Isaac Bisbee

Dr. Harry Ide

PHIL 338

April 25, 2024

“Reconciling Neoplatonic Monism and Thomist Teleology”

**Thesis Abstract**

In this paper, I aim to present a theory of human nature characterized as substance immaterialist monism, formed from reconciling Neoplatonic monism with Thomist teleology. This paper will evaluate various metaphysical frameworks concerning the relationship between the body and the soul. The first framework is Neoplatonism, an immaterialist monist theory. The other framework comes from Thomas Aquinas, a philosopher deeply influenced by Aristotelian thought, known as Thomist hylomorphism. The first and main pillar from Aquinas' framework adopted for this paper is the affirmation of God's existence. This definition and understanding of God is essential for the second pillar of Aquinas' framework: Teleology. Having established the metaphysical framework, it can be reasoned that all things first exist as ideas before they exist as physical matter. One analogy that explains this theory's conception of the physical world is the analogy of Infrared (IR) Light. By understanding the physical body as the manifestation of a spiritual “idea”, the possible issue of unity between the two is nonexistent. The purpose of the body, then, is its ability to actualize potentials. Although my theory disagrees with the Neoplatonic view of the physical world's value, it finds common ground with Aquinas' conception of purpose and his Theory of Forms. Other forms of dualism exacerbate the issue of unity even further, portraying individuals as composed of two distinct parts. An alternative framework that claims to address these complexities is materialist monism. This scenario echoes the Ship of Theseus conundrum. In conclusion, this paper has attempted to reconcile two metaphysical perspectives on the body-soul relationship, primarily drawing from Neoplatonic monism and Thomist teleology.

**Introduction**

Throughout history, philosophers have explored fundamental questions about human nature and the relationship between the body and the soul. In this paper, I aim to present a theory of human nature characterized as substance immaterialist monism, formed from reconciling Neoplatonic monism with Thomist teleology. This theory adopts two foundational pillars from Aquinas' worldview. Continually, by synthesizing these two frameworks this paper posits objections to both, providing alternative solutions. By utilizing both perspectives, this paper should clearly explain the unity between body and soul as well as respond to other metaphysical theories.

**Establishing Terminology and Frameworks**

This paper will evaluate various metaphysical frameworks concerning the relationship between the body and the soul. Among the categories explored are substance immaterialist monism, substance materialist monism, and dualism. Dualism posits that humans possess two distinct properties: bodies and souls, with the degree of separation between these properties varying depending on the specific framework. In contrast, monism asserts that humans are characterized by a single property; materialists contend that only the body constitutes the person, whereas immaterialists argue that only the soul represents the true essence of personhood. While these definitions may invite debate, establishing a foundational understanding of the terminology is crucial for assessing the two frameworks in this paper.

The first framework is Neoplatonism, an immaterialist monist theory. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) was utilized to define this perspective, “Neoplatonic philosophy is a strict form of principle-monism that strives to understand everything [based on] a single cause that they consider divine, and indiscriminately referred to as 'the First', 'the One', or 'the Good'.” Further, Neoplatonism claims that all things exist in varying degrees of emanation, with the material world being the lowest and least perfect form of existence. Because of this, Neoplatonic monism claims that all humans are souls, temporarily trapped in physical bodies. The immortal soul possesses intellect and higher faculties, capable of contemplating spiritual truths. In contrast, the body is imperfect, associated with the material world, and subject to decay.[[1]](#footnote-0)

The other framework comes from Thomas Aquinas, a philosopher deeply influenced by Aristotelian thought, known as Thomist hylomorphism. According to Aquinas, all substances are composed of both matter and form, with matter providing the underlying substrate and form giving it its specific nature and purpose. This view is grounded in Aquinas's belief in the existence of God, who is the ultimate source of all existence and teleology or purpose. This is similar to the Neoplatonic view that all things come from “The One”. However, humans, in this framework, are a composite of body and soul, with the soul providing the form or essence that animates the body. Aquinas does not view the body as a hindrance to the soul's ascent towards higher realities, but rather as an essential component of human nature, created with a specific purpose in accordance with divine design.[[2]](#footnote-1)

**God and Teleology Assumed from Aquinas**

As established in the introduction, my theory largely aligns with Aquinas' metaphysical framework. This alignment serves as a foundational element for evaluating both dualism and monism. The first and main pillar from Aquinas' framework adopted for this paper is the affirmation of God's existence. According to Aquinas, God is understood as specifically Christian characterized as a Trinity and the First Cause. However my theory does not require a Christian conception of God; rather, it underscores the attributes and actions attributed to God, including possessing a divine will, being the prime mover and first cause, embodying simplicity and indivisibility, and possessing all power and knowledge.

This definition and understanding of God is essential for the second pillar of Aquinas' framework: Teleology. Teleology refers to the study of purposes or ends in nature and is fundamental to Aquinas' understanding of the world. In this framework, God's divine will imbues all aspects of creation with inherent purpose and direction. Moreover, because God is the creator of all things, and because He creates all things with a purpose, we can reason that all things have a purpose. Aquinas discusses this at length in his seminal work, the *Summa Theologiae*;

“Since, however, God is the cause of things by His intellect, and thus it behooves that the type of every effect should pre-exist in Him, as is clear from what has gone before (I:19:4), it is necessary that the type of the order of things towards their end should pre-exist in the divine mind.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

Therefore, along with the existence of God, this theory argues that all things, having originated from the divine mind, have teleology.

**The Relationship of Body and Soul**

Having established the metaphysical framework, it can be reasoned that all things first exist as ideas before they exist as physical matter. This version of idealism comes from the Neoplatonist understanding of reality, that all things proceed out of “The One”, or in this case, God. This concept of “ideas” can be traced back to Plato's use of “forms” in his writings including *The Republic*. In Book X, Plato argues that all things exist first as forms, using the concepts of a “bed” and “table”. These objects which exist in the real world, first existed as an idea in a carpenter's mind. The carpenter possesses the idea of “beds” and “tables”. Similarly, a painter can paint a bed or table, and though these pictures do not function in the same way as the physical objects made by the carpenter, both the painting and the physical object come from the initial idea of beds and tables.[[4]](#footnote-3) Similarly, every human exists first, outside of time, as an idea in the divine mind. This “idea”, is the form of the person. However, this does not imply that the physical body is a distinct entity from the person. Instead, it is argued that the physical realm is merely a manifestation of the spiritual realm.

One analogy that explains this theory's conception of the physical world is the analogy of Infrared (IR) Light. IR light, invisible to the human eye, is not a separate level of existence that humans are unaware of. Rather, it is purely a wavelength that requires scientists to utilize tools that convert it into visible light, enabling perception. Through this process, scientists can detect and comprehend various phenomena occurring on Earth and in space. Similarly, one could liken the physical realm to a specific "wavelength" of existence. Just as visible light is the only wavelength perceptible to humans, the physical realm represents the sole level perceivable by human senses. The body, therefore, functions as the tool that translates certain aspects of existence into perceivable entities, allowing interaction and measurement.

By understanding the physical body as the manifestation of a spiritual “idea”, the possible issue of unity between the two is nonexistent. This is because, while the soul exists as the form, and the body as the matter, similar to the Thomist description, the two are a singular unified person. However, this does not necessitate that the soul perishes with the body. Just as losing an ear or an eye leads to the body's separation from sound or vision, it does not constitute total death and separation from life. Moreover, the loss of the physical body is purely the loss of connection with the physical world and does not constitute the total death from all existence. The conclusion then, is that human identity is first and primarily the soul or “idea” from the divine mind, the body is the tool by which the soul interacts with the physical world.

**The Teleology of the Physical**

The theory that the physical body is the tool for the soul, raises an important question: Is the physical body a hindrance as understood by Neoplatonism, or does it have a purpose as understood by Aquinas? While understanding the purpose of the physical body is not essential for grasping the relationship between body and soul, it is important for comprehending why this theory must reconcile Aquinas and the Neoplatonists, instead of merely adopting the Neoplatonic view. Neoplatonism claims that the physical is the most imperfect and farthest level of existence from “The One”. Because of this, the body is a hindrance. Like Aquinas, I reason that the physical world has inherent value because, like all things, it comes from the will of God. Because of this, the physical world has teleological foundations or a purpose.

The purpose of the body, then, is its ability to actualize potentials. This idea is largely derived from Thomist Form Theory. If the soul is the substantial identity of the person, the body serves as the vessel through which potentials are realized, enabling individuals to grow and evolve. Aquinas states, “But the soul is the form of the body. Therefore, just as the body is changed when it passes from potentiality to act, so also the soul passes from potentiality to act, and so from non-being to being, as we have said before.”[[5]](#footnote-4) My theory posits that while the body undergoes changes and physical properties evolve, the soul, as the fundamental identity, remains constant as the same “idea” from the divine mind. An illustrative example is a box, which does not become a different box when its contents are emptied, altered, or changed. The contents give the box unique qualities, but the box itself remains a box. Similarly, all humans possess human souls, but their personalities, emotions, and physical characteristics differentiate them from one another. This concept is akin to Aquinas' notion of accidental properties, which change without altering the essence of the substance. Unlike dualism, this theory remains monist by asserting that the soul and body are not separate substances but integrated aspects of a single entity. A person can grow, change, and even lose memories or consciousness, but their soul remains their fundamental identity.

**Objection to Thomist Hylomorphism**

Although my theory disagrees with the Neoplatonic view of the physical world's value, it finds common ground with Aquinas' conception of purpose and his Theory of Forms. However, this alignment prompts an assessment and response to Thomist Hylomorphism. Initially, it seems plausible to adopt Aquinas' dualism since much of this theory's framework is already in line with his metaphysical worldview. The fundamental reason my theory adopts immaterialist monism over hylomorphic dualism is that Aquinas' view fails to adequately address the unity between the body and soul. While Aquinas acknowledges the interconnectedness of these two parts, his dualistic framework still views them as separate entities, with the soul animating the body. In contrast, immaterialist monism better explains the intrinsic oneness of human identity, viewing the person as the soul primarily. Aquinas would agree that the individual parts of the body are not the body itself, and similarly, the immaterialist monism of my theory posits that the body is a part of the person, but not the person itself. By embracing monism, my theory provides a more coherent and holistic understanding of human existence.

**Assessing Alternative Theories**

Other forms of dualism exacerbate the issue with unity even further, portraying individuals as composed of two distinct parts. This perspective risks fragmenting human nature, undermining our intuitive sense of self. Further, after death, is the person the body or the soul? This presumes that the soul survives death. If the soul perishes with the body, its purpose becomes ambiguous. Considering my theory assumes the existence of God, the theological implications from dualism become significant, as it prompts further explanations into why God created individuals as separate entities and how unity is maintained. While arguments for dualism exist, they often appear complex and less plausible compared to holistic views of human nature. René Descartes' mind-body dualism, for instance, posits the mind and body as distinct substances with different natures[[6]](#footnote-5), a notion that clashes with modern scientific understanding. These complexities highlight the need for a coherent framework that not only can withstand modern scientific objections, but also theological implications with the soul.

An alternative framework that claims to address these complexities is materialist monism. This view posits that human identity is purely physical, thus avoiding issues related to the soul, personal unity, or scientific comprehension. By asserting that human beings are only what we can physically observe, materialist monism eliminates the need for any spiritual component. Interestingly, some materialist monists even affirm the existence of God, despite their belief that human identity is tied solely to the physical body. However, while materialist monism may seem appealing, it raises critical questions by reducing humans to mere physical entities: What parts of the body are required to be considered human? Without a soul or substantial form, how can one be certain they are the same person after losing a limb? Moreover, considering future scientific advancements, if it becomes possible to replace every part of the body with mechanical components, at what stage does the person remain the same individual? This scenario echoes the Ship of Theseus conundrum. In contrast, my theory of immaterialist monism does not encounter this issue, as it does not equate the body with human identity. No matter how many physical properties change, the soul remains the enduring essence of the person.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to reconcile two metaphysical perspectives on the body-soul relationship, primarily drawing from Neoplatonic monism and Thomist teleology. By synthesizing these frameworks, my theory establishes a framework of substance immaterialist monism, stating that humans are unified entities primarily the soul, with the body serving as its physical manifestation. This perspective rejects dualism's separation of body and soul while incorporating Aquinas' insights into the purpose-driven nature of existence. Through analogies and conceptual examples, it clarifies how the body actualizes the potentials of the soul, remaining fundamentally unchanged despite physical alterations. Furthermore, this theory challenges Neoplatonic monism and Thomist hylomorphism, offering a coherent account of human identity. By emphasizing the enduring essence of the soul and its divine origin, this theory provides a holistic understanding of human existence, acknowledging the intrinsic unity between material and immaterial aspects of life.

References

Hatfield, Gary. 2008. “René Descartes (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/#MindRela.

Jowett, Benjamin. 1994. “Plato, "The Republic." Wikipedia. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1497/pg1497-images.html.

Mackenna, Stephen, and Christian Wildberg. 2016. “Neoplatonism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism/.

Pasnau, Robert. 2022. “Thomas Aquinas (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/.

“SUMMA THEOLOGIAE: Home.” 1947. New Advent. https://www.newadvent.org/summa/.

1. "Neoplatonism" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016 , accessed April 25, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. "Thomas Aquinas" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022 , accessed May 8, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Aquinas, Thomas. "Summa Theologiae." trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New Advent, 1947, accessed April 25, 2024, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Plato, "The Republic," trans. Benjamin Jowett, Project Gutenberg, 1994, accessed April 25, 2024, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1497>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Aquinas, Thomas. “Summa Theologiae.” Book I, Q.76, A.1. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New Advent, 1947, accessed May 16, 2024, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. “René Descartes” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2008 , accessed May 11, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/#MindRela>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)