstract: Is the being in an irreversible persistent vegetative state as the result of a horrible accident numerically identical to the human person, Lindsay, who existed before the accident? Many proponents of Thomistic metaphysics have argued that Aquinas’s answer to this question must be “yes”. In particular, it seems that Aquinas’s commitment to both Aristotelian hylomorphism and the unity of substantial form (viz., that each body/soul composite possesses one and only one substantial form) entails the position that the human person remains alive as long as biological life persists. I argue, however, that although Aquinas does possess a deeply integrated account of human nature and is indeed committed to the claim that the person, Lindsay, exists as long as Lindsay’s body lives, there is good reason to suppose that he also holds that the body in the PVS is not Lindsay’s body in anything more than an equivocal sense.

Imagine that a close friend, Lindsay, has been in a serious car accident and is now in an irreversible persistent vegetative state (PVS) in which there is no higher brain function, and from which there is no hope of recovery.¹ Her family is at the hospital, and difficult decisions are in store for them, among them the most pressing of which is whether Lindsay should be kept on life support, without which she will die. When, in this situation, the family asks whether *Lindsay* is really still alive, they touch on a host of philosophical questions involving personal identity and persistence conditions—questions whose answers they see as having important ethical consequences.

In this paper, I address Thomas Aquinas’s answers to these questions. The integrated account of persons and bodies offered by Thomistic metaphysics has long attracted attention in discussions of the boundaries of human life;² in particular, many scholars have argued that

¹ The phrase “non-reversible” seems vague, of course, in the sense that advances in medical technology appear to change what constitutes a non-reversible vegetative state. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll intend by “non-reversible vegetative state” the sort of case in which it seems *conceptually* impossible for medical technology (as opposed to divine intervention) to repair the damage done.

² The literature on this subject, even just over the last fifty years, is extensive. Readers interested in an overview, particularly with respect to abortion, are encouraged to begin with the exchange between Pasnau (2003) and Haldane and Lee (2003), which provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the previous literature on this subject. (See especially Haldane and Lee (2003, 259, note 5.)) For the debate concerning euthanasia, Eberl (2005) proves a good place to begin; one of

Aquinas's commitment to Aristotelian hylomorphism and the Unity of Substantial Form³ entails the position that a human person persists until the death of the organic body. Even in situations involving persistent vegetative states, then, the person remains alive as long as biological life persists.⁴ I argue, however, that although Aquinas does possess a deeply integrated account of human nature and is indeed committed to the claim that the person, Lindsay, exists as long as Lindsay's body lives, there is good reason to suppose that he also holds that the body in the PVS is **not Lindsay's body** in anything more than an equivocal sense. Thus, there is good reason to suppose that Aquinas holds that the body in the PVS is no longer Lindsay.

My argument proceeds in three stages. In section I, I show that Aquinas holds that the identity conditions for 'human person' are the same as for 'human being.' In section II, I argue that Aquinas is also committed to the view that the identity conditions for 'human being' are the same as for 'human body.' Thus, Aquinas cannot claim that Lindsay, the person, ceases to exist while her body lives. Yet, as I show in sections III–IV, this does not entail that a living body in a PVS is still a person. Rather, a crucial passage in Aquinas's commentary on the *Liber de causis* suggests that he holds that if the being in the PVS lacks even the *capacity* for rational thought, that being is no longer a human being. I conclude by pointing out that this fact does not itself give us reason to adopt any particular attitude about the value or dignity of that being.

I) Three Options

There are three popular responses to the question of whether Lindsay persists in the PVS. First, cases of higher brain death and PVS—in which organic life persists in the absence of the

the most recent pieces on this topic, it also references much of the relevant secondary literature. For a more general, book-length treatment of how 'Thomistic Substance Dualism' might prove relevant to issues in contemporary ethics, see Moreland and Rae (2000). Although I argue (Van Dyke 2009) that Moreland and Rae mischaracterize Aquinas's actual account of human nature, their book provides a classic example of the general argument that Aquinas's metaphysical position yields attractive ethical positions on difficult moral issues. Finally, an important study is currently at press and due out in 2013: Amerini (Forthcoming).

³ In short, the unity of substantial form (also called the unicity of substantial form) is the view that each substance possesses one and only one substantial form, and that all other forms a substance possesses are accidental. I discuss this doctrine (and its consequences for Aquinas's account of human nature) in more detail in section III.

⁴ As J.P. Moreland and Stan Wallace put it, "...if there is reason to believe that there is still unified organic life exemplified by a body, then the Thomist perspective will see the human person as still being present" (1995, 328). See also Eberl (2005, note 1) and Smith (1990).

capacity for any sort of mental activity—have motivated many philosophers to argue for the non-identity of persons (understood as beings necessarily capable of having emotional states, beliefs, and self-reference) and bodies (understood as organisms participating in certain biological processes). Lynne Rudder Baker (2000), for instance, holds that the mere possibility of a body continuing to live while permanently lacking higher-order mental capacities demonstrates conclusively that persons and bodies possess different modal properties, and thus can't be identical. As she writes, "Sameness of living human organism is not sufficient for sameness of person" (121).⁵ Lindsay clearly *was* a person: she loved her children, believed tomatoes tasted best fresh off the vine, and completed regular self-evaluations as part of her job. The being in the irreversible PVS, however, is permanently incapable of such activities. On this view, the being in the PVS cannot be a person, and so it seems that Lindsay (who is necessarily a person on this view) no longer exists. What persists in the PVS is a living human organism; a being doesn't cease to be *human* when it loses the capacity for emotional states and first-person reference, even if it ceases to be a person.

Second, one might think that the being in the PVS is a human *body*, but no longer a human *being*. This view holds that a) human beings are essentially persons, and b) human beings have different persistence conditions from living human bodies. A person who holds this view (as it seems plausible to think Plato did) believes that the being in the PVS is neither Lindsay nor a human being, but that the living body in the PVS is still a human body.⁶ On this view, human beings are not necessarily living organisms; a human body can cease to be a human being before it ceases to exist.

Third, one could hold that persons can exist in the absence of any capacity for first-person reference, etc. On this view, which many have attributed to Aquinas, human beings are both necessarily persons and identical with living human bodies. Thus Lindsay-the-person continues to exist as long as organic life persists, even in an irreversible PVS. At Lindsay's death, the body that remains is no longer a person, a human being, or a human body. It is, instead, a corpse that bears certain historical relations to Lindsay. I will call this the Organic

⁵ As she continues, "Although it is still a living organism, it is incapable of suffering or of any awareness whatever, and never will be. It is a being that does not, and never will be able to, care about itself or about anything else" (121). As Baker puts it elsewhere, "[T]he relation between Smith and her body is not one of identity" (2005, 494).

⁶ And in more than just the sense in which it bears certain historical relations to a particular human body.

Persistence View, and I will argue that it is half-correct to attribute it to Aquinas: he does indeed hold that the identity conditions for human persons, human beings, and human bodies are identical; at the same time, he allows that there can be a transitional stage between Lindsay and Lindsay's corpse—a stage in which (at least one) living organism which is not identical to Lindsay exists.

II) Aquinas on the first option: Human Persons and Living Bodies

The term 'person' first appears in philosophical discourse in the early Middle Ages, with Boethius's discussion of the metaphysics of the Incarnation in *Liber de persona in duabus naturis*. Boethius's definition of 'person' as "an individual substance with a rational nature" becomes standard by the thirteenth century;⁷ Aquinas, with most others, adopts this definition and argues that rationality (broadly construed as capacity for mental activity) is what distinguishes persons from other beings.⁸ Although this particular definition fell out of favor in the early modern period, its emphasis on individuality and rationality carried over into and deeply influenced subsequent discussions of persons. In particular, the question of whether a being possesses rational capacities—understood as including the capacity for second-order

⁷ Boethius's definition quickly gained traction and became the medieval standard when Peter Lombard endorsed it in his influential *Sentences*, on which every student working for a master's degree in theology at the University of Paris had to write a commentary.

⁸ In his words: "...even among other substances, individuals with a rational nature have a certain special name. And this name is 'person.'" In ST Ia 29.1.co, Aquinas discusses each part of this definition in turn, first defending the claim that a person is an *individual substance*, and then explaining the importance of that substance's having a *rational nature*. He makes his case for persons being individual substances with a *rational nature* by arguing that "particularity and individuality are found in a more specific (*specialiori*) and perfect way in rational substances, which have control (*dominium*) over their actions, and are not only moved like other things, but act through themselves." In other words, rationality implies that the substance controls its own actions, and this "self-control" gives that substance a better claim to being an individual than other entities. "Furthermore," Aquinas continues, "actions belong to individuals (*actiones autem in singularibus sunt*). For this reason, then, even among other substances, individuals with a rational nature have a certain special name. And this name is 'person.' Thus, 'individual substance' is placed in the definition of 'person' that was given above insofar as it signifies an individual (*singulare*) in the genus of substance, and 'with a rational nature' is added insofar as it signifies an individual among rational substances."

judgments, intentional states, first-person reference, and such—has remained a central focus in contemporary debates on end-of-life ethics.⁹

Aquinas holds that human beings are persons because they are individual substances with rational natures, but he argues that in the case of human beings, the term ‘person’ also picks out the biological components that are necessary conditions for human cognition. In ST Ia.29, for instance, he states that in the case of human beings, ‘person’ signifies “*this flesh and these bones and this soul*, which are the principles that individuate a human being, and indeed which, although they don’t belong to the signification of ‘person,’ do belong to the signification of ‘human person’” (4.co, added emphasis).¹⁰ Flesh and bones aren’t part of the general signification of ‘person,’ of course, since angels and God are immaterial individual substances with a rational nature, but Aquinas is clear that in the case of human beings—the only rational substances which also possess physical bodies—the term ‘person’ picks out all the components, physical and non-physical, that compose individual human substances. In the case of human beings, then, the word ‘person’ refers to a physical organism with rational capacities. For individuals such as Lindsay, the person ‘Lindsay’ has the same persistence conditions as the human being ‘Lindsay,’ even if the term ‘person’ isn’t co-extensive with the term ‘human being.’

(At the same time, Aquinas is comfortable drawing sharp conceptual distinctions between Lindsay’s existence as a rational substance and as a living organism.¹¹ According to the unity of substantial form, Lindsay’s substantial form—her rational soul—is what accounts both for her having organs that function in a way necessary for preserving life and for her capacity for abstract thought; still, Lindsay’s existence as an organic body can nevertheless be *considered* in separation from her existence as an intellectual being, even if her physicality cannot actually be separated from her existence as a person.¹²)

⁹ For just a few examples of how Aquinas’s treatment of ‘person’ has functioned in these debates, see Brown (1991), Crosson (1968), La Plante (1993), Seidl (1987), as well as Moreland and Wallace (1995), and the extended discussion in Moreland and Rae (2000).

¹⁰ All translations are mine.

¹¹ As he writes in a discussion of the soul/body relation in *Summa theologiae*, “Although the form is the same with respect to the essence which attributes diverse levels of perfection to matter...it differs with respect to the consideration of its definition (*ratio*)” (Ia.76.ad2).

¹² For an argument in favor of the possible separation of Lindsay’s existence as a body and as a person, see Shewmon (1985) for a Thomistic argument to this effect. I agree with his general sentiment—namely, that rationality is crucial to Aquinas’s concept of personal survival—but (as

Given what Aquinas says, having the right sort of body appears essential to being a human person. Nothing we've seen so far, though, commits Aquinas to the view that every human body must, in turn, be a person. In the following section, I argue that his acceptance of the unity of substantial form *does* entail this position. According to Aquinas's metaphysics, the substantial form 'human being' is what accounts for Lindsay's being both a person and a living organism in such a way that Lindsay remains a human person as long as her body lives.

III) Aquinas on the Second Option: Human Beings and Human Bodies

Philip Smith (1990) acknowledges the difficulty inherent in referring to people in PVSs: "Designating certain patients as 'vegetative entities' or, especially, as 'humanoid animals' jars the sensibilities of the average person. Perhaps a distinction between human person and a human being would be preferable" (214–5). We've seen that Aquinas will not welcome such a distinction between human person and human being; in this section, I argue that Aquinas's hylomorphism and his commitment to the unity of substantial form yield an account of human nature according to which human persons are not just identical to human beings—they are identical to living human *bodies*.

One reason this consequence of Thomistic metaphysics is not more widely recognized is the fact that Aquinas frequently employs dualistic language, speaking of the human body as one "part" of the soul-body composite that constitutes a human being. Following Aristotle, Aquinas holds that all physical objects are composites of matter and form, and he often uses a strongly dualistic analogy to explain this relationship, comparing soul to form, and body to matter. In *Summa contra gentiles* II.65, for instance, Aquinas writes: "Living things...are composed of matter and form. Moreover, they are composed of a body and a soul, which makes them actually living things. Thus, one of these [i.e. the body and the soul] must be the form, and the other matter...[And] the soul is the form."¹³ Indeed, "the soul makes the organic body itself to be" (*Quaestiones de anima* 1.ad15).¹⁴ In this analogy, the body functions as the material aspect of living things—the lump of stuff or collection of physical particles structured or shaped by the

I argue below) I believe that the point at which the body in the PVS is no longer a person is also the point at which it is no longer a human body, properly speaking.

¹³ For other places where Aquinas draws the same parallel, see QDA 8, 10, 11, and 16; also ST Ia.75.1.

¹⁴ "...*anima facit ipsum esse corpus organicum.*"

rational soul or substantial form. Those of us with Platonic and Cartesian-trained sensibilities (which is, after all, most of us) tend to read into this the identification of body and soul as separate substances, especially given Aquinas's insistence that the human soul survives the death of the body and exists for some time without it, prior to the resurrection of the body.

Aquinas explicitly rejects the sort of full-blooded substance dualism advocated by Plato and Descartes (and popular in Aquinas's own day), however, on the grounds that the essential unity of the human being would be seriously compromised were both body and soul entities capable of independent existence.¹⁵ Later in the same discussion quoted above, for instance, Aquinas claims that "the soul and the body are not two actually existing substances, but from these two things *one* actually existing substance is made" (*Summa contra gentiles* II.69).

To understand the source of this apparent tension, we need to recognize that Aquinas distinguishes between many different kinds and senses of both 'matter' and 'body.' *Prime* matter—matter understood in its essence—lacks any form at all; it is pure potentiality. Any particular existing physical object is matter that already possesses a form. As Aquinas writes in *De potentia* 5.3, "[T]he definition (*ratio*) of matter... is pure potentiality. Indeed, matter... cannot exist without form." The substantial form's role is to actualize, organize, and structure matter in a way that makes it the body of a cat, say, as opposed to the body of a cactus.

Actually existing bodies, then, are composites of matter and substantial form. The matter that composes those bodies can, in turn, be considered both as 1) compositional—the collection of individual physical bits of stuff (or elements) that constitute the human body and that fluctuate over time, and as 2) functional—the material organism itself, composed of functioning parts and organs, which remains the same over time.

This distinction between 'compositional' and 'functional' matter helps explain the different intuitions we have about whether material bodies remain the same over the course of a life. On the one hand, none of the particular bits of physical stuff that Lindsay possesses at the moment of the accident that results in the PVS are the same ones she possessed at birth, and so it seems plausible to say that Lindsay has a different body at the moment of her accident than she

¹⁵ For Aquinas's denial that the soul is itself a substance, see his discussion of how the soul is not complete in species or genus, and how the separated soul subsists in such an unnatural state that it's unable even to cognize without the direct intervention of either God or the angels in, e.g., *Summa theologiae* Ia.89, *Summa contra gentiles* II.81, *Quaestiones de anima* 1 and 15, and *In Aristotelis librum De anima commentarium* I.2.1–101.

did at her birth. On the other hand, since her birth, there is a unified *something* that has carried out the same biological processes and functions; something now that has the scar from her knee surgery thirteen years ago, etc. Thus, it also seems plausible to claim that her body remains the same throughout her life, despite the constant change in the “quantity of elements” which constitute that body.

In a passage on the persistence of identity through change, Aquinas addresses this very point:

In the body of a human being, while that human being lives, there aren't always the same parts with respect to matter, but only according to species, for with respect to matter parts come and go (*fluunt et refluent*). Nor is [a human body's unity] impeded by this, since a human being is one in number on account of her principle of life, up until the moment of death. An example of this can be taken from fire, which, while it continues to burn, is called one in number, because its species remains, even though logs are consumed in the fire and new ones placed on it. This is also the case for the human body. For the form and the species of its singular parts remain the same throughout its whole life, but the matter of the parts is both resolved through the action of natural heat and generated from scratch through nourishment. (SCG IV.81)

Generally speaking, Aquinas attributes sameness of organic body to continuity of substantial form. When united with matter, the substantial form ‘human being’ yields a functioning body that remains numerically the same over time: “If flesh is considered with respect to species, that is, with respect to that which is in it *formally*, it always remains the same” (*Summa theologiae* Ia.119.1.ad2). Whether we say that Lindsay has the same body at the moment of her accident as at her birth, then, depends on how we’re thinking of the matter composing it. The compositional matter constituting her body has changed, but the ‘ensouled’ matter remains the same throughout her life. In fact, the fluctuation in her compositional matter is a natural part of what allows for Lindsay’s growth and development over time—development guided by her substantial form (which also serves as the principle of unity for her material body throughout that change).

This discussion of Aquinas’s conception(s) of matter support a further understanding of ‘body’ that has crucial significance for questions surrounding the end of human life. All substances are composites of matter and *one and only one* substantial form (a doctrine usually referred to as “the unity of substantial form”),¹⁶ and Aquinas explicitly rules out the possibility that the form which makes something a human body could be something as basic as the

¹⁶ See, e.g., *Summa contra gentiles* II.58; *Quaestiones de anima* 9 and 11; *De spiritualibus creaturis* 3; *Summa theologiae* Ia.76.3, and 76.6.ad1.

substantial form ‘body’ (*forma corporeitatis*). As he writes in SCG IV.81, “[T]here aren’t diverse substantial forms in one and the same thing, through one of which the thing is placed in a general genus (say, ‘substance’), and through another of which [it is placed] in a proximate genus (say ‘body’ or ‘animal’), and through another in a species (say, ‘human being’ or ‘horse’).” Instead, one and the same substantial form accounts for a thing’s being a human being *and* an animal *and* a body *and* a substance. Since the substantial form for a human being is her rational soul, “corporeity, taken as a substantial form in a human being, is nothing other than the rational soul.”¹⁷ In the case of human beings, the substantial form ‘human being’ (i.e. the rational soul) accounts for a human being’s three dimensionality as well as her ability to grow, to see and hear, and to intellectually cognize.¹⁸

Thus, the doctrine of the unicity of substantial form entails that the human body is a composite of matter and exactly one substantial form, namely, ‘human being.’ As Van Steenberghen writes, “It is not to the *body* but to *prime matter* that the soul is united as substantial form” (1980, 73, added emphasis).¹⁹ Although at times Aquinas speaks of human beings as composites of soul and body, it seems at least as (if not more) accurate to refer to them as composites of soul and *matter*.²⁰ In at least one passage, Aquinas himself makes this move:

¹⁷ See also Aquinas’s commentary on *De anima*, where he writes: “We should not understand the claim that the soul is the actuality of the body as though the body is established through one form that makes it be a body while, coming on top of that, is the soul that makes it be a living body. Soul is, rather, the actuality of body in such a way that from soul comes its being [*qua* being], its being a body, and its being a living body” (II.1.225).

¹⁸ Aquinas frequently argues for the unicity of substantial form on the grounds that no substance could possess more than one such form: “The [substantial] form of a natural thing **is** its nature,” and a thing can have only one essential nature. For this reason, Aquinas claims, “It is clear that any substantial form, whichever one it is, makes and constitutes a being in actuality; for this reason, it follows that only the first form which comes to matter is a substantial form, and all the forms following after it are accidental forms” (*De spiritualibus creaturis* 3).

¹⁹ Van Steenberghen advocates speaking always as the human being as a composite of matter and form, rather than body and soul: “...almost all of Christian literature in the fields of theology, morality, and spirituality is dualistic in its language and also in its thought. This is unfortunate since such language is inaccurate and fails to correspond to the conclusions of the human sciences. Thomists should, therefore, strive to correct these dualistic expressions in the writings of the Angelic Doctor. This is an important task if one wishes to bring out the value of the remarkable doctrine that serves as the foundation of his anthropology” (73–4).

²⁰ Eleonore Stump makes much this same point, but without making the further step of identifying the human being with the human body: “There is something redundant about this description of the composite [as soul and body] since Aquinas thinks there is a living human body only when matter is configured by the form that is the soul. Given his view that the soul is

“Since the soul is part of the human body, it is not the whole human being, and I am not my soul” (*In Corinthios XV, L.2*).²¹ The claim that the rational soul is part of the human *body* might sound peculiar to our Cartesian-influenced ears, but what Aquinas states here is exactly what he believes. Strictly speaking, the rational soul is one part of the human *body*—it is the part that organizes and vivifies matter in a way that results in a living human body...that is, a living human being.²² Aquinas cannot, then, claim that the being in the PVS is Lindsay’s body without its being the person or human being ‘Lindsay.’

III) Aquinas on the Third Option: Human Life, Organic Life, and Transitional Beings

Given everything I’ve said so far, it seems that Aquinas would maintain that the human person, Lindsay, is present so long as Lindsay’s organic body lives and breathes. This is what I’ve called the Organic Persistence View, and what Moreland and Wallace (1995) identify as “the Thomistic position” concerning end-of-life issues.²³ I’ll argue in this section, though, that this does not entail that Lindsay persists so long as a body in a PVS lives and breathes. Rather, there is good reason to suppose that Aquinas holds that the rational soul can separate from the physical organism (e.g., in cases of irreparable higher-level brain damage); at the moment of separation—a separation that constitutes the death of the human being—the substantial form

the single substantial form of a living human body, we would expect him to say instead that a human being is a composite of *matter* and soul, not *body* and soul. Nonetheless, ‘body and soul’ is a common Thomistic description of the material composite that a human being is. It may be that the problem here is an artifact of translation; in some contexts, the Latin word translated ‘body’ (*corpus*) refers just to matter” (1995, 512).

²¹ In *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*.

²² Anthony Kenny neatly captures this point when he comments on this passage: “It is remarkable that St. Thomas says [here] not just that the soul is only a part of a human being, but that it is only part of the *body* of a human being. Commonly he uses ‘soul’ and ‘body’ as correlatives, and often he writes as if body and soul were related to each other as the form and the matter of the Aristotelian hylomorphism. But the formulation which [Aquinas] uses in this passage is in fact the more correct one from the hylomorphic standpoint: the human being is a body which like other mutable bodies is composed of matter and form; the soul, which is the form of the living body, is one part of the body, and the matter is another part of it, with ‘part’ used in the very special sense which is appropriate in this context.” (1994, 138–9).

²³ As they put it, “For the Thomist, a genus and a species in the category of substance are not degreed properties. That is, they are either fully predicable of an entity or they are absent. An entity either is or is not a human person or some other type of person...For the Thomist, it is impossible for there to be a human non-person” (329). According to the OPV, the organic body lying in a permanent vegetative state either is or isn’t Lindsay, the human being and the human person—it can’t be a human non-person.

‘human being’ is replaced by a lower-level substantial form.²⁴ In this case, the organic body in the vegetative state is no longer *Lindsay’s* body, for Lindsay has died. Thus, although I accept the claim “if the human body is still functioning as a biological unity, then the human person is still present because the soul is the ground of that functioning” (328), I deny the point that Moreland and Wallace use that claim to make: namely, that the human person persists until the apparent end of organic life. I believe Aquinas’s metaphysics allows for there to be a living body in a PVS whose compositional matter is historically linked to Lindsay’s body and which functions as a biological unity for a time without such a body’s necessarily being a *human* body.

Aquinas himself has little to say about when human death occurs in these difficult sorts of cases.²⁵ Yet, in one telling passage, Aquinas identifies important structural similarities between the process of corruption and the process of generation. According to his embryology, there is initially a being with a nutritive soul that takes in nutrition and grows; in the case of human gestation, that being is eventually replaced by a being with sense perceptive capacities, and then finally by a being with rational capacities. Each of these stages involves substantial change; the fetus is not a human being until the infusion of the rational soul.²⁶ In his commentary on the Book of Causes, Aquinas describes the end of life in a directly parallel way: “In the process of corruption, first the use of reason departs and living and breathing remain; second, living and breathing depart and being itself remains, since it is not corrupted to nothing... For existing things are prior to living things and living things to human beings, since, when ‘human being’ is removed, ‘animal’ is not removed as a consequence” (*In librum De causis exposito* I.1.20–21).²⁷ The obvious reading of this passage is that at the end of life, rational capacities, sensory capacities, and nutritive capacities can cease to exist at different times. And a being that has no rational capacities is not a human being any more, although it can be an animal; it has

²⁴ For an in-depth discussion of how this process might work, see Wallace (1994); Wallace (1995) discusses how he believes developments in medical science support this view.

²⁵ As D. Alan Shewmon observes, life support technology has raised “a great number of thorny philosophical and moral problems... regarding patients with serious neurological damage, who in generations past would have died from their acute illness” (1985, 24).

²⁶ For a brief treatise on the process of human generation, see SCG II.83–89, particularly chapters 86–89. See above (note 1) for references to some of the extensive secondary literature on Aquinas’s embryology.

²⁷ “*Rursus: quia in via corruptionis primo amittit usum rationis et remanet vivum et spirans; secundo, amittit vivum et spirans et remanet ipsum ens quia non corrumpitur in nihilum... nam priora sunt existential et viventibus et viventia hominibus, quia, remoto homine, non removetur animal secundum consequentiam, sed e converso, quia si non est animal non est homo.*”

gone through a substantial change parallel to the substantial change that occurs when a fetus with a sensory soul goes through the substantial change that occurs when the rational soul is infused.

There are, however, two immediate difficulties for the obvious reading. First, this passage appears in a commentary (on the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de causis*), and it can be hard to determine in that context whether an author is actually advocating a position or simply explaining it. This general interpretative worry seems mitigated in this instance, however, by the fact that Aquinas himself introduces this example in order to explain more fully the text on which he's commenting. It seems highly unlikely that he would attempt to elucidate the text with an illustration he himself did not find convincing.²⁸

Second, it seems possible that Aquinas is referring here to a logical rather than an ontological process of separation, in which case he wouldn't mean that Lindsay could *literally* lose the substantial form 'human being' and be replaced by a substantially different living, breathing thing. Jason Eberl argues for this reading in a recent paper: "When Aquinas asserts that an animal remains if rationality is removed from a human being, he is not offering an ontological description of what happens in the process of human death. Rather, he is claiming that, if one mentally abstracts the concept of rationality from the definition of a human being, the concept of animality will remain" (2005, 37).²⁹ On this reading, all Aquinas means to be saying here is that an animal is logically prior to a human being such that we can imagine something's being an animal without being a human being, and imagine an existing thing without its being an animal, while we cannot imagine something's being a human without its also being an animal or an animal without its existing.

I find this reading unconvincing. Eberl draws this conclusion in the context of addressing a number of passages concerning the separation of rationality from the human being.³⁰ Although he seems correct in identifying Aquinas's concern in several of those passages as logical rather than ontological priority concerning the concepts involved in 'human being' and 'animal,' I

²⁸ The fact that the *Liber de causis* commentary is a late work (circa 1272) also seems to mitigate against the theory that this is a position which Aquinas later abandons.

²⁹ As a sidenote, I find it extremely puzzling that Eberl, whose paper is as a whole quite well documented, fails to engage with (or even mention) William Wallace's important work on this subject.

³⁰ See, e.g., InDA III.4 and QDP VIII.4.ad12. Eberl is responding here to Kluge (1981). Kluge maintains that Aquinas would adopt the "higher-brain death" criterion for determining the time of death of a human being, as opposed to appealing to the end of the body's functioning as a unified organism, as Eberl, Moreland and Wallace, Smith, and others do.

believe he errs in grouping the *Liber de causis* commentary passage with the others. Instead, the *Liber de causis* passage differs from the others in at least one extremely significant way: namely, in this passage, Aquinas explicitly refers to the actual process of the corruption of a human being (“first the use of reason departs and living and breathing remains; second, living and breathing depart...”) and not just to the logical separation of rationality from an animal.

A look at the immediate context in which Aquinas makes this remark further clarifies this point: Aquinas actually brings up the process of corruption in this passage in order to further support a point he has just used the process of *generation* to illustrate. As he writes in the previous paragraph: “[I]t is clear in the generation of a particular human being that first you find being in the material subject, then you find living, and after that a human being exists; for first an animal exists and then a human being, as is said in *De generatione animalium* II” (19).³¹ Given that Aquinas clearly takes himself to be describing an actual ontological process in the case of generation, it would be an extremely forced reading that denied he was also describing an actual, ontological process in the case of corruption immediately following.³²

For our purposes, this is significant: if in the process of dying, the rational soul is replaced by a lower-level soul (either sensory or nutritive) before organic life ends, an actual change in substance occurs before the organic body dies. As Aquinas puts it: “When [at death] the soul withdraws, another substantial form takes over that provides an existence that differs in species” (InDA II.1.226). As this claim is typically understood, when Lindsay dies, her substantial form ‘human being’ is immediately replaced by the substantial form ‘corpse,’ or even just becomes a collection of elements with their own substantial forms that gradually fall apart.³³ What the *Liber de causis* commentary passage suggests is that the substantial form ‘human being’ is sometimes (or, perhaps, always) replaced by at least one intermediate form before that being becomes a corpse.³⁴

³¹ “*Manifestum est autem in generatione unius particularis hominis quod in materiali subiecto primo invenitur esse, deinde invenitur esse, deinde invenitur vivum, postmodum autem est homo; prius enim ipse est animal quam homo, ut dicitur in II De generatione animalium.*”

³² Interestingly, several contemporary Thomists argue that, given “modern embryological knowledge,” Aquinas would reject delayed hominization in favor of immediate hominization. For a particularly clear version of this argument see Heany (1992) as well as Eberl (2000).

³³ The body that remains is a human body only equivocally—properly speaking, it’s a composite of matter and the form ‘corpse.’

³⁴ I don’t believe anything of crucial philosophical importance hangs on whether an intermediate form always replaces ‘human being’ before the organism ceases functioning, but I find it

What is it that lives and breathes after the departure of the rational soul in Lindsay's case? Certainly not something that fits neatly into a species and genus other than 'human being' as we usually understand it.³⁵ At the same time, the being in a persistent vegetative state is a living, organic body but *not* a person if it lacks the substantial form 'human being,' and thus, the capacity for rational thought. The person, Lindsay, persists for exactly as long as that living body possesses the substantial form 'human being,' and no longer.

IV) What Follows?

The real question here is whether the rational soul persists in union with matter as long as an organic body lives and breathes. On one reading of Thomistic metaphysics, Lindsay (understood both as the person and as the human being) exists even in a persistent vegetative state until the moment organic life ends, because only then does the rational soul separate from matter. So far in this paper, I've argued that this position does not necessarily follow from Aquinas's account of human nature. The unity of substantial form entails that human beings (and human persons) are identical to living human bodies, but Aquinas leaves open the very real possibility that the living body in a PVS is not a *human* body.³⁶ On my reading, Aquinas's gerontology parallels his embryology: the rational soul can separate from matter before organic life ends, in the same way that God infuses the rational soul into matter after organic life has begun.³⁷

plausible to suppose that Aquinas would claim that this process always takes place—although at differing rates. (For some people, the process might take days, weeks, or even years, while for others it might last for only a few seconds.)

³⁵ Concerning these 'transitional' forms, Aquinas writes: "intermediate [forms] do not belong to a complete species, but are on the way (*in via*) toward a species; and, therefore, [those forms] are not generated as permanent, but as [forms] through which the ultimate generation is reached" (SCG II.89).

³⁶ This might not seem like a particular *attractive* possibility, insofar as it entails that Lindsay's body is replaced with a qualitatively identical body that is no longer human. This is clearly Aquinas's view when it comes to the end of biological life, though: the living body is replaced by a qualitatively identical but substantially distinct corpse. It's also his view as regards gestation and the move from nutritive to sensory to rational beings. So, really, it's not clear why it would be any more objectionable for Aquinas to hold this view about the end of life.

³⁷ Eberl objects that this account violates the rule of Ockham's Razor—"i.e., the explanation that is the least metaphysically complex by requiring the postulation of the least number of entities... is the explanation to which one ought to give assent" (2005, 40). This seems to me to miss a crucial feature of the proper use of this principle: the Razor recommends against

I believe, however, that identifying Aquinas's exact metaphysical position on this issue is—to some large extent—irrelevant to the current ethical debates surrounding end-of-life issues. We are very rarely in a relevant position of epistemic certainty concerning the ontological status of human beings at the end stages of life, whatever the metaphysical realities of the situation. Furthermore, even were we to possess complete epistemic access to the ontological status of human beings at the end of life, there is not one determinate ethical position that would follow from this knowledge.

Although Moreland and Wallace, for instance, argue that Aquinas's position is superior to Descartes's account of human nature precisely because it entails that the human person persists as long as organic life continues—and, thus, speaks against euthanasia even in cases of persistent vegetative states and higher brain death,³⁸ I think it's important to recognize that in order to reach any particular conclusion about how to behave toward living organisms at the end stages of life, we need to appeal to a variety of ethical principles, and that such ethical principles do not follow automatically from metaphysical ones.³⁹ We might think it permissible, for example, to end someone's suffering even if we hold that she is still a person and not merely a vegetative being. On the other hand, we might think it impermissible to end the life of an organism—even if we believe it to be no longer a person—on the grounds of its historical relation to the human person.

In conclusion, introducing Aquinas's metaphysics into contemporary philosophical debates on topics such as abortion or euthanasia seems genuinely helpful only if we keep in mind that accounts of human nature do not themselves generate ethical principles.⁴⁰ We would do well

multiplying entities *beyond necessity*, not choosing whichever position involves the fewest number of entities. If the principle functioned as Eberl states here, we should all advocate monism. As it is, the dramatic physiological changes that occur in the process of organic death give us good reason to suppose that perhaps we do need at times to posit more than one entity at the end of life.

³⁸ Eberl makes a similar claim, writing that “the Thomistic position is universally applicable and concepts of death based upon alternative philosophical understandings of human nature are not valid options for clinical practice and public policy” (2005, 47). For a full discussion of his argument in favor of this position, see Eberl (Forthcoming).

³⁹ For an extended argument to this effect, see Corcoran (2003).

⁴⁰ To this end, I think Ramsay (1997) makes a promising start, insofar as it addresses Aquinas's conception of three of the central moral concepts appealed to in debates concerning euthanasia.

to focus attention not just on Thomistic metaphysics but also on the ethical principles that are far too often left implicit in current discussions.⁴¹

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⁴¹ This paper has gone through many iterations over a number of years, and I owe so many people thanks for discussions of it that there's no hope of my recalling them all. I do remember, though, that Josh Hochschild gave me excellent comments on a very early draft at a conference at Wheaton College, that I am grateful to audiences at the Cornell Summer Medieval Colloquium and Jon Kvanvig's Philosophy of Religion Conference for their input, and that (as usual) I owe Bob Pasnau my undying thanks for pushing me towards greater truth and clarity. To everyone else who gave me written or verbal feedback on some version of this paper—I deeply appreciate it, even if I haven't managed to name you here. Rest assured, this paper is the better for you, and the worse for my forgetfulness.

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