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# On Whether Or Not Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Lived Body Experience Can Enrich St. Thomas Aquinas's Integral Anthropology

Joshua Miller

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ON WHETHER OR NOT MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF LIVED  
BODY EXPERIENCE CAN ENRICH ST. THOMAS AQUINAS'S  
INTEGRAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College  
and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Joshua F. Miller

May 2009

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Joshua F. Miller

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## ABSTRACT

# ON WHETHER OR NOT MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF LIVED BODY EXPERIENCE CAN ENRICH ST. THOMAS AQUINAS'S INTEGRAL ANTHROPOLOGY

By

Joshua F. Miller

May 2009

Dissertation Supervised by Professor James Swindal

I argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of lived body experience can be used to enrich Aquinas's integral anthropology. In Chapter One I lay out the possibilities of such an enrichment by examining contemporary philosophers of mind who draw on Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty in strikingly similar ways. Analytical Thomists, as represented by Eric LaRock, and thinkers seeking to integrate neuropsychology and phenomenology, like Ralph Ellis, argue that the concept of form (taken from Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty respectively) is necessary for properly understanding the human being as an integral unity of intellectual principle and body. I then pose potential objections to my project: 1) that Aquinas's method of syllogistic demonstration and dependence on tradition is not compatible with Merleau-Ponty's use of phenomenological description and insistence that philosophy be grounded in immediate subjective experience; 2) that their basic anthropological terms (e.g. soul, body, consciousness, form) might radically

differ; 3) that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, if a form of idealism or materialism, might preclude compatibility leading to enrichment. In Chapter Two I outline the broad metaphysical structure of Aquinas's thought and then present his argument that the intellectual soul is form of the body. In Chapter Three I outline Merleau-Ponty's basic philosophical methodology and then present his phenomenological explorations of consciousness (or soul) as form of the body. Chapter Four is devoted to overcoming the objections raised in Chapter One. I argue, for example, that there is a foundation for compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty in that both believe perception is the basis for any philosophical knowledge and both appeal to interior experience for concluding that the human being is an integral union of intellectual principle and body. I conclude by arguing that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of lived body experience can enrich Aquinas's philosophical anthropology in at least three ways: 1) they richly illustrate Aquinas's position that the intellectual soul is form of the body; 2) they can offer better practical examples for Aquinas's arguments than he himself provides; 3) they can be used to extend Aquinas's claims regarding the intellect's knowledge of itself.

## DEDICATION

To my dear wife, Brooke,  
with great love and gratitude – *totos tuus*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I give first honor to the Lord God and to his Holy Catholic Church, which sustains me in every way – *Spiritus est qui vivificat*. I give heartfelt appreciation to my wife, Brooke, for her tireless support these past several years of graduate school. I thank also my children--David, Virginia, Nancy and Christopher--who never failed to pray “for daddy’s dissertation.” To my parents, Arthur and Carol Miller, who are abidingly generous with time and resource, and to my father-in-law, Patrick Murphy, who provided initial encouragement and funding for my pursuit of a doctoral degree in philosophy, I give hearty thanks. To Professor Jim Swindal, my dissertation director, who has been amazingly helpful in so many ways, I am deeply grateful. My thanks go also to Professor Thérèse Bonin and Professor Fred Evans for their critical and instructive reading of my dissertation. I am grateful to my colleagues at SIMA® International who have faithfully prayed for my work. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the larger bodies of which I am part and which have helped provide the rare opportunity of philosophical study: Duquesne University as well as the political institutions of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the United States of America.



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## Introduction

One of the developments John Paul II calls for in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, is the exposure of “continuity between contemporary philosophy and...philosophy developed in the Christian tradition.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that revealing such continuity (where it can be found) is necessary to help overcome several problems with which contemporary thought is confronted. One problem is that of *eclecticism*, which occurs when thinkers draw haphazardly from ideas in a wide range of different modes of thought “without concern for their internal coherence, their place within a system or their historical context.”<sup>2</sup> One of the risks of such an approach is a “failure to distinguish the part of a truth of a given doctrine from elements of it which may be erroneous.”<sup>3</sup> A second problem John Paul II points to is that of *historicism*, a claim that “the truth of a philosophy is determined on the basis of its appropriateness to a certain period and a certain historical purpose.”<sup>4</sup> The history of philosophy becomes, therefore, a way of cataloguing certain teachings not universally applicable but only apropos for the time they were developed, rather than a way to identify authentic growth in philosophical truth. A third problem is that of *scientism*, which “refuses to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences.”<sup>5</sup> According to this perspective real knowledge on the basis of philosophical speculation, or divine revelation, or aesthetic intuition is impossible; what counts is that which can be scientifically verified.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason*, Vatican translation, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), #86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, #87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, #88.

As a Catholic philosopher I am committed to the Church's call, as articulated in *Fides et Ratio*, to show continuity (where it can be found) between the Catholic intellectual tradition and contemporary thinkers who tend to be outside this tradition. This dissertation is an exercise in a kind of dialogue leading to such continuity from the standpoint of my basic Thomistic orientation. Certainly I do not equate the philosophy of St. Thomas with the Catholic intellectual tradition. Indeed many Catholic philosophers within the pale of this tradition would firmly resist the label of Thomist: e.g. many Augustinian, Franciscan, Existentialist, and phenomenological thinkers. The dialogue I pursue is between the Catholic intellectual tradition in a Thomistic vein and a representative of contemporary thought, Merleau-Ponty, who is outside that tradition.

The primary purpose of dialogue is to establish shared truth, to indicate common ground, and to pave the way for mutual growth toward the truth. In this dissertation I specifically attempt to do that by examining whether or not St. Thomas Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's respective teachings regarding the integral unity of body and intellectual soul are compatible enough for Merleau-Ponty's thought to enrich Aquinas's. Thus, I approach the writing with the presupposition that Aquinas's philosophical anthropology is basically correct, although not complete, and that it is possible for the Thomist to develop Aquinas's insights into the nature of the human being.

Showing agreement among thinkers who express truth, especially when they come from diverse traditions, develops philosophical knowledge (as it avoids the eclecticism heretofore mentioned) and is therefore a worthy task for a doctoral dissertation. Why do I believe this? Basically because philosophical positions that are true shine brighter when their common ground is exposed, like separate lights when they

are brought together. If philosophy is the search for wisdom and wisdom involves dwelling in truth, then a movement to expose truth across very diverse philosophical disciplines (in this case Merleau-Ponty's version of phenomenology and Thomism) is a worthy task. Furthermore, comparisons of the sort I am attempting often open up new questions and new ways to interpret the respective thinkers under comparison and therefore can provide a springboard for additional dialogue.

Although I will be making comparisons between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty in order to expose common ground in their respective thinking about the human being's integral unity, the purpose of the dissertation is not a comparison for its own sake. My primary purpose is to examine whether or not Merleau-Ponty's thought might deepen and enrich Aquinas's teaching. The objective I lay before myself with this dissertation has been called for but not, to my knowledge, carried out. Recently John Haldane has stressed the value of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for contemporary philosophical anthropology as well as noted its potential for enriching Aristotelian and/or Thomistic philosophy. Haldane points to the current disarray in analytic philosophy and argues that a return tohylomorphism and Merleau-Ponty's insights into the lived body experience could help resolve this disarray. In this context he declares his sympathy with "the possibility of incorporating Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological and Wittgenstein's 'grammatical' insights within a broadly Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics."<sup>6</sup> In addition to Haldane,<sup>7</sup> the Thomistic metaphysician W. Norris Clarke, S.J. recently declared that

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<sup>6</sup> John Haldane, "Insight, Inference and Intellection," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 73 (2000), 42.

<sup>7</sup> I should also note that Alasdair MacIntyre speaks disappointedly about the contemporary loss of the Aristotelian/Thomistic notion that the human being is first and foremost an animal and suggests that this lesson may need to be relearned "perhaps from

“the most significant challenge and opportunity for Thomism today [is its] relationship with phenomenology.”<sup>8</sup> Here Clarke speaks about a reciprocity of enrichment between the two methods. On the one hand he holds that “the rich and insightful analysis of contemporary phenomenology can be a wonderful complement to enlarge and refine Thomas’s own base of analysis.”<sup>9</sup> He also argues that phenomenology requires a metaphysical grounding provided by Aquinas’s philosophy which it cannot supply for itself. Given the necessarily limited scope of a dissertation I will neither be exploring how phenomenology in general nor how Merleau-Ponty’s particular version of it could be enriched by Aquinas’s thinking, but I do hope to fulfill in some way what Haldane and Clarke have called for regarding a phenomenological enrichment of Aquinas’s thinking.

I now briefly touch upon what I *will not be doing* with this dissertation. First, I will not attempt to force Merleau-Ponty into Thomistic categories or, on the other hand, to claim that Aquinas is a phenomenologist. Some Thomists have argued that whatever is good in modern and contemporary philosophy is somehow latently present in Aquinas’ work. Although I am sympathetic with this perspective I will not be arguing that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights are present, though in seminal form, in Aquinas’s work.

Second, in the light of comparing Aquinas to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology I will have occasion to draw attention to an overlooked element of Aquinas’s thought, namely, the importance of subjectivity. But I will not conduct an exhaustive examination

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those phenomenological investigations that enabled Merleau-Ponty also to conclude that I am my body.” See his *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, (Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1999), 6.

<sup>8</sup> W. Norris Clarke, “Thomism and Contemporary Philosophical Pluralism,” *New Scholasticism* 67 (January 1990): 130.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129.

of interiority or inner awareness in Aquinas even though this might be helpful for a broader comparison of Aquinas with phenomenology. It will be enough for me to establish that Aquinas is open to the kind of explorations of subjective experience which are central to the phenomenological method.

Third, the dissertation does not fall into the category of philosophy of mind. Obviously the questions I raise are intimately related to this contemporary philosophical issue and my primary interlocutors in Chapter One, Ralph Ellis and Erick LaRock, draw upon Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas respectively but this work is not a direct exercise in philosophy of mind. It is closely related, but neither Merleau-Ponty nor Aquinas thematize mind per se (*mens* – Latin; *esprit* – French) in their respective philosophical anthropologies. Merleau-Ponty is wont to speak of the human being according to its embodied nature (“*body-subject*,” “lived body”) and usually refers to the thinking part of the human being as consciousness but never does he separate “mind” from its incarnate state. To categorize Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas’s respective anthropologies as philosophy of mind would be to disengage them from their mutual commitment to considering the human being as an essential unity.



## **Chapter One: Fruitful Compatibility or Mere Comparison?**

I begin with a statement of justification about the title of this first chapter as well as a short example of what fruitful compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty could look like. Some might claim that even to attempt an examination of Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's respective philosophies in order to find similarities or differences between them leading to some kind of compatibility would be a waste of time. I am thinking now of certain secular scholars whose outlines of the history of philosophy jump from Aristotle to Descartes and who assume that philosophical thinking among the medieval scholastics is so grounded in theological presuppositions that it simply cannot count as philosophy. In the next chapter I will address this charge with regard to Aquinas's thinking but for now I want simply to point out that, at the very least, some kind of comparison between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty is possible and likely to be philosophically interesting because some degree of comparison between any two kinds of things is possible and philosophically interesting. A thought and a potato can be compared at one level – in that they both have some kind of existence. The potato has a real organic existence and the thought a mental existence. And even though this comparison depends upon the broadest of common denominators, existence itself, it is still philosophically interesting because it draws our attention to a most significant metaphysical claim: everything shares in some form of being.

Furthermore, even if Aquinas is a pure theologian and fails to ground his philosophical anthropology on principles established by the human mind there are at least two reasons why it would likely be philosophically valuable to examine similarities and dissimilarities between his notion of the human being and Merleau-Ponty's. First, the

comparison could help us understand how both philosophical and theological lines of argument can reach similar conclusions. Second, it could help draw a distinction between philosophically legitimate claims about the human person and those that depend upon revelation. So, at least some philosophically interesting form of comparison between the anthropological thinking of Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty is probable.

However, it is another thing altogether to show “fruitful compatibility” between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty. What do I mean by this phrase? Let me draw on an analogy from horticulture, already suggested by this chapter’s title, to further explain. Experts in the art of grafting tell us that “the more closely...plants are related botanically, the better the chances are for...graft union to be successful.”<sup>10</sup> Grafting involves inserting a living shoot or scion from one plant into the rootstock of another plant. Ideally, the rootstock takes hold of the scion and gives it life so that the shoot develops alongside the other branches or stalks growing on the rootstock. The plant growing its own branches as well as the scions from another plant will obviously produce a more varied array of leaves and/or fruit than the plant that only develops its own original branches. Thus, the MacIntosh apple tree that grows Winesap scions alongside its original branches can produce an enriched yield due to the Winesap branches in the sense that the overall harvest of fruit is more diverse than it would have been without the grafting. Now, inter species grafting—e.g. within the apple trees just mentioned—is apparently almost always successful. Grafting between species within a genus often works well although to a lesser extent than that between plants of the same species. For example, grafting within the *Citrus* genus is regularly performed; orange tree branches grown on lemon tree rootstock

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<sup>10</sup> Hudson T. Hartmann, et al., *Plant Propagation: Principles & Practices*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 415.

give hearty yields as commercial citrus farmers well know. Sometimes, however, reciprocal grafts between species of the same genus are not successful: “‘Marianna’ plum on peach roots makes an excellent graft combination, but the reverse—grafts of the peach on ‘Marianna’ plum roots—either soon die or fail to develop normally.”<sup>11</sup> Plants of the same family but of different genera can sometimes be successfully grafted together but here the chances of success become far less likely. For a successful graft to take place there must be the right genotype combination between rootstock and scion; grafting within species is usually successful because of the close genetic similarities between scion and rootstock. Obviously the possibility of a strong genotype combination weakens as the genetic similarities between scion and rootstock also weaken. The question of whether or not there can be “fruitful compatibility” between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty can be likened to the question posed by the horticulturalist who wishes to propagate plants via grafting. He or she must ask whether or not there is enough genetic similarity between the scion and rootstock for the latter to “take hold” of the former and allow it to develop and thus be enriched by it. In similar fashion I am asking whether or not there is enough “genetic” similarity between the philosophical anthropologies of Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty for the former to take hold of the latter and be enriched by it. Can Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights be inserted into the rootstock of Aquinas’ philosophical system? Is Merleau-Ponty’s thought, written in a distinctly modern philosophical idiom, able to find a place within the medieval scholastic language of Aquinas? Are the core anthropological terms both thinkers use—e.g. soul, form, body—and their notions of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

what grounds philosophical claims and constitutes truth so different that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty can only be compared from a distance but not brought into fruitful union? As I said in the introduction I believe that Merleau-Ponty's anthropological insights can find a place with Aquinas's thought, that they are not so foreign to his philosophy that they cannot enrich it. What might this enrichment look like?

As an example of the kind of "fruitful compatibility" that I would like to demonstrate by the end of the dissertation I turn to two of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of lived body experience. I want to show how these insights might enrich the experiential base of Aquinas's argument that the intellect is the form of the body.

First, let us first look at our experience of bodily movement. Merleau-Ponty describes how we do not push ourselves about like a table or chair that we can grasp in one place and then shift to another. "My body itself I move directly," he says, "I do not find it at one point of objective space and transfer it to another, I have no need to look for it, it is already with me."<sup>12</sup> Another way to say this is that I find in myself no distance in either space or time between my intention to move my body and the movement itself. There is instead an immediacy between the decision and the physical act itself. Merleau-Ponty also describes how the body is expressive of our selves. Our emotions, not simply visceral emotions but those that are heartfelt, are so keenly manifest in our bodies that we can often see, for example, the joy of persons in their whole bearing – their eyes, walk, and gestures. Here our body parts are imbued with a distinctly spiritual affection. Do we not also sometimes experience that joy simply *must* be expressed in

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<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1962), 108. Hereafter referred to as *Phenomenology of Perception*.

bodily comportment--e.g. dance--in order for us to be properly joyful? Here our very limbs are in a way consciousness incarnate. As I thrust my hand forward with jubilation my experience is not that “I” am somehow back here simply behind my eyes but am also here in my extended hand. Further, it is in the very act of raising the hand or shouting or dancing that the joy comes into existence.

These two phenomenological illustrations show how, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, “consciousness of the body invades the body [and] the soul spreads over all its parts.”<sup>13</sup> We could say then, as Merleau-Ponty does, that *I am my body* insofar as I experience my body as co-extensive with my self.

I now move to Question 76 of the Prima Pars of the *Summa Theologica*, where Aquinas in his own way addresses the union of body and soul, and specifically Article One where Aquinas asks “Whether the Intellectual Principle is United to the Body as Its Form?” Aquinas answers in the affirmative and in the first part of his response gives Aristotle’s demonstration that the intellectual principle is the form of the body. I will skip this part of the argument and turn to a second stage of Aquinas’s response where he seems to make a latently phenomenological turn. After giving Aristotle’s demonstration he states that:

If anyone however wishes to say the intellectual soul is not the form of the body he must explain how it is that this action which is understanding may be the action of this man for every one knows by experience (*experitur*) that it is himself who understands.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.1, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 371: Si quis autem velit dicere animam intellectivam non esse corporis formam, oportet quod inveniatur modum quo ista actio quae est intelligere, sit huius hominis actio: experitur enim unusquisque seipsum esse qui intelligit. In this case I have slightly modified the Benzinger translation.

I, as a particular being made up of flesh and blood and existing at a given time and place, recognize that I myself understand, that understanding somehow emerges from this concrete manifestly embodied creature. I am conscious of being the same one who both senses and thinks. This basic experience suggests that the intellect is the form of the body, but it is not a complete argument for there may be other explanations to account for it. However, let us note that the experience itself is not called into doubt. Aquinas, as Merleau-Ponty does, trusts our primary perception of being embodied rational agents. Now, the sentence from which I have just quoted is the beginning of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, the kind Aquinas so often uses. He will go on to address a variety of explanations for our experience of being creatures who both understand and think. After showing problems with these explanations he then concludes that “this [particular] man understands because the intellectual principle is his form.”<sup>15</sup>

Compatibility is suggested between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty because both believe that at the level of primary perception human beings experience themselves as embodied rational agents. Further, both trust this basic experience which implies a common epistemological grounding in the perceived world. Aquinas will go on to argue that the only adequate explanation for this perception is that the intellectual principle is the form of the body, whereas Merleau-Ponty is content to leave proof for our composite nature at the level of phenomenological description. Aquinas may not need any additional phenomenological analysis to make his argument, but I submit that the phenomenological descriptions of the lived body provided by Merleau-Ponty can enrich the experiential

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Hereafter, all translations of the *Summa Theologica* will be from this edition, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.4: “quod hic homo intelligit, quia principium intellectivum est forma ipsius.”

base drawn on by Aquinas. The Thomist could declare, for example, that if anyone wishes to say that the intellectual soul is not the form of the body he or she must first explain how it is that we are able to experience in ourselves an immediacy between our decision to move our bodies and the movement itself. He or she might also say that those who deny that the intellectual soul is form of our bodies must explain why it is that our bodies are imbued with expressions of our conscious life to such an extent that we sometimes experience that a spiritual emotion would be incomplete unless borne out in our bodies.

This brief foray into an area of possible fruitful compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty is one way that enrichment between the two thinkers might take place. However, at this point I remain more like the hopeful and amateur horticulturalist thinking about how a new graft might work than the seasoned orange grove botanist planning how to raise yet another crop of California Navels on the base of lemon trees. In this chapter I plot out the likelihood of successful enrichment between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty as well as raise potential objections to it.

A final word before getting into the possibilities of fruitful compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty is that my attempt is not to create a hybrid that would draw on both our thinkers while going beyond them to a new species of anthropological thought. My main intention is to explore whether or not certain of Merleau-Ponty's anthropological ideas can fit within a Thomistic framework in such a way that they remain distinctly Merleau-Pontian while also being compatible with Aquinas's insights. In Part One of this chapter I argue for the possibility of compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty while in Part Two I raise objections to this possibility.

**Part I. Compatibility Between Aquinas & Merleau-Ponty Suggested by Contemporary Mind-Body Theorists who Draw on these Thinkers in Strikingly Similar Ways.**

Much contemporary scholarship is highly critical both of computational theories of mind and of Cartesian style dualism in which the human being is composed of two distinct parts—unextended mental substance and extended bodily substance. In this part of the dissertation I introduce two contemporary thinkers who stand together in critiquing both mechanistic and dualistic notions of the human being: Eric LaRock, an Analytical Thomist, and Ralph Ellis, a phenomenologist working at the intersection of neuropsychology and philosophy. Ellis is part of a growing movement of scholars in the fields of phenomenological psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience who recognize the severe inadequacy of computational theories of mind for explaining consciousness. In the article from which I will draw to represent Ellis’s position, “Phenomenology-Friendly Neuroscience: The Return to Merleau-Ponty as Psychologist,” he reports that:

Neuropsychologists during the past decade have rediscovered the importance of self-organization and self-energized movement in biology, and the philosophy of mind has again begun to recognize that the differences between consciousness and the unconscious information processing of computers stem from the fact that conscious beings understand their world by initiating action and then taking note of environmental action-*affordances*; that is we understand what kinds of actions could be “afforded” by a given object, just as an infant understands when it finds an object that “affords” sucking.<sup>16</sup>

According to traditional neuroscience, consciousness can be explained by a bottom to top sort of causality in which neurological activity is simply identified as consciousness or leads to the epiphenomenal result of consciousness. But a current and blossoming direction in neuroscience is to recognize the truth of top to bottom causality as identified

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<sup>16</sup> Ralph Ellis, “Phenomenology-Friendly Neuroscience: The Return to Merleau-Ponty as Psychologist,” *Human Studies* 29 (2006), 33. Hereafter referred to as Ellis.



by phenomenology. Our minds have the power to initiate human agency. Furthermore, by understanding the “action-affordances” of those objects we encounter, our action can continue as we recognize how and in what ways we are able to interact with them. Now, a significantly influential reason for the recent change of direction among many neuroscientists has been Merleau-Ponty and his understanding, achieved through phenomenology, that human consciousness has the power to organize, integrate, and direct its bodily systems. Ellis reports, for example, that Francisco Varela et al.<sup>17</sup> dubbed this new phenomenological turn in neuropsychology the “enactive” approach while “specifically acknowledging their debt to Merleau-Ponty.”<sup>18</sup> Further, Varela and Shaun Gallagher have founded a new journal *Phenomenology and Cognition* “whose purpose is to re-integrate phenomenology with cognitive science by means of this enactive approach.”<sup>19</sup> Ellis reports that there are a number of other important mind/body theorists who have taken up the “enactive” approach and who have also acknowledged Merleau-Ponty’s influence on their work: Esther Thelen and Linda Smith,<sup>20</sup> Eugene Gendlin,<sup>21</sup> Thomas Natsoulas,<sup>22</sup> Natika Newton,<sup>23</sup> Kathleen Wider,<sup>24</sup> and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Francisco Varela and E. Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, 34.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Esther Thelen and Linda Smith, *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Natsoulas, “What is Wrong with Appendage Theory of Consciousness,” *Philosophical Psychology* 6 (1993): 137-54.

<sup>23</sup> Natika Newton, *Foundations of Understanding*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999).

There is also a growing movement among Thomists (especially of the analytical persuasion) to show that Aquinas's work is critically relevant to contemporary philosophy of mind. For example, the 2006 American Catholic Philosophical Association meeting was devoted to *Intelligence and the Philosophy of Mind* and included a number of papers addressing the importance of Aquinas's work to current discussions. In his Presidential Address at the conference Anthony Lisska reports that "the late twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest in Aquinas's philosophy of mind within analytic philosophy."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, many predominant Thomists in the analytic tradition have argued that Aquinas's doctrine of the intellectual soul as form of the body should be integrated into contemporary philosophy of mind. Peter Geach puts forward in his classic work *God and the Soul* that "the only tenable conception of the soul is the Aristotelian conception of the soul as the form."<sup>27</sup> Antony Kenny draws on Wittgenstein and Aquinas to argue that thinking and willing are capacities of the body and the soul that informs the body, rather than simply being actions of an immaterial mind.<sup>28</sup> Eleanore Stump attempts to show that Aquinas's notion of the form/body composite is compatible with non-reductive materialism.<sup>29</sup> In at least two recent articles<sup>30</sup> John Haldane stresses that a

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<sup>26</sup> Anthony Lisska, "A Look at Inner Sense In Aquinas: A Long-Neglected Faculty Psychology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 80 (2006), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Geach, *God and the Soul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1969), 38.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Kenny, *The Aquinas Lecture, 1988, The Self*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1988), 24-28.

<sup>29</sup> Eleanore Stump, "Non-Cartesian Substance Dualism and Materialism Without Reductionism," *Faith and Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (1995): 505-31.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example: John Haldane, "A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind," *Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (1998): 253-277. Also: John Haldane, "The State and Fate of Contemporary Philosophy of Mind," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (July 2000): 301-11.

Thomistic conception of form is necessary for rescuing contemporary philosophy of mind from fragmentation and disarray resulting from the inadequacy of physicalism to explain the relationship between consciousness and the body.

A full survey of the scholarly work among Thomists showing the relevance of Aquinas's anthropology to contemporary philosophy of mind would be out of place here. I draw attention to some of this work merely to note that there is a basic similarity between research in the fields of phenomenological psychology/neuroscience and work being done by Thomists who address themselves to contemporary philosophy of mind. Broadly speaking, both groups of thinkers, as I will show below, appeal to the notion of form as critical for avoiding theoretical problems with mechanistic or dualistic concepts of human nature. I turn now to a closer examination of two thinkers whose work is, generally speaking, representative of these two movements: Ralph Ellis, whose article I previously mentioned, and Erick LaRock.

I first turn to LaRock and his article, "Dualistic Interaction, Neural Dependence, and Aquinas's Composite View." LaRock's main objective in this article is to address two standard objections to Cartesian dualism and then to show how Aquinas's composite view of human nature escapes these objections.<sup>31</sup> The first major objection to Cartesian

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<sup>31</sup> LaRock admits that it is debatable whether or not Descartes held to the view that is commonly attributed to him. Armand Maurer shows that Descartes believed in the substantial unity of the human being. See: Armand Maurer, "Descartes and Aquinas on the Unity of a Human Being: Revisited," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1993): 501. He writes: "Defining the relation of soul to body for Regius, Descartes uses the scholastic notion of substantial form. The soul, he tells his pupil, is man's true substantial form (*Letter to Regius*; III, 505. 16-18. See also *Reply to Fifth Objections*; VII, 356. 14-22)...[Descartes] sees no use for substantial forms in material things, which he conceives as only geometric extension--an ideal object of mathematical physics—but he finds the notion of substantial form valid in the one case of the human soul (*Letter to Regius*; III, 505, 503). However, the Cartesian notion of substantial form is not

dualism, which LaRock takes from Patricia Churchland,<sup>32</sup> is the dualistic interaction objection. “Simply put, how can mind causally interact with brain, if the properties of mind are so radically different than those of brain.”<sup>33</sup> LaRock recognizes that Descartes was familiar with this problem and sought to alleviate it by appealing to the mediation of “animal spirits.” But this solution does not work since these “animal spirits” turn out to be nothing but low-density material objects and thus the problem of how to explain interaction between such profoundly different substances remains.

The second major objection, which LaRock takes from Paul Churchland,<sup>34</sup> concerns neural dependence. “Consciousness is intimately associated with neural brain activity, otherwise, it would not depend on the neurochemistry of the brain.”<sup>35</sup> We know that consciousness unquestionably depends upon the brain. Various sorts of psychotic disorders are successfully treated through drug therapy. Substance abuse can cause neural damage leading to lack of rationality. Emotions can be regulated by Prozac. “If consciousness is a feature of mind-stuff (as Cartesian dualists claim), then why is it affected by chemical manipulation or brain damage?”<sup>36</sup> LaRock also points to evidence

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Thomistic, for Aquinas conceived this form in the Aristotelian sense as the actuality of matter which is entirely potential and of itself undetermined to any particular form (*material prima*). For Descartes the soul does not stand in relation to the body. Rather, the soul is actively present in the body and capable of moving it at will.” Thus, the charge that Descartes holds to a “ghost in the machine” anthropology is inaccurate. Maurer does show, however, that Descartes’ followers (e.g. Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz) do not hold to any real substantial unity in the human being.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Eric F. LaRock, “Dualistic Interaction, Neural Dependence, and Aquinas’s Composite View,” *Philosophia Christi* Series 2 3.2 (2001), 460. Hereafter referred to as LaRock.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness: A Contemporary Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> LaRock, 461.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

showing “that the mind depends on specific neural regions of the brain to process visual information.”<sup>37</sup> When there is damage to those centers of the brain responsible for visual processing, then agnosia or mind-blindness can result. He references one patient diagnosed with agnosia who could see the clothes laid out on his bed but could not understand what they were until his wife put them into his hands. Clearly brain damage to a person can radically affect his or her consciousness. This and other examples lead LaRock to conclude that “Churchland’s argument from neural dependence offers a formidable challenge to Cartesian sorts of dualism.”<sup>38</sup>

However, LaRock does not accept Churchland’s conclusion that consciousness can be reduced to brain activity. He sees this as a dubious claim and offers Aquinas’s non-Cartesian dualism both to oppose the materialist reductionism of Paul Churchland and Patricia Churchland and to show how Aquinas’s teaching withstands the dualistic interaction and neural dependence objections.

According to LaRock, Aquinas offers a composite view of the human being that “carves out a middle path between physicalism and Cartesian sorts of dualism.”<sup>39</sup> This middle path is achieved through the metaphysical co-principles of form and matter. We must understand matter here in an equivocal sense for Aquinas uses the term to refer both to prime matter and to non-living matter that is a composite of matter and form (e.g. stones). Prime matter is “the underlying nebulous element out of which material objects are organized into definite patterns or structures by form.”<sup>40</sup> In scholastic language, the act or *esse* of the form is responsible not for the creation of prime matter, but for shaping

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

that matter into the kind of existence that is appropriate to the form.<sup>41</sup> The form of the human being is its soul while its matter is the body. Soul is not a specific part of the body nor is it an epiphenomenal result of bodily parts interacting. The body (with all of its parts) is completely lifeless by itself and is only animated by the soul. For Aquinas “organized life is a feature of soul embodied in biological organisms and is irreducible to physics and chemistry.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, without soul the physical parts of an organism would have no way to be a unified configuration. There is no such thing as an organism that is not animated by soul.

LaRock uses an example from visual perception to illustrate the function of soul in configuring bodily components. After the retina gathers and organizes visual data it communicates these to the back of the brain. Then:

A variety of brain regions are involved in processing visual information in the act of perception. For example, as one perceives a tree, the ventral system, whose neural pathway runs from the occipital lobe down to the inferior temporal lobe, processes object properties; object properties include a tree’s shape and color. The dorsal system, whose neural pathway runs from the occipital lobe up to the parietal lobes, processes spatial properties, such as location and size. On Aquinas’s account of visual perception, form organizes the retinal and neural material in visual information processing. As the form of the body, the soul is the organizational principle of the biological parts involved in visual information processing.<sup>43</sup>

The soul is responsible for establishing the ventral and dorsal systems so that they carry out their respective functions in visual information processing. Furthermore, there is no

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<sup>41</sup> Insofar as form shapes matter, makes matter to be what it is, is it in act. But form is not always in act and can be mixed with potency. For example, the form informs powers of the soul which are not always actualized. Thus, we have to say that the soul’s powers are in act insofar as they are *really* latent, but that they remain in potency when they lie dormant.

<sup>42</sup> LaRock, 463.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

additional neural process responsible for synthesizing the contributions of the ventral and dorsal systems in visual perception and yet in this perception both systems are integrated. For Aquinas the soul, which is form as well as seat of consciousness, organizes information processing from both systems into one act of perception while at the same time experiencing what is seen.<sup>44</sup> The ventral and dorsal systems are a necessary but not sufficient condition for perception. Without the informing and organizing principle of the soul there would be no perception.

Aquinas's view is dualistic in that the human being is made up of two basic components and is not reduced to a complex material system; rather, the human is a composite of body parts that are animated and informed by the soul. But this dualism is not Cartesian and we now turn to how LaRock shows that Aquinas's view escapes the dualistic interaction and neural dependence objections while providing a strong explanation for the relationship between soul and body.

LaRock's first major point is that for Aquinas a mediating mechanism between soul and body is superfluous. Drawing from Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*, LaRock states that "soul and body are unified and directly related in the sense that wax and its impression constitute an integrated whole."<sup>45</sup> The analogy is not perfect because soul differs from a device for impressing wax in that its power to inform remains immediately present to the matter of the body; the soul does not do its work and then separate from the "impressed" matter. But the analogy does work to show how the formed lump of wax would be another thing altogether if the impression upon it were

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<sup>44</sup> Of course Aquinas did not have detailed scientific knowledge of the brain, but he did understand that it was the primary organ used by the soul for perception.

<sup>45</sup> LaRock, 465.

different. It is a singular being due to the irreducible components of the wax lump and the impression. The human being too is one thing with all of its body parts exhibiting their special characteristics because of the informing power of soul. Neurons exhibit causal power *because of* the causal power of soul that organizes them. The soul, as form, is the primary efficient cause of any bodily action; neurons, and other causal forces in the body are, therefore, secondary efficient causes relative to the soul.

LaRock stresses that although the question of causal interaction between mind and body confronts Cartesian dualism, for Aquinas the question itself does not even arise. To ask this question assumes a separation between soul (S) and body (B) that is precluded by Aquinas's composite view. "Because the soul's causal relation to body is immediate," says LaRock, "there is no spatial gap between mental events and brain events"<sup>46</sup> that would have to be explained in terms of a mediating causal mechanism between soul and body.

LaRock assumes that this Thomistic retort to the dualistic interaction objection would not satisfy the physicalist demand for a comprehensive explanation of *how* soul relates to body and that the physicalist might argue that in the absence of a satisfactory explanation we can conclude that S is not causally related to B. But such a retort would be fallacious LaRock argues:

Even if one cannot give a 'satisfying' explanatory account of how S is immediately and causally related to B, it would not follow that S is not immediately and causally related to B. Such an inference is guilty of the 'how-that fallacy.' In the mind-body issue, the 'how-that fallacy' occurs whenever one illegitimately assumes that if one cannot explain *how* mind is causally related to body, then it follows *that* mind cannot be causally related to body. Also, establishing that mind is irreducible to brain does not depend on 'satisfying' the physicalist's how-that objection. As

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.



implied earlier, satisfying such a concern would seem to require a mechanistic account of mind's relation to body. But since the causal activity of form in relation to body is immediate on Aquinas's composite view, an intermediate set of physical steps between mind and brain with respect to causation is gratuitous.<sup>47</sup>

LaRock is not here interested in establishing that mind is causally related to body, only in eliminating an objection which assumes that this causal interaction must be explained in physicalist terms. Such an explanation is precluded by the very nature of the soul as form. However, he also shows that "it is not contradictory to assume that two different kinds of things or events can causally influence each other."<sup>48</sup> For instance, if a mental property (MP) can be traced to brain processes (BP) such that BP causes MP it *remains possible* that the soul as form (F) of the brain processes is immediately and causally present *with* BP such that BP *and* F causes MP. We might be able to track down the lines of causation between BP and MP but this does not preclude another kind of causation occurring simultaneously with BP.

LaRock then recalls that Patricia Churchland had rejected dualism because "she thinks that dualists cannot offer an account of *where* mind-brain interaction occurs."<sup>49</sup> To this LaRock provides three responses. First, he believes that Churchland commits a category mistake. Asking where mind and brain action occurs is like asking where God is. In a sense he is nowhere because God is not physical but in another sense God is everywhere since he upholds the universe as an omnipresent spiritual Being. Likewise the mind is nowhere because it is not a physical organ but also everywhere "in" the body since it serves as form of the body. It is understandable that Churchland, as a physicalist,

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 466-67.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 466 fn.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

would ask the dualist where mind and brain action occur; LaRock is here assuming the truth of an immaterial soul when he accuses Churchland of making a category mistake. Second, her assumption that dualists cannot explain mind-body interaction is unfounded because many dualists of the Cartesian sort have in fact attempted to argue that such interaction does occur in a specific part of the brain.<sup>50</sup> Finally, Churchland's objection is question begging for "it assumes that mental causation is located."<sup>51</sup>

LaRock then argues that Aquinas escapes the objection from neural dependence because "the brain and sense powers are only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for acquiring knowledge in this life."<sup>52</sup> The intellect does depend upon the body's ability to sense and the brain's powers to process sense information, hold memory, and enable the imagination. However, the intellect cannot be reduced to these bodily powers since it has the ability to understand universal forms (e.g. human nature) that are immaterial. We may be able to track down the path of sense information in a person while she stares at the moon and the color yellow registers on her retina and is then communicated to her brain through visual processing but her own conscious experience of the yellow moon cannot be reduced to neurons firing off in her brain. At the same time we can admit with physicalists that the body and its parts have a deep impact upon the mind which would not be true if the mind was fundamentally distinct from the body. Thus, Aquinas's view is not subject to the objection from neural dependence. Indeed, his view confirms a causal

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<sup>50</sup> Descartes is famously known for theorizing that this interaction occurs in the pineal gland of the brain. More recently Sir John Eccles has argued that it takes place in the liaison part of the brain. See his "Cerebral Activity and the Freedom of the Will," in *Mind and Brain: The Many Faceted Problems*, 159-74, ed. Sir John Eccles, (New York: Paragon House, 1985).

<sup>51</sup> LaRock, 468.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

link between the body and the intellect but without being reductively materialistic because the mind's operations transcend bodily operations.

I turn now to an article by Ralph Ellis entitled “Phenomenology-Friendly Neuroscience: The Return to Merleau-Ponty as Psychologist” in which Ellis’s characterization of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of psychophysical form is similar to LaRock’s presentation of form in Aquinas. Unlike LaRock, who argues that Aquinas’s composite view of the human being escapes two major objections to Cartesian dualism without being reductively materialistic, Ellis shows that there is a trend in contemporary neuropsychology to depart from reductive materialism as it increasingly confirms Merleau-Ponty’s integral anthropology. Although LaRock and Ellis draw on Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty’s respective ideas of form for separate reasons we will see that their understandings of form’s function in the human being are remarkably similar. According to LaRock and Ellis, form serves to organize and direct the biological parts of the human being; it does not interact with the body as a distinct substance but is inseparable from the body; it avoids problems associated with Cartesian dualism--e.g. the difficulty of explaining interaction between a purely spiritual substance and a physical body—and reductive materialism—e.g. the impossibility of explaining consciousness through empirical observation. I now turn to a summary of the major parts of Ellis’s article. Following that I will more closely examine LaRock and Ellis’s respective notions of form.

Ellis starts by indicating how traditional neuropsychology was dominated by computational theories of mind. According to these theories consciousness is achieved through a bottom to top process of causality: neurological activity, which is itself caused

in perception by sense data coming from outside the person, leads to consciousness. But Ellis reports that these theories are now being completely reversed:

It is now recognized that conscious living beings process information very differently from non-conscious and non-living systems, and that consciousness drives and organizes the process rather than being a mere causal by product or spin-off...this means that conscious processes again must be seen as self-organizing phenomena resembling Merleau-Ponty's psychophysical forms.<sup>53</sup>

It is impossible to explain the phenomenon of consciousness within the positivist framework of traditional neuroscience for in this framework reality consists of empirically observable objects and nothing else. Because consciousness could never be subsumed under empirical analysis, many neuropsychologists began to take seriously phenomenological accounts of consciousness and in their own experimentation to increasingly confirm Merleau-Ponty's idea that the mind is not only the seat of consciousness but also organizes the material dimensions of the body.

But how exactly does Merleau-Ponty define form? Ellis points to one definition from the beginning of Merleau-Ponty's *Structure of Behavior* that applies to all material beings non-living and living alike:

'Forms' ...are defined as total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess... We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.<sup>54</sup>

This definition does get at the ability of form to organize a system but it does not address the connection between form and consciousness. So Ellis goes on to explain that "for

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<sup>53</sup> Ellis, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fischer, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 47. Hereafter referred to as *The Structure of Behavior*.

Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is a further development of life,” meaning a form that is self-aware, “which is self-organizing in the sense that it must appropriate the needed material substrata to maintain its patterns of living.”<sup>55</sup>

After indicating the movement in contemporary neuroscience overturning computational models of mind, Ellis points to anomalies which confront reductionist accounts of consciousness. These anomalies have led to new directions in neuropsychology which corroborate Merleau-Ponty’s notion of form derived from phenomenology. First, neuroscientists have discovered via experimentation that “consciousness is an *enacting of* rather than a *passive reaction to* the physical events that serve as its substratum; neither is it the non-physical half of an ontological dualism.”<sup>56</sup> This first “anomaly” is more like a fatal blow in that it demonstrates a complete reversal of the traditional bottom to top causal link between body and mind. Another anomaly is that “mechanistic causes...seem to *overexplain* consciousness.”<sup>57</sup> According to reductionist accounts of the human organism consciousness is simply complex neurological activity and theoretically can be laid bare by empirical analysis. But as phenomenologists have long known “it is impossible to know what a state of consciousness is like merely by knowing everything that can be known empirically about its underlying physical mechanisms.”<sup>58</sup>

The first anomaly is the “non-passivity of conscious attention.”<sup>59</sup> Ellis points to separate studies by Carl Aurell,<sup>60</sup> Michael Posner and Mary Rothbart,<sup>61</sup> Antonio

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<sup>55</sup> Ellis, 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Damasio,<sup>62</sup> and Alexander Luria<sup>63</sup> which demonstrate that information processing in the brain is radically different when it is functioning on a conscious basis as opposed to a non-conscious basis. During consciousness the organism directs informational input through its own motivation:

Consciousness occurs only when *efferent* (outflowing) nervous activity takes the lead in selecting and directing *afferent* (inflowing) activity; conscious beings are self-organizing emotionally and motivationally directed beings that actively direct their attention, and can imagine things with no afferent input with neural substrates remarkably similar to the imaging activities in *perceptual* consciousness...Consistent with Jean-Paul Sartre's suggestion in *The Psychology of Imagination* subjects form perceptual imagery largely as a result of formulating their own questions about reality rather than just passively reacting to "stimulus-response" mechanisms.<sup>64</sup>

This research shows that the computational model of the mind in which mechanical forces outside the body act upon it and cause afferent neural activity leading to the epiphenomenal result of consciousness is backward. It shows that the organism initiates action according to its own motivation and purposes which then leads to consciousness of objects outside the organism that depend upon afferent activity. As Merleau-Ponty says, "we must look in order to see."<sup>65</sup> This research is but one example drawn on by Ellis to show that neuropsychology is moving away from epiphenomenalism. Instead, it now confirms that consciousness plays an active role in determining the kinds of information

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<sup>60</sup> Carl G. Aurell, "Man's Triune Conscious Mind," *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 68 (1989): 747-754.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Posnar and Mary Rothbart, "Attentional Mechanisms and Conscious Experience," in *The Neuropsychology of Consciousness*, eds. A.D. Milner and M.D. Rugg, (London: Academic Press, 1992), 91-111.

<sup>62</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes's Error*, (New York: Putnam, 1992).

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Luria, *Higher Cortical Functions in Man*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>64</sup> Ellis, 36-37.

<sup>65</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 247.

processing that take place in the brain. Thus, consciousness functions as a kind of form organizing its material substrates while at the same time using them to accomplish its purposes.

The second anomaly I want to address from Ellis's paper is that "mechanistic causes..seem to *overexplain* consciousness."<sup>66</sup> A basic premise of traditional neuroscience is that one set of neuropsychological properties is the sufficient condition for a succeeding set of neuropsychological properties. Let us suppose that a conscious event (C1) leads to another conscious event (C2)—e.g. the decision to raise my hand leads to actually raising my hand. Underlying C1 and C2 are physiological correlates of these states: P1 and P2. According to modernist neuroscience P1 causes C1 and is the necessary and sufficient condition for P2 which itself causes C2. This means that nothing else could be responsible for consciousness apart from its physiological substrates and that there is no place whatsoever for the function of consciousness *per se* in a person's action. But our basic experience seems to undercut this claim for a person's decision to take a walk in fact leads to walking. Our experience that mind does have a role in directing neurological activity indicates that traditional neuroscience makes an overreaching claim when it reduces the mind to brain matter.

Ellis then examines three basic responses to this problem of causal overexplanation: psychophysical identity, causal epiphenomenalism, and dualism. He wants to show their inadequacies in explaining the relationship between consciousness and its physiological correlates. He then argues that Merleau-Ponty's notion of psychophysical forms avoids the problem of physicalist causal overexplanation and offers

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<sup>66</sup> Ellis, 39.

a cogent explication of the relationship between consciousness and its physiological correlates.

According to at least one theory of psychophysical identity, neurological activity *is* consciousness. But this cannot avoid the problem of causal overexplanation because if C1 and P1 were identical then a complete knowledge of brain physiology would yield a complete knowledge of consciousness. This, however, is impossible Ellis argues, for “no amount of empirical knowledge and explanation of a headache can reveal to someone what it feels like to have a headache, unless that observer has also experienced something like a headache in his or her *own* consciousness.”<sup>67</sup> And even then the observer could still not gain knowledge of the particular feeling that the one experiencing the headache has.

The solution of causal epiphenomenalism fares no better according to Ellis. If P1 leads to C1 and P2 to C2 then physiological correlates to consciousness could not be exactly the same thing and “the question arises as to *what sort of entity C1 is* if it is to be distinguished from a *physical* entity.”<sup>68</sup> Ellis does not here explain why this question is problematic. It appears that he wants to deny that consciousness is simply caused by physical substrates while at the same time denying that consciousness is a non-physical dimension of the human being. But in any case causal epiphenomenalism, along with the psychophysical identity theory, still leaves no role for consciousness to cause neurological activity. It simply denies that one’s intention to act really leads to action.

Ellis suggests that epiphenomenalism leads to metaphysical dualism, another possible solution to the problem of causal overexplanation in traditional neuroscience. According to this dualism (which Ellis casts in Cartesian terms) there is “some little bit of

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



matter in the brain whose only purpose is to serve as a substratum for consciousness.”<sup>69</sup>

But this solution flies in the face of advances in contemporary neuroscience which show that neurological activity during consciousness is globally distributed and not isolated to a single part of the brain. “For example,” Ellis explains, “..when impulses caused by optic stimulation set up patterns of activity in the occipital lobe, but without coordinated limbic and frontal-cortex activity, no perceptual *consciousness* results from the occipital activity.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, consciousness cannot be narrowly correlated with only a specific part of the brain.

Ellis then goes on to explain that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of psycho-physical forms or the “enactive approach” does provide a satisfactory account of the relationship between consciousness and its physiological correlates:

The enactive approach, with its return to Merleau-Ponty’s psychophysical forms, does avoid this problem of causal overexplanation. It avoids it by allowing that a process can have causal power. In the case of the conscious states C1 and C2, and their physical correlates, P1 and P2, the enactive approach can allow that P1 is necessary and sufficient for P2 (under the given circumstances), while at the same time maintaining that C1 can *also* be necessary and/or sufficient for C2 and for P2. The reason is that, if C1 and P1 relate as process to substratum, then C1 and P1 are “inseparable” from each other in the sense that they are necessary and sufficient *for each other*.<sup>71</sup>

What does this mean that consciousness and its physical correlates are necessary and sufficient for each other? For Ellis (and in his view for Merleau-Ponty as well) consciousness is a process that organizes its physical substrates to achieve its purposes. Now, a process is inseparable from its substratum elements. A wave on the ocean, for example, is undividable from the water particles beneath it. If this is true then “the

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

process will also be necessary and sufficient for whatever its substratum elements are necessary and sufficient for.”<sup>72</sup> The movement of some water particles is necessary and sufficient for the movement of others but the whole process of the wave is “in” each particle and each stage of causal movement. This does not mean of course that the process is identical to its substrata. To keep with the aquatic example: “a wave on the ocean may travel many miles in a horizontal direction, while its substratum elements, the movements of particles of water, are very small vertical oscillations.”<sup>73</sup> Of course the fundamental difference between an ocean wave and the human being is that consciousness is purposive; it directs and organizes the physical substrata beneath it while at the same time being inseparable from it. By showing that consciousness as a purposive process or psychophysical form does have causal power, Ellis provides a theoretical explanation for our experience of effecting physical movement through our intentions. He also avoids the problems associated with other attempts to resolve the problem of causal overexplanation because consciousness is not identical with its substrate, nor is it an epiphenomenal result of it, nor is it a separate substance.

It is clear that there are potentially significant differences between Merleau-Ponty’s notion of form as presented by Ellis and Aquinas’s notion of form as presented by LaRock. For example, Aquinas believes that the form of the whole body is the soul (a term not even mentioned by Ellis), that the soul is both immaterial and incorruptible and that it acts as form both when the human being is conscious and when he/she is not conscious. Ellis’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is that consciousness is a physical form

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

or process and he implies that considering it to be a non-physical entity would lead to Cartesian dualism. Furthermore, consciousness as a formal power seems confined to conscious states which means that Merleau-Ponty's notion of form would be much more restricted than Aquinas's view in which the soul is the act of the body during conscious and unconscious states. For Aquinas it is impossible even to speak about the body without the soul for the very language of body means informed matter. If in Merleau-Ponty the formal power of consciousness only applies to conscious states of the body then he might hold that it is possible to speak of the body apart from its relationship to form.

Nevertheless, there are enough similarities in how LaRock and Ellis draw, respectively, on Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty to suggest at least the possibility that these latter thinkers have enough philosophical commonality for Merleau-Ponty to enrich Aquinas's thought. First, both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty recognize that a living material being is self-organizing because of its form and that it is not a simple by-product of causal forces outside it. Neither would deny that living material beings are subject to influences from their respective environments; however, both hold that via its form an organism acts into its environment to achieve certain objectives and orders all of its body parts toward these ends. Thus, in LaRock's presentation of Aquinas the matter of the body "depends on form for life and organization"<sup>74</sup> and Ellis writes that for Merleau-Ponty the form of living beings "is self organizing in the sense that it must appropriate the needed material substrata to maintain its patterns of living, rather than merely [have]

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<sup>74</sup> LaRock, 464.

their forms be caused by those substrata.”<sup>75</sup> In both cases the matter of the living being is for the sake of the form and receives its direction from the form. A second similarity is that (if LaRock and Ellis are correct) both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty do not consider form and body separate substances but inseparable parts of one integrated whole. LaRock writes that “soul and body are unified and directly related in the sense that wax and its impression constitute an integrated whole.”<sup>76</sup> Here the inseparability of soul or form and body extends to both conscious and unconscious states. Now, Ellis also argues that form and body are inseparable but restricts his explanations of this inseparability to conscious states of living. He writes, as quoted above, that consciousness and its physiological correlates “are ‘inseparable’ from each other in the sense that they are necessary and sufficient *for each other*.”<sup>77</sup> A third similarity in LaRock and Ellis’s accounts is that on the basis of inseparability between form and body both scholars argue against physicalism and various problems associated with Cartesian dualism. Aquinas’s rejection of physicalism is absolute. For him the human form is clearly immaterial and incorruptible. But Ellis, while interpreting Merleau-Ponty, directly opposes only a certain kind of physicalism; he objects to the reductive billiard ball sort of materialism in which consciousness is characterized as a mechanical result of various lines of linear causality. Ellis seems unwilling to consider that consciousness might be immaterial but he doesn’t establish any position of this sort using Merleau-Ponty. In any case, both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty are together in opposing reductive physicalism and it is clear that both avoid critical problems associated with Cartesian dualism. For example, on Aquinas and

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<sup>75</sup> Ellis, 36.

<sup>76</sup> LaRock, 465.

<sup>77</sup> Ellis, 50.

Merleau-Ponty's accounts of the form/body unity, there is no need to explain how soul could be a causal power outside of observed physical causality since form is inseparable from its physiological correlates. As both argue, conscious states can be correlated with neurological activity without fallacy. Further, on both accounts the mind is dependent upon the brain or body for its activity and so the problem of neural dependence between an unextended mental substance and its extended body is avoided.

The similarities between LaRock and Ellis's use of form from Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty provoke a number of interesting questions. Was Merleau-Ponty through the examination of subjective experience in phenomenology able to identify what Aristotle and Aquinas describe on the basis of naturalistic observation? Would contemporary neuroscientists who draw on Merleau-Ponty also be open to Thomistic insights into the mind-body problem? Did the scholastic notion of form influence Merleau-Ponty's own idea of form? Given the ongoing breakdown of reductive physicalism in contemporary philosophy and a return, in John Haldane's words to a "philosophy of form," is it possible that their two accounts could work together to continue the happy demise of computational models of mind? Each of these questions would be interesting to answer, although I do not take them up in the course of the dissertation. I raise such questions in part to show possible philosophical benefits to a further study of Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty. Furthermore, the similarities between LaRock and Ellis's use of form on the basis of our two thinkers suggests to me the possibility of compatibility between them. If Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty stand together on critical points of anthropology, perhaps insights from the latter thinker, unknown to Aquinas, might be fruitfully integrated into Aquinas's own philosophical anthropology.

In Chapter Four I argue that such enrichment can take place. But before I go further I want to address potential barriers to such a project.

## **Part II. Counter Claim. Fruitful Compatibility Between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty Hindered by Fundamental Philosophical Differences.**

In this part of the dissertation I raise several objections to the possibility of a fruitful comparison between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty. By “fruitful comparison” I again mean one that would show compatibility between them and open up grounds for some degree of Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology. The first of these objections concerns the possibility of comparing any phenomenologist at a philosophical level with Aquinas. Objections two to four concern Merleau-Ponty specifically in relation to Aquinas.

### **Objection #1. Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty’s Conceptions of Philosophical Methodology are Opposed to One Another**

For the first objection I draw on a Thomist from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Robert F. Harvanek, who was much concerned with waning interest in Aquinas’s philosophy during the 1960’s. In an article entitled “The Crisis in Neo-Scholastic Philosophy,” Harvanek provides evidence for this waning interest and juxtaposes it to the heightened fascination with phenomenology, existentialism and linguistic analysis among young thinkers of his day. The “crisis” of which he speaks is not only growing resistance to Aquinas’s thought but how Thomism can incorporate genuine insights attained through the new philosophical movements. Harvanek reports that “it has become something of the accepted procedure for Thomists to adopt the word ‘phenomenology’ when describing

their own philosophical process”<sup>78</sup> and refers to Von Hildebrand’s argument that all truly great philosophers employed phenomenology to develop their insights. Harvanek resists both claims, although he does state at the end of the article that “a new Thomism has to be uncovered, read from the viewpoint of phenomenology”<sup>79</sup> but a phenomenology that might very well be modified in light of traditional philosophy.<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, he is not opposed to a phenomenological enrichment of Thomism or to a potential alteration of phenomenology through dialogue with scholastic and Thomistic thought but he does believe that there are significant barriers to such integration and that fundamental differences between Thomism and phenomenology need to be clearly and honestly stated.

Before getting to these barriers it is important to note that Harvanek applies them to each of the major interpretations of Husserlian philosophy. He states that there is one group of phenomenologists, led by Adolf Reinach, who proceed on the basis of the early Husserl and who hold to a certain kind of Platonic realism. These thinkers include Max Scheler, Conrad-Martius, Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Caspar Nink, S.J. among others. A second school, Harvanek says, follows the transcendental direction taken by Husserl. Although this latter direction was considered by the Reinach school to be a betrayal of the original and authentic meaning of phenomenology, Harvanek believes that the basic methodology of both phenomenological directions is essentially the same.<sup>81</sup> Later historians of philosophy have identified two other schools of

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<sup>78</sup> Robert F. Harvanek, “The Crisis in Neo-Scholastic Philosophy,” *Thought* 38 (1963), 537. Hereafter referred to as Harvanek.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 545.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>81</sup> Harvanek’s critique may be compared with Jacques Maritain’s treatment of phenomenology in his *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. Gerald Phelan, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 101-07. Here Maritain, like

phenomenology: existential and hermeneutic. The hermeneutic interpretation (e.g. Gadamer, Ricouer) was under development in the 1960's and so Harvanek could not be expected to distinguish it from the other branches of phenomenology. But the existential interpretation, which includes Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre was certainly an established part of the phenomenological tradition by the time Harvanek writes of the "crisis" in Neo-Scholastic philosophy. Does Harvanek mean to exclude this mode of phenomenology from his critique of the whole movement? No, it is more likely that he simply includes them somewhere within the two different directions he believes phenomenology has taken because he specifically mentions Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as phenomenologists and it is clear that he intends his basic portrayal of the phenomenological method and conception of philosophy to cover all thinkers employing whatever derivation of Husserl's philosophy.

Harvanek believes that "there is a basic difference in methodology" between Aquinas and phenomenology (among other contemporary philosophical movements of his day) and "ultimately a basic difference in the conception of philosophy."<sup>82</sup> I turn first to methodological differences regarding the notion of experience. Harvanek believes that phenomenology is restricted to a dependence upon immediate and subjective experience because of its insistence on beginning without presuppositions: "this passion for the immediate in Husserl is rooted in his search for a presuppositionless science."<sup>83</sup> He notes,

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Harvanek will do, critiques phenomenology for its supposed immanentism and insistence that truth cannot come from "the outside" but must emerge through a pure philosophy of consciousness. However, Maritain avoids making this claim against all the various directions phenomenology has taken and restricts his considerations to "phenomenology under the highly significant aspect..it takes in E. Husserl" (Maritain, 101 fn).

<sup>82</sup> Harvanek, 537.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 539.



for example, that Scheler approaches the question of God's existence by exploring Divine manifestations in personal experience and argues that Heidegger fails to adequately establish his fundamental ontology precisely because of phenomenology's exclusive orientation to the sphere of the immediate. In contrast, Thomists and scholastic thinkers depend upon "the experience of Western man, or of the human race, [or of] the developed interpretation of that experience as found in the philosophy, theology, and literature, of the West and the East."<sup>84</sup> This is a mediate notion of experience not in the sense that one's personal self-awareness is filtered through historical and cultural filters but in the sense that it involves traditions and movements of thought outside of direct personal experience; it is, therefore, a communal and historical notion of experience.<sup>85</sup> The philosopher who depends upon the experience of Western philosophical thinkers is therefore not oriented around truths or ideas as they immediately appear to him or her but in truth as it has been articulated and developed within the philosophical tradition.

Another methodological difference, flowing from these separate notions of experience, is that phenomenology aims not for demonstrable propositions but for rigorous explication and analysis of consciousness. The "proof" for the phenomenologist is to describe adequately subjective experience so that it resounds with others and finds confirmation in the spheres of their own interior lives. But for the scholastic or Thomistic thinker this is not philosophical proof. Harvanek reports, for example, that a "scholastic moralist reading one of von Hildebrand's analyses of moral attitudes remarked: 'There

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 540.

<sup>85</sup> We will see in Chapter Four that although Harvanek's claim about phenomenology as a search for a presuppositionless science might apply to Husserl, it does not apply to Merleau-Ponty, who believes that experience is both communal and historical.

are many good insights, but he does not prove anything.”<sup>86</sup> For his part, von Hildebrand was known to be strongly critical of “philosophers ‘who want to demonstrate everything’” for ““more truths are immediate than such philosophers recognize.”<sup>87</sup> However, according to scholastic and Thomistic thinkers properly identifying the causes of things is at the heart of authentic philosophy:

In Aristotelian philosophy, an object is scientifically known when its causes are known, or, in other terms, when it is demonstrated. The middle term or the cause is the instinctive and natural quest of the Aristotelian and the Scholastic. For every statement a “because” is looked for. Of course, there is a doctrine of intellect and immediate knowledge in Aristotle, but even truths of this class call for a dialectical and negative demonstration.<sup>88</sup>

Perceptual consciousness may be relied upon to accurately bring individual objects in the world to the intellect but perceptual consciousness provides just a first step in making a philosophically valid proposition. For instance, I can grasp via perceptual consciousness that the person standing before me is a human being. I know that all humans are mortal; thus, I can philosophically conclude that the person before me is mortal. Even the fundamental principles of philosophy grasped immediately by the intellect-- e.g. principle of contradiction—need to be explained negatively or dialectically Harvanek believes. Thus, the effective teacher of first-year philosophy students does not simply declare that “a thing cannot both be and not be in the same respect at the same time.” He or she tests it out dialectically, for example, by exploring the possibility that the principle might not be true and then explaining the need to assume the principle in order to disprove it. For the Thomist, philosophy demands demonstrable proof, according to Harvanek. Insofar as

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 539.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

phenomenologists do not establish their claims through demonstration their work is not philosophical in the sense that is acceptable to Thomists.

These methodological disparities indicate a radical difference between the Thomistic and phenomenological conceptions of philosophy. For the Thomist, as we have discussed, the experience that is drawn upon for philosophy is communal and historical. This “mediate” experience refers not only to philosophical tradition but to religious faith, as Harvanek explains:

The scholastic conception of philosophy presupposes the truth of the Catholic faith and the reality of the Catholic experience. Philosophy proceeds within this context making a clear distinction between theology and itself but nevertheless recognizing the close relationship between the two.<sup>89</sup>

Philosophy is characterized by its relationship to faith in God, to the supernatural. This does not mean that scholastic thinkers depend upon theological premises to do their work. Philosophy needs to be grounded in principles that can be established via human reason. However, philosophy does deal with questions that are raised by faith and it contributes to claims of faith by showing their compatibility with human reason. Furthermore, its end, wisdom itself, is ultimately God himself which means that the final destination of philosophy is exactly the same as the end of theology. But if religious experience for scholastic thought serves as a basis for philosophical research, the very opposite is the case in modern philosophical practice including phenomenology. Harvanek again:

In the postmedieval, and then the post-Enlightenment context, the notion of “pure experience” or of “immediate experience” was developed in clear consciousness of the distinction between the revelational and supernatural on the one hand, and the natural on the other. A presuppositionless

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 540.

philosophy had to be a philosophy which is derived exclusively from natural, as contrasted with supernatural, experience.<sup>90</sup>

If philosophy in a Thomistic vein is characterized by the transcendence of the intellect reaching out not only toward supernatural principles and the Divine but also towards truth established in the philosophical tradition, phenomenology (as every modern philosophical movement) is characterized by immanence, the immanence of immediate personal experience and natural principles that are considered to be drawn from within the philosopher's own self.

Because the method of phenomenology is descriptive analysis rather than demonstration and because it rests upon an entirely different notion of experience and because it conceives of philosophy as radically distinct from religious faith, Harvanek sees "a kind of opposition between the contemporary philosophical trends and Scholasticism or Thomism."<sup>91</sup> He has already noted that according to some Thomists phenomenology fails to prove anything. This suggests a barrier to a fruitful comparison because, from this perspective, there would be no valid conclusions to lay by the side of Thomistic demonstrations. But Harvanek also notes that there is a corresponding reaction from phenomenologists and other contemporary thinkers toward scholastic philosophy:

This scholastic concept of philosophy which implicates and includes the notions of community and tradition and discipleship, as well as the notion of a philosophy closely bound to theology and intertwined with Christian experience, is alien to the Cartesian and Husserlian spirit of a completely presuppositionless philosophy...In the modern view, scholastic philosophy must break its links with theology and with religious experience, at least supernatural religious experience, before it can be accepted as a true philosophy.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 539-40.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

Harvanek notes that some Thomists, albeit naively, claim that their method is phenomenological. This obviously indicates a willingness to pursue some kind of fruitful compatibility between phenomenology and Thomism. Harvanek is concerned with a false rapprochement that does not recognize fundamental differences but he too would like to see the opposition between phenomenology and Thomism surmounted. However, the way to this compatibility might not be on the basis of their current methodologies and conceptions of philosophy for he suggests that “it might very well be that the task before the Thomist is the conversion or at least the modification of the contemporary philosophical mentality.”<sup>93</sup> In any case, there seems to be a greater openness on the part of Thomists toward phenomenology (at least at the time of Harvanek’s writing) than on the part of contemporary thinkers toward scholastic thought.

Merleau-Ponty himself corroborates the kind of rejection of the scholastic idea of philosophy that Harvanek notes above. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, where Merleau-Ponty had been given a chair, he outlines his conception of philosophy and the purpose of the philosopher. In one section he specifically addresses claims made by religious thinkers that there is a final and complete destination for the human being and that history is oriented toward a destiny in God. He states that:

The philosopher does not say that a final transcendence of human contradictions may be possible, and that the complete man awaits us in the future. Like everyone else, he knows nothing of this. He says—and this is something altogether different—that the world is going on, that we do not have to judge its future by what has happened in the past, that the idea of a destiny in things is not an idea but a dizziness, that our relations with nature are not fixed once and for all, that no one can know what freedom may be able to do, nor imagine what our customs and human relations would be in a civilization no longer haunted by competition and necessity. He does not place his hope in any destiny, even a favorable one, but in

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

something belonging to us which is precisely not a destiny—in the contingency of our history. The denial of this is a fixed (non-philosophical) position.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, the authentic philosopher rejects faith in the Absolute and instead embraces the contingency and change which characterize ordinary life grounded in the here and now. We see in this passage at least one of the essential features of the modern philosophical project as articulated by Harvanek: the insistence that philosophy detach itself from religious faith. It is arguable, as we shall see, whether or not Merleau-Ponty was committed to Husserl's presuppositionless philosophy of consciousness but in any case it is clear that for him scholastic thought is not philosophy insofar as it is wedded to religious faith.

We are confronted, therefore, with a situation in which representatives from both Thomistic philosophy and phenomenology deny one another even the status of philosophy and one of our representatives happens to be the very figure whose work I propose to make compatible with Aquinas! If Harvanek is right there are significant barriers to discovering compatibility between St. Thomas and Merleau-Ponty because their very conceptions of philosophy and their methodologies are alien to one another. It may be that fruitful comparison at a historical level could be attained, for example, to shed light on differences between medieval and modern thought. But it does seem, on the basis of Harvanek's conclusions, that discovering philosophical compatibility that would enable a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's thought will be difficult.

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<sup>94</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. John Wild, James Edie, and John O'Neill, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 43-44.

## **Objection #2. Merleau-Ponty is Committed to a Purely Materialistic Anthropology Incompatible with Aquinas's Emphasis on the Priority of the Immaterial Soul**

We have already encountered the suggestion that Merleau-Ponty is committed to a purely materialistic anthropology when we addressed Ralph Ellis's idea that consciousness could not be conceived of as an immaterial part of the human being. But it is also clear from Chapter One, Part I that Merleau-Ponty is not a reductive materialist. Indeed, a significant part of his philosophical career was devoted to opposing empirical realism which postulates that the human being, like any other object in the cosmos, can be broken down to its physical and chemical make up and, in theory, exhaustively known. From his first major work, *The Structure of Behavior* and onward, Merleau-Ponty strenuously critiqued this empiricism in large part because scientific explanations are always a second order expression of a more fundamental experience of the world, an experience in which objects exist, in part, for consciousness which means that consciousness itself can never be broken down into a scientifically analyzable object. Merleau-Ponty denies reductive materialism but this does not mean that he accepts an immaterial dimension to the human being.

Neither of the scholars whom I will draw on for this section claim that Merleau-Ponty is a reductive materialist, but each believes he holds to a kind of non-reductive materialism. I will draw out two slightly different characterizations of this supposedly materialistic dimension of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical anthropology from two different commentators on his thought: Steven Priest and Fred Evans.

I first turn to Stephan Priest, author of *Merleau-Ponty*. Here Priest introduces readers to the broad range of Merleau-Ponty's work while also critiquing it and arguing that it provides a helpful way to introduce human subjectivity into the natural sciences.

Early in the book Priest makes the following claim about the nature of subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty:

He thinks subjectivity is physical, or, to put it another way: I am my body. His phenomenological descriptions steer a careful course between mind-body dualism and materialism. Like the Cartesian dualist he accepts the reality of consciousness and subjectivity. Like the materialist he accepts that we are essentially physical beings. However, as in *La Structure du Comportement*, he rejects the idea that we are physical objects. We are in fact *physical subjects*.<sup>95</sup>

Merleau-Ponty does not accept any notion of mind as a separate substance in an exterior relation with a body but he does hold with Descartes, Hegel and Kant that the human being is a conscious subject who experiences the world. Further, this subject experiences his or her body from within which means that there must be an essential distinction between human bodies and other objects which cannot be experienced from within but are given to consciousness as mere objects. We are subjects because we experience but at the same time, according to Priest, Merleau-Ponty believes with the materialists that we and our bodies are essentially physical.

Fred Evans, who has written extensively on Merleau-Ponty, also stresses that Merleau-Ponty's anthropology is materialistic but not reductively so and he sees this anthropology as a very useful critique against mechanical theories of human behavior. In his book, *Psychology and Nihilism: A Critique of the Computational Model of Mind*, from which I take his account of Merleau-Ponty's supposed materialism, Evans addresses not so much how Merleau-Ponty's anthropology is a hybrid of empirical and dualistic notions of the human being but that the body itself is the source both of our 'spiritual'

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<sup>95</sup> Stephan Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), 6.



transcendence and our grounding in the world. Evans writes that, according to Merleau-Ponty:

The body subject is not a mind and a body: *mind* is merely a capsule phrase for indicating the body's ability to break with its immediate activities and initiate (for example, to 'imagine') others at the 'periphery' of the immediate horizon of its activities; and *body* is merely a capsule term for our inability to ever break completely with our immediate situation in the world.<sup>96</sup>

On the one hand, there is an immanent dimension to this body; because we are enfolded material beings we are grounded in specific temporal and spatial parts of the world.

Evans stresses that, for Merleau-Ponty, we cannot even think about the body-subject as an isolated aspect of the world because we always find ourselves in a concrete situation.

We passively undergo the action of other beings upon us. However, there is also a transcendent dimension to the body. Insofar as we are 'mental' or 'spiritual' beings we can freely initiate action and thereby re-form or re-create the elements of our immediate surroundings into something original. We can also express universal and abstract concepts and thereby go beyond our grounding in specific situations. But this transcendent power is an ability of the body itself: "Our 'spirituality' is..rooted in our bodily existence despite the tradition that attempts to divorce spirit or mind from all traces of 'carnality.'"<sup>97</sup> As evidence for this Evans points to how all our abstract ideas can be traced back to our bodily grasp on the world: "for example, to the degree that our most sophisticated geometrical ideas contain any hint of space, that is, refer to distance, size, or shape, they refer back to our bodily relations to things."<sup>98</sup> Thus, there is no immaterial

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<sup>96</sup> Fred Evans, *Psychology and Nihilism: A Critique of the Computational Model of Mind*, (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993),129.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

dimension of the human being for Evans's Merleau-Ponty; the body is responsible both for our being a part of the world and for our ability to break out of it.

What then is the distinction between the body as proposed by reductive materialists and that proposed by Evans' Merleau-Ponty? If both hold that we are essentially corporal beings what is the difference between the Merleau-Pontian and reductivistic conceptions of the human being? Evans addresses this point:

Unlike reductive materialism, which begins by considering the body as decomposable into micro-parts, that is, into the basic units of physiology, chemistry, and physics, we must understand the body characterized by intentionality on the level of its interaction with the objects present to it, on the level of the 'subject-object dialogue.' Explanation of human action, therefore, must refer primarily to the intentionality of the person or groups under consideration, and only secondarily to the 'parts' of this continual upsurge toward the other inhabitants of the world.<sup>99</sup>

An inherent aspect of the reductivistic account of the human being as a compilation of physical parts is that we are completely determined, just like any other being, by causal and external forces outside our control. We dwell in passivity to sensory input and any of our "actions" are ultimately explainable by particles received via sensation. This account is blind to the intentional action that Merleau-Ponty believes is so fundamental to basic human experience. As body-subjects we find that we exist in a "continual upsurge toward the other inhabitants of the world," that we ceaselessly exist in bodily intentionality toward the objects of the world. Furthermore, the body itself, as an organic whole, integrates its various parts so that it can achieve its intentional purposes. As Evans says, quoting Merleau-Ponty, "each organ and process is what it is only insofar as it is already unified by the common orientation for which it and the others provide the basis in any

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

given situation.”<sup>100</sup> A critical difference, then, between the reductivistic and Merleau-Pontian accounts of the human being is that the former begins with the parts of the body and assumes they are *externally* organized while the latter begins with the human being as a whole being who *internally* organizes its parts according its own intentional directions. Evans’s Merleau-Ponty still has an essentially materialistic conception of the human being but he also believes that the body-subject can initiate action rather than simply exist in passivity to other objects in the environment.

If Priest and Evans are correct that Merleau-Ponty is committed to a purely materialistic anthropology and believes that the “soul” of the human being expresses only a bodily capacity for self-organization and self-initiation, then it may be difficult for us to find the kind of compatibility that would enable Merleau-Ponty’s ideas to enrich Aquinas’s. In Aquinas’s notion of the body/soul unity the soul is an immaterial principle that forms for its purposes the human body. For Aquinas it would be utterly impossible for the body to exercise the kind of initiative and self-organization that Merleau-Ponty (according to Priest and Evans) attribute to it. How could anthropological ideas, grounded in an essential materialism (though not reductivistic) positively contribute to a philosophical system that rejects the first principles of these ideas?

### **Objection #3. Merleau-Ponty Has an Idealist Notion of Body/Soul Integration Incompatible with Aquinas’s Philosophical Realism.**

Some commentators on Merleau-Ponty’s work claim that, at least in his early works, including *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he remains stuck in philosophy of consciousness. Gary Brent Madison, for example, holds

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

that breaking “out of the framework of a philosophy of consciousness [is] something..which Merleau-Ponty had not yet succeeded in doing”<sup>101</sup> by the time of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This next major objection to compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty emerges from the claim that the latter’s philosophical anthropology is based upon an idealist foundation. They may both hold that the human being is an integral union of body and soul but if Merleau-Ponty believes that this union is only achieved as a mental construction and may not be *really* so then we have here a striking difference between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty which would likely preclude compatibility between them.

In the previous objection I drew out claims from two scholars that Merleau-Ponty has an essentially materialistic notion of the human being. But now I put forth commentators who believe that his anthropology is grounded in a kind of idealism. How is it possible that his work admits of two radically different interpretations? As we will see in Chapter Three, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical career was largely devoted to carving out a middle way between reductive scientific materialism and the idealism of a pure philosophy of consciousness. He positively employed both of these basic positions. For example, as we saw in Part Two, he drew strongly from the empirical studies of contemporary science which were certainly grounded in materialistic presuppositions about the nature of the human being. He also, as we shall see, believed that the philosopher can only base his/her truth claims in what can be consciously experienced and in this way shows his dependence upon philosophers of consciousness. Merleau-

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<sup>101</sup> Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Series in Continental Thought, Vol 3, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 163. Hereafter referred to as Madison.

Ponty, therefore, was positively influenced by the two basic positions he so strongly critiqued and it is not unreasonable that commentators would be able to situate the first principles of his philosophical anthropology in both of these very different philosophical positions.

I first turn to David Braine's claim, grounded in his analysis of *The Structure of Behavior*, that Merleau-Ponty's anthropology is rooted in idealism, but an idealism that also accepts the validity of certain scientific conceptions of the human being and that "has an inbuilt anti-metaphysical bent."<sup>102</sup> It is clear that Merleau-Ponty does not accept the view that the human being is simply a product of causal forces; this we have amply covered already. But he looks with great favor, Braine shows, on scientific studies which undercut positivistic causality: "Merleau-Ponty portrays causality as having lost 'its mythical meaning of productive causality' with the result that 'laws can no longer be conceived as that which engenders the existence of the facts.'"<sup>103</sup> For example, Merleau-Ponty makes much of research in particle physics which demonstrate that the presence of an observer shapes the experimental outcome. If the presence of human intentionality can literally redirect the physical flow of particles then there is space, Merleau-Ponty believes, for the presence of human freedom among the laws of science. So, we cannot conceive of the human being as a product of external forces. How then should we think of the nature of the human being? Braine believes that Merleau-Ponty resists giving any set, metaphysically grounded, concept of the human being and instead rests his conceptions of nature upon the meaning-giving power of consciousness:

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<sup>102</sup> David Braine, *The Human Person: Animal & Spirit*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 284.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

[Merleau-Ponty] quotes with agreement the saying of Goldstein that what we are looking for in the idea of life ‘is not the terminal stone of a building, but the building itself in which the partial phenomena, at first insignificant, appear as belonging to a unitary, ordered and relatively constant formation of specific structure...; we are not looking for a real foundation (*Seinsgrund*) which constitutes being, but for an idea, a reason in knowledge (*Erkenntnisgrund*) in virtue of which all the particular facts become intelligible.<sup>104</sup>

By “building,” Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty mean a general conception of life. They both allow that there are apparent natural structures but that identifying these should not be equated with establishing a philosophy of being. Instead, they are looking for ideas, mental constructions, which make sense out of the various facts of life established by science. If Braine is right, Merleau-Ponty does not hold that we can have a metaphysically grounded concept of the human being as an integral union of body and soul. Whatever unity we discover among human beings is a phenomenon of consciousness, not something we can really attribute to them.

Another commentator on Merleau-Ponty’s work, Mary Rose Barral, comes to the same conclusion as Braine does but mainly draws from *The Phenomenology of Perception* and, in particular, the introduction to phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty provides at the beginning of this work. I first quote in full a passage from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* employed by Barral to justify her position that he is an idealist. While describing the beginning point of philosophical reflection Merleau-Ponty declares:

I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead, it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the tradition which I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-84.

distance from me would be abolished—since that distance is not one of its properties—if I were not there to scan it with my gaze.<sup>105</sup>

Barral places her own commentary on this passage in the context of a comparison with Aquinas. She allows that both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty are interested in discovering essences through an examination of things in their concrete particularity. However, Aquinas wants to nail down the “ultimate explanatory principles and causes of the world of our experience, causes and principles which phenomenology does not investigate.”<sup>106</sup> Barral believes that, for Aquinas, the position of the philosopher is irrelevant to the metaphysical causes of the universe in the sense that his knowing or lack of knowing makes no difference to these causes because the whole universe is subject to them, is formed according to them. But, Barral writes, according to Merleau-Ponty the presence of the subject is essential for philosophical knowledge:

In a sense, it is as if he were saying: I am the cause of things and events, but things and events do not cause me. He looks at the world from the point of view of the subject, who can never be a pure spectator, as Husserl’s *epoché* would require, or as could be said of Thomas’s speculation. He is saying, in fact, that he is the one who gives meaning to the world and to things in the world.<sup>107</sup>

If Barral’s Merleau-Ponty is right, the meaning of all things, including the human being, is not something that can be established apart from the subject’s involvement with them. While it may be true that there are definite structures, stable modes of being, typical states of affairs, etc. in the world I only know of them because they appear in my consciousness according to the meaning that I bestow upon them. We could say, then, that the human being for Aquinas exists on a totally different plane of existence than it

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<sup>105</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

<sup>106</sup> Mary Rose Barral, “Thomas Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty,” *Philosophy Today* 26 (Fall 1982), 208.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

does for Merleau-Ponty. The integral unity that Aquinas sees between body and soul is a real one, existing apart from the meaning-giving power of my consciousness.<sup>108</sup> But the plane of reality in which Merleau-Ponty sees the human being as an integral unity is only within our conscious life.

If Braine and Barral are right and Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the body/soul relationship are not intended to describe the make-up of really existing human beings, but only to identify how we bestow meaning on what we call human beings, then how can these ideas be imported into Aquinas's system which is undoubtedly directed toward identifying the real essence of the human being? Merleau-Ponty may make similar claims about the body/soul relationship but if their reference is not to the same kind of being that Aquinas references (but only an ideal one), then a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's philosophical anthropology may be difficult to achieve.

### **Conclusion to Chapter One**

In this chapter I have attempted to lay the groundwork for a comparison between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty which, I hope, will end in demonstrating that the two thinkers are compatible enough for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights into the integral union of body and soul to enrich Aquinas's philosophical anthropology. In Part I I argued that the possibility of compatibility between Aquinas & Merleau-Ponty is suggested by contemporary philosophy of mind theorists, Eric LaRock and Ralph Ellis, who show that these two very different philosophers make strikingly similar claims about the human being. First, both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty recognize that a living material

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<sup>108</sup> Here I use the term "real" to refer to objectively existing things which do not depend upon my thought to exist. The use of this term is distinct from the "realism" of scientific empiricism which assumes that all objects are exclusively organized by external causes.



being is self-organizing because of its form and that it is not a simple by-product of causal forces outside it. Neither would deny that living material beings are subject to influences from their respective environments; however, both hold that via its form an organism acts into its environment to achieve certain objectives and orders all of its body parts toward these ends. A second similarity is that (if LaRock and Ellis are correct) both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty do not consider form and body separate substances but inseparable parts of one integrated whole. A third similarity between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty is suggested by how LaRock and Ellis draw upon them to argue against physicalism and various problems associated with Cartesian dualism. For example, on Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of the form/body unity, there is no need to explain how soul could be a causal power outside of observed physical causality since form is inseparable from its physiological correlates. As both LaRock and Ellis argue, conscious states can be correlated with neurological activity without fallacy. Further, on both accounts the intellect is partly dependent upon the brain or body for its activity and so the problem of neural dependence between an unextended mental substance and its extended body is avoided. These various points of similarity raise at least the interesting possibility that there is enough compatibility in their respective philosophical anthropologies for a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's thought.

However, in any kind of journey it is prudent to gain some foresight into potential difficulties that might hinder it. In my hopeful quest to show that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical anthropology can enrich Aquinas's, I recognize that there are possible problems which may affect my conclusions; they will certainly affect the way in which I make the comparison because they indicate probable points of tension between our two

thinkers. In Part Two, we looked at three objections to the possibility of a fruitful comparison between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty. On the basis of work by Robert Harvanek, we first looked at how Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of philosophy and philosophical methods might be opposed to one another. Because the method of phenomenology is descriptive analysis rather than demonstration and because it rests upon an entirely different notion of experience and because it conceives of philosophy as radically distinct from religious faith, Harvanek sees "a kind of opposition between the contemporary philosophical trends [including phenomenology] and Scholasticism or Thomism."<sup>109</sup> In the second objection I drew out claims made by two experts in Merleau-Ponty's work--Stephen Priest and Fred Evans--that Merleau-Ponty is committed to a purely materialistic anthropology and I argued that this would be incompatible with Aquinas's teaching that the soul, which forms the body of the human being, is immaterial. The third objection to possible compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty emerges from claims made by David Braine and Mary Rose Barral that Merleau-Ponty only sees the human being as an integral unity within our conscious life and does not intend, as Aquinas does, to make metaphysical claims about the really existing human being.

These are serious objections to the possibility of a fruitful comparison between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty and, specifically, to the possibility of the latter's insights enriching the former's philosophical anthropology. But as I close out this chapter I want to offer a final analogy that gives me hope to press forward. Let us imagine a good-hearted humanitarian atheist working for the United Nations. Her job is to understand the

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<sup>109</sup> Harvanek, 543.

customs of various tribes in a war-torn region of Africa in order to best structure an effective peace-keeping policy in the region. She knows little about a certain strife-torn tribe tucked away in southern Kenya but she has access to detailed and accurate descriptions of its people from a Christian missionary who has been living with them for years. The secular humanist and the Christian have radically different ideas about the nature of the world and of human beings and they would come to little agreement about the best ways to shape U.N. policy should they find themselves collaborating on a strategic planning committee. However, the humanitarian's knowledge is greatly enriched by the insights of the missionary and she is able to shape a very effective peacekeeping policy as a result. If we now return to Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty and assume that the objections arrayed against the possibility of a fruitful comparison are true there may yet be opportunity for Aquinas to effectively draw upon Merleau-Ponty's insights into the nature of the body-soul relationship. If the descriptions of the missionary are of the same people and places that the U.N. humanitarian is also addressing but they seriously disagree about the nature of the world, etc. is it not possible for the latter to simply disregard the difference while drawing upon the missionary's insights? Similarly, if Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty address themselves to the same world and both trust the accuracy of basic descriptions of this world and our involvement in it, might Aquinas be able to utilize Merleau-Ponty's descriptions without embracing those philosophical principles which conflict with his own? Perhaps, but if the third objection is true and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy remains confined to ideas in consciousness it may be that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty are not even addressing themselves to the same world.

## **Chapter 2 – Aquinas’s Understanding of the Integral Human Being**

In this chapter I turn away from a direct examination of the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology and toward a description of Aquinas’s teaching on the integral nature of the human being. Before getting to the specifics of this teaching I want to put it into the broader context of his Christian philosophy, basic metaphysical schema, and epistemology. A final point of context I will address is the open-ended and, in the words of Josef Pieper, hope-structured dimension of Aquinas’s philosophy.<sup>110</sup> Although Aquinas was a systematic thinker and articulated a whole interconnected vision of the universe he by no means offered a closed system of thinking as some of his critics and proponents have supposed. His philosophical anthropology is a significant dimension of a vision of the universe which assumes that Being is both intelligible yet unable ever to be exhaustively grasped by the human intellect.

### **Part I – Some Fundamental Dimensions of Aquinas’s Philosophy**

#### **A) Aquinas As A Christian Philosopher**

I do not mean to imply by saying that Aquinas is a Christian philosopher that his philosophy itself is grounded on principles of Christian theology. On the contrary, Aquinas is very careful to distinguish philosophy from theology by marking out their radically different starting principles: “As sacred doctrine is based on the light of faith, so

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<sup>110</sup> See Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas; Three Essays*, trans. John Murray, S.J. and Daniel O’Connor, (New York, Pantheon, 1957). Hereafter referred to as *The Silence of St. Thomas*.

is philosophy founded on the natural light of reason.”<sup>111</sup> Aquinas affirms this basic methodological difference in Chapter Four of the *Summa Contra Gentiles II* when he argues that philosophers and Christian theologians think about creatures in opposite ways. At this point one might argue that the very language of creatures (*creaturis*) is already imbued with a theological slant because it implies that natural beings were made by a personal God, but Aquinas holds that philosophy is able to affirm God as the first efficient cause of the entire universe and so the theology implied in *creaturis* is not necessarily Christian or based on revelation but is of a natural sort.<sup>112</sup> In any case, philosophers approach creatures in “bottom to top” fashion not assuming, at least initially, that they are the revelation of God’s power but thinking first about their immediately manifest nature—e.g. that fire moves upward, that certain objects have no interior principle of animation but others do, that human beings are animals with rationality. “In the teaching of philosophy, which considers creatures in themselves and leads us from them to the knowledge of God, the first consideration is about creatures, the last of God.”<sup>113</sup> Philosophy does reach up to God but only through what it can gather on the basis of natural observation. However, “in the teaching of faith, which considers creatures only in their relation to God, the consideration of God comes first, that of

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<sup>111</sup> *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity, Prologue*, in *The Pocket Aquinas*, trans. and ed. Vernon J. Bourke, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), 292.

<sup>112</sup> I use the term ‘Christian theology’ to indicate a distinction between theology that proceeds on the basis of Christian revelation and theology that proceeds on the basis of human reason, so called ‘natural theology,’ which is a form of philosophical thinking. Unless I specify otherwise ‘theology’ refers to ‘Christian theology.’

<sup>113</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles II.4.5*, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 35-36. Hereafter referred to as *Summa Contra Gentiles II*.

creatures afterwards.”<sup>114</sup> The theologian rooted in revelation has a sort of “top to bottom” approach to the natural world; he/she first regards its objects—mountains, fire, leaping stags—as representing the glory of God and only then thinks about natural beings in themselves. Thus, the disciplines of philosophy and Christian theology proceed from entirely different methodological foundations, although both are directed toward many of same objects. Both can conclude, for example, that God is One and the First Cause of the universe.

What then is meant by Aquinas’s ‘Christian philosophy’? This phrase does not indicate that authentic philosophy necessarily confirms Christian teaching, for Aquinas famously holds that one can believe, on the basis of human reason, in the eternity of the world even though one cannot, on the basis of his or her Christian faith, accept that the world is eternal. The phrase does indicate how Aquinas uses philosophy for the exposition and defense of the Christian faith. The science of human wisdom or philosophy is not inherently ordered toward this kind of apologetic but it can be employed to advance the claims of faith. He states, for example, in his *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity* that theologians can draw on the work of philosophers in three ways. First, “to demonstrate items that are preambles to faith.”<sup>115</sup> Such preambles include truths about God that we can rationally know—e.g. that God is simple and unchanging.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.4.5, p. 36.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, II, 3, c, in *The Pocket Aquinas*, trans. and ed. Vernon J. Bourke, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), 293. All translations of the *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity* are from this edition.

<sup>116</sup> For example, in Book Two of *The Republic* (380d-381d) Plato argues that God must be simple and unchanging. That which changes must either be changed by something else or change itself. The more perfect a thing is the more resistant it is to being changed by external forces. God, as the most perfect being, would, therefore, not suffer change from an outside cause. Nor would he change himself because when a thing changes it becomes

Aquinas insists that the same truths cannot be known in the same person both according to faith and according to reason.<sup>117</sup> For those who are uneducated in philosophy, truths that can be rationally demonstrated might instead be accepted via revelation and, as such, do not function as *preambula ad articulos fidei*. However, truths that can be determined through the science of human wisdom Aquinas calls preambles of faith and he holds that they can aid in the acceptance of the teachings of the ‘divine science’ because our intellect is able to be led by “what is known through natural reason..to that which is above reason.”<sup>118</sup> Second, philosophy is able “to make known those items that belong to the faith by means of certain similitudes.”<sup>119</sup> For example, Augustine in his book *On Order* shows that there are certain similarities between philosophical truths and the reality of the Trinity. Third, philosophy is able “to oppose statements against the faith, either by showing that they are false, or by showing that they are not necessarily true.”<sup>120</sup> Christian theologians might, for example, undercut the position of a heretic not by appealing to revelation but by showing how it contains logical contradictions. For Aquinas, philosophy is not Christian in the sense that it is grounded in supernatural principles but because it serves the advancement of the Christian faith. In fact all sciences, including philosophy, serve as handmaidens (*ancillae*) to the divine science.<sup>121</sup>

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either better or worse. As the most perfect being God would not make himself worse and it would be impossible for him to make himself better than he already is.

<sup>117</sup> See the discussion in *De Veritate* 14.9.

<sup>118</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.1.5.ad. 2.

<sup>119</sup> *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, II, 3 c, p. 293.

<sup>120</sup> *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, II, 3 c.

<sup>121</sup> See *Summa Theologica* Ia.1.5.

## **B) Aquinas's Basic Metaphysical Schema And The Place of the Human Being Within It**

Within Aquinas's grand metaphysical schema all created beings are sent out by God (*exitus*) and exist in a movement of return to God (*reditus*). Aquinas grounds this metaphysical structure on philosophical bases but also considers it from the perspective of theology. For example, he teaches that final end of the human being is the beatific vision, the ultimate *reditus*. Although the very existence of the end of contemplating God and divine things can be ascertained through philosophy<sup>122</sup> the possibility of seeing a personal God face to face comes through the light of revelation. And, *a fortiori*, the beatific vision itself is a gift from God because it exceeds the natural powers of the human mind. Another central example of the theological dimension of Aquinas's overall metaphysical structure is that he recognizes that the entire created order, as a result of Adam's sin, exists in a wounded and disordered state. Christian revelation teaches that Christ's descent from the Triune Godhead, in which he becomes a human being, dies, and rises from the grave, enables each person and the whole universe to overcome defects caused by original sin and to achieve its preordained end in God.<sup>123</sup> Still, the basic idea of the universe as a journey in which creation starts out from God and exists in a movement of return to God is an accomplishment of philosophy which means that, for Aquinas,

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<sup>122</sup> Aristotle characterizes Metaphysics as *theology* and believes that the philosopher who contemplates this, the highest science, is immersed in the study of divine things in that he/she addresses the first and divine causes of the universe (*Metaphysics* Bk VI, 1025b-1026a30).

<sup>123</sup> According to Christian theology, Jesus's incarnation, death and resurrection enable human beings, through the sacramental grace of the Church, to return to God in a far greater way than they would have prior to the fall and the introduction of original sin into the human race. Thus, during the Great Vigil liturgy on Holy Saturday night the Church declares the words of St. Augustine: "O felix culpa," 'Oh happy fault' because through it the Son of God became human so that the human, by participating in the sacramental grace of the Church, can become God, can participate in Christ's divine life.



philosophy is fundamentally theological. The science of human wisdom, according to the internal capabilities of this science, determines that human beings are ordered to God.

If God is the source and summit of Aquinas's metaphysical structure then proofs of God's existence would be obviously a central part of his approach. And indeed Aquinas begins each of his two *Summae* with detailed arguments for the existence of God. In the *Summa Theologica* his famous "five ways" take up Question 3, Article Two of the First Part and in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas demonstrates God's existence in Chapter 13 of Book One. Each of the various proofs begins with sense perception. The first of Thomas's five ways is grounded in our experience of motion. It is clear that Aquinas puts special priority on this argument because it is the only one he emphasizes in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*; there he provides a great deal more detail (13 pages) than the simple paragraph devoted to the first way in the *Summa Theologica*.

In order to help show the centrality of sense experience for Aquinas, I highlight below the critical steps which he takes in the "first way" from motion. Aquinas says that this proof is the "more manifest way" than the others not because it is the simplest but because "it is certain, and evident to our senses that in the world some things are in motion."<sup>124</sup> Aquinas here indicates the basic trust he has in sense experience. Unlike Descartes, who distrusts the senses and who starts his proof of God's existence in an internal experience of doubting everything but his own doubt, Aquinas assumes the existence of the world and has absolute certainty that there are beings in the world whose

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<sup>124</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.2.3.

motion he can perceive. This trust is obviously critical to his whole philosophical project because he rests his demonstrations of God's existence and entire metaphysics upon it.<sup>125</sup>

What is motion, according to Aquinas? He states, borrowing Aristotle's definition from the *Physics* (Bk 3, Ch. 1), that it "is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality."<sup>126</sup> Aquinas is not just speaking about local motion but of any change whatsoever – alteration, growth, even diminution. After defining motion Aquinas argues that "nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality except by something in a state of actuality."<sup>127</sup> A reality like fire—a typical example employed by Aquinas that he uses here as well—is actually hot and it heats up wood which is potentially hot but just prior to contact with the fire is actually cold. Here the argument depends upon the principle of contradiction: wood cannot be at the same time potentially hot and actually hot for then it would both be and not be the same thing in the same respect, which is impossible. The wood cannot bring itself to a point of being actually hot and therefore it needs something that is actually hot—fire—in order to undergo the change from cold to hot. Aquinas then states "it is impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move

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<sup>125</sup> Natural philosophy leads to proofs of God's existence specifically and first philosophy or metaphysics in general which means that it is chronologically prior to metaphysics and contributes to it; however, metaphysics is called "first philosophy" because it then provides philosophy of nature with the ontological reasons for natural things. Aquinas argues that: "The events perceptible to the senses, from which natural philosophy demonstrations come, are more easily known by us in the beginning. But when we have reached the knowledge of the primary causes by means of them, then from these causes it will become apparent to us what is the essential explanation for these events on which factual demonstrations were based. And thus, natural science contributes something to divine science, and yet its own principles come to be known by means of the latter." Thomas Aquinas, *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, V, 1, reply to Obj. 9, p. 152.

<sup>126</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.2.3.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

itself.”<sup>128</sup> He goes on to make a major claim that “therefore whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another.”<sup>129</sup> Within the *Summa Contra Gentiles* I Aquinas takes pains to show that ultimately no being can move itself but here he skips this possible objection. However, the claim that whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another does stack up well to basic common sense observation. Human beings are moved, for example, by other people, by objects which attract their appetite, by the call of duty, and so on. The second part of Aquinas’s first way is that it is impossible for there to be an infinite series of movers who are themselves moved: “this cannot go on to infinity because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover.”<sup>130</sup> Thus, without a first mover who is itself unmoved there would be no motion at all. Every being that moves is dependent upon the being (or beings) who gave it motion. If there is no unmoved mover then there is no explanation at all for why there is motion; indeed, there would be no motion. But motion exists and thus there must be an unmoved mover whom, according to Thomas, “everyone understands to be God.”<sup>131</sup> This brief foray into one of Aquinas’s demonstrations of God’s existence is important for showing that his metaphysics is based not on God as described through revelation but upon the workings of human reason trusting in sense perception.

After proving God’s existence and treating various aspects of God’s attributes Aquinas goes on in each of his *Summae* to address creation. At this point we turn to the *exitus* dimension of Aquinas’s metaphysics and how God, out of the abundance of his

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

goodness, created the universe *ex nihilo*. Any claim that creation was necessary for God would indicate that he was determined to act which would mean that God is not completely free and thus not perfect. “The fact that creatures are brought into existence, though it takes its origin from the rational character of God’s goodness (*ex ratione divinae bonitatis originem habeat*), nevertheless depends solely on God’s will.”<sup>132</sup>

But why did God create such a diverse universe where there are some species of beings that, from a human perspective, appear quite “low”—e.g. slugs and bugs—and others quite “high”—e.g. angels? In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas answers this question in several ways. I will address two of his responses. Aquinas begins the first one by stating that “since every agent intends to introduce its likeness (*similitudinem*) into its effect, in the measure that its effect can receive it, the agent does this the more perfectly as it is the more perfect itself.”<sup>133</sup> Poor sculptors will do a poor job carving into stone the forms they want to materialize, while excellent ones will do a correspondingly excellent job of carving into stone those forms they want to materialize. As the most perfect agent God’s likeness should be manifest in his creation in the best possible way. But precisely because of God’s perfection, Aquinas argues that it would be impossible for any one creature to allow the universe to bear an appropriate likeness to its Creator. God, as cause, is simple and one but causes always transcend their effects; thus, there could not be an effect from God that shared in his simplicity and unicity. Thus, “the presence of multiplicity and variety among created things was..necessary that a perfect likeness

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<sup>132</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.97.13, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), 71. Hereafter referred to as *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.

<sup>133</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.45.2.

(*similitudo perfecta*) to God be found in them according to their manner of being.”<sup>134</sup> By *similitudo perfecta* Aquinas does not mean that created being is a perfect copy of God as if the latter were a kind of clone of the former. He means that the universe taken as a whole is the most complete image of God that is possible “to a degree consonant with created being.”<sup>135</sup>

It is perhaps easier to see how angels and human beings bear a likeness to God than inanimate beings and creatures who lack the powers of rationality and will which intellectual creatures have in common with God. How does this inequality in the universe contribute to the whole creation being a *similitudo perfecta* of God? Aquinas argues that a being is more like God if it resembles him in more than just one way. God is goodness and poured out this goodness into other beings in the act of creating them. “Hence, the creature approaches more perfectly to God’s likeness if it is not only good, but can also act for the good of other things.”<sup>136</sup> But acting for the good of other things requires both plurality and inequality in the universe. One cannot pour out its goodness upon another unless there is another to receive it; thus, we see the need for plurality. Further, the presence of varying species allows creatures that are more like God to help those who are less like him. Thus, the angels, purely intellectual substances, can act for the good of the created order beneath them. The human race is able to act for the good of the various species below it. The existence of diverse grades of being, the higher helping the lower, was necessary in order for the created order to represent God as Goodness outpouring goodness upon lesser beings.

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.45.4.

I have just touched briefly on some of the different grades of being present in the universe, but in order to more accurately place human beings in the context of the universe I now turn to a more complete treatment of the basic dimensions on the ladder of being. I will first look at material creatures composed of matter and form. An important principle for ranking these beings is the extent to which form transcends the matter it informs: “the higher the form, the more it surpasses (*superexcedit*) matter in its being.”<sup>137</sup>

At the lowest level of form/matter composites we find the basic natural elements of the universe, what is today indicated by the periodic table. Within these elements forms “are altogether material and wholly embedded in matter,”<sup>138</sup> because the forms themselves have the dispositions of matter—e.g. moisture, density.

Above the lowest forms Aquinas describes the forms of mixed bodies. For the most part the mixed bodies have the same operations as those of the natural elements but their operations can sometimes produce the same effects as those of the natural elements but through a “higher power which they receive from the heavenly bodies.”<sup>139</sup> The case in point Aquinas gives is the lodestone or magnet which exhibits density and gravity but which can also attract iron to itself through, Aquinas believes, the action of the heavenly bodies<sup>140</sup> working within its form.

Above this level Aquinas describes the souls of plants that are “principles of movement in living things, which move themselves.”<sup>141</sup> The souls of plants are able to surpass the power of the natural elements (e.g. earth, water) because they draw them into

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<sup>137</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.6.

<sup>138</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.8.

<sup>139</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.9.

<sup>140</sup> Aquinas held that what we now call the planets and stars are made up of incorruptible substances, but that the earth itself is of a corruptible material nature.

<sup>141</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.10.

themselves, although the elements directly assist plant forms in their operations. For example, through drawing up moisture and nutrients into itself the plant is enabled to continue growing.

A step beyond plant forms is that of animal forms. Here we find forms “resembling the higher substances, not only in moving, but even, somehow, in knowing (*in cognoscendo*), so that they are capable of operations to which the aforesaid qualities [of the natural elements] are of no assistance.”<sup>142</sup> Many different species of animals can act through some degree of knowledge achieved via the bodily powers of sensation and imagination. For example, lions can sense the fresh smell of the gazelle that it is nearby and, in some latent way, can imagine their prey as they track it. These cognitive powers are not directly caused by the elemental properties of the animal’s bodily organs (e.g. heating and cooling), Aquinas says, “although these [properties] are necessary for the due disposition of the organ involved.”<sup>143</sup>

We now come to the human soul. This form is animal in that it has the powers of sensation and imagination but it is also similar to substances higher than itself (i.e. God and the angels) in that it can achieve intellectual knowledge. God and the angels, who are purely immaterial substances, do not require any bodily organs in order to understand. Likewise, the understanding of human beings does not directly depend upon matter. Aquinas points out that “the intellectual soul knows a thing in its nature absolutely: for instance, it knows a stone absolutely as stone.”<sup>144</sup> If this soul were material or depended upon bodily organs knowledge of a thing’s universal nature would be impossible on the

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<sup>142</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.11.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Summa Theologica* 1a.75.5.

principle that an effect cannot have what is not in the cause. There is no power in a bodily organ to access a universal reality that transcends its instantiation in a particular being. Thus, our ability to know the absolute nature of something is not from any of our bodily organs. On the other hand, human knowledge does require initial sense perception which means that the intellectual soul of the human being is different than the intellects of God and the angels because it is naturally suited to a body:

But since the human soul's act of understanding needs powers—namely, imagination and sense—which function through bodily organs, this itself shows that the soul is naturally united to the body in order to complete the human species.<sup>145</sup>

The human soul does not start its existence with an *apriori* grasp of universal principles or with some untapped stock of knowledge but in a *tabula rasa* state. In order for us to know the absolute nature of anything we must first have access to the world of concrete particulars and our access to this world is achieved through imagination and sense. Thus, the form of the human being is higher than the form of any other composite being. The operation of the animal form directly depends upon bodily organs, but the human form in its understanding “transcends the condition of corporeal matter” and thus “must not be wholly encompassed by or imbedded in matter.”<sup>146</sup>

Between human beings and God exists the angelic order of creatures which are not material and, therefore, not composite beings of form and matter. A particular angel's form is its substance and, because there is no matter within an angel, it is impossible, on Aquinas's metaphysics of individuation, that there be several individual angels of one species; instead, every angel is its own species. The angelic form is higher than the form

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<sup>145</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.12.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*



of human beings because it completely transcends matter. Its knowing does not require the powers of sensing and imagination. Given our embodied groundedness in specific times and places, human beings must slowly work their way to a knowledge of the universe, but Aquinas holds that the angels do not come to knowledge discursively. Instead “in the truths which they know naturally, they at once behold all things whatsoever that can be known in them.”<sup>147</sup>

If the angels are immaterial and separate intellectual substances capable of knowing at once all natural things that they can know what makes them different from the divine substance? How does their form differ from God’s form? Aquinas teaches that God is the fullness of existence itself and that all being subsists in him; God *is* being. Thus, God’s goodness, love, understanding and any other attribute that we rightly attribute to God are all God himself; God *is* goodness or God *is* love, etc. Because of the fragmented nature of our understanding we have distinct names for the different attributes of God but in him there are no real distinctions. If God is being then he must be absolutely simple for being encompasses everything and it would be impossible for there to exist something that could be separate from being for if it were separate it would have existence, but being already encompasses all existence. Thus, in God there is no difference between being and *what is* or essence. Angelic creatures are not composed of matter and form but nevertheless “a certain composition is found in them by the fact that in them *being* is not the same as *what is*.”<sup>148</sup> The *what is* of the angel refers to its existence *as* an intellectual substance but this *what is* does not refer to the fullness of existence because it does not encompass the divine being.

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<sup>147</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.58.3

<sup>148</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.52.1.

I have so far addressed Aquinas's central proof for God's existence, his teaching that the universe was created by God through the abundance of his goodness, and the various levels of the ladder of being. I now turn to the *reditus* dimension of Aquinas's metaphysics, the return of the created order back to God.

In Chapter 46 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas argues that all beings are naturally inclined to return to God. He states that:

An effect is most perfect when it returns to its source (*Tunc enim effectus maxime perfectus est quando in suum redit principium*); thus, the circle is the most perfect of all figures, and circular motion the most perfect of all motions, because in their case a return is made to its starting point. It is therefore necessary that creatures return to their principle in order that the universe of creatures may attain its ultimate perfection.<sup>149</sup>

God, as the perfect craftsman, would not create an imperfect universe and thus it was necessary that every creature return back to him, the source of the universe.

In the same chapter of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas indicates two different ways that created beings return to their source. One way is achieved as a being images the Creator simply by existing according to its own particular essence and apart from any additional operation on its part. "Each and every creature," Aquinas says, "returns to its source so far as it bears a likeness to its source, according to its being and nature."<sup>150</sup> Thus, the first way corresponds to the first act of creatures, their *esse*, which Aquinas also calls a creature's first perfection. The *esse* of composite things derives from the form of these beings; thus, the matter of the composite thing is what it is because of the act of the form. Now, all creatures, even sub-intellectual ones, return to God simply by being. Even if the existence of the sub-atomic quark is miniscule it still has a likeness

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<sup>149</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.46.2.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

to God who is existence itself. But God's nature is intellectual. And "since God's intellect is the principle of the production of creatures..the existence of some creatures endowed with intelligence was necessary"<sup>151</sup> in order for the universe as a whole to return to God. The universe would not be complete in its return to God, according to first act, unless some beings had an intellectual nature as God does.

The second way creatures return to their source is through their operations. This second way corresponds to their second act, the operations or essence-structured actions through which their *esse* is manifest. This second act also constitutes a thing's second perfection. Now, a creature's operations tend naturally toward the good that is proper to it. A plant's stems and leaves reach out toward the sun and its roots seek out water so that it might achieve optimal vegetative growth. An animal establishes itself in a particular environment so that it can find the appropriate food and shelter and thus thrive according to its nature. In moving toward the good appropriate to themselves creatures operate according to their own natures and in doing so they return to God by imaging him whose own operations perfectly correspond to the divine nature. However, the operations of plants, animals and any other sub-human creatures are not rational. But God has no other operation than those of intellect and will. Thus, in order for the universe to most perfectly image God in its return to God, it was necessary that there be creatures who operate according to intellect and will.

Now, a central dimension of God's action is the outpouring of his goodness upon the universe in creating it. God also conserves or sustains the universe and thereby contributes to the good of the universe in an ongoing fashion. If a critical part of God's

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

operation is to contribute to the good of others, then for intellectual creatures to image God adequately in their operations and thereby return to him they must also contribute to the good of others. While discussing above God's reasons for creating diversity in the universe I addressed Aquinas's argument that in order for the universe to image God most perfectly it required the existence of intellectual creatures which contribute to the good of others. But this contribution is the same way that intellectual creatures make their journey back to God.

One very important aspect of this beneficent *reditus* intellectual creatures make is that it implies that sub-intellectual creatures are not able, by themselves, adequately to return to God and that intellectual creatures have a responsibility for helping them on their journey. If sub-intellectual creatures could adequately return to God simply by being and operating according to their natures then intellectual creatures could contribute nothing to their perfection and thus nothing to their journey back to God.

But how do intellectual beings actually help sub-intellectual creatures reach their proper perfection and thereby return to God? In his article, "How Knowing the World Completes the World: A Note on Aquinas and Husserl," John C. McCarthy helps provide Aquinas's answer. I turn first to a section of text quoted by McCarthy drawn from the same chapter of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* I have been addressing above:

In all things becomingly ordered, the relation of secondary terms to the ultimate term imitates the relation of the first to all the others, both first and last, though sometimes deficiently. Now, it has been shown that God comprehends in Himself all creatures. And this is represented in corporeal creatures, although in another way. For the superior body is always found comprehending and containing the inferior, but according to quantitative

extension, while God contains all creatures in a simple way, and not by extension of quantity.<sup>152</sup>

McCarthy then gives a simple example from geometry to show what Aquinas means by higher corporeal bodies comprising and containing lower ones according to quantity. Within the structure of the cube the line contains the point, the plane contains the line while the cube contains each of these quantitative dimensions beneath it. God contains the cube and every other object in the universe but not in a material way. McCarthy goes on quoting from the same passage:

In order that the imitation of God, in this way of containing not be lacking to creatures, intellectual creatures were made which contain corporeal creatures not by quantitative extension but simply by way of understanding: for what is understood is in the one understanding and is comprehended by his intellectual operation.<sup>153</sup>

McCarthy's gloss on this is that "the way the whole universe is comprehended by the divine intellect is imaged in the way the sub-intellectual world is understood by created intelligence."<sup>154</sup> In a sense the whole sub-intellectual world is held in the mind of intellectual creatures in the understanding which the latter have of them and this is an imitation of how God comprehends and contains the whole created order.

It is perhaps easier to see how the containing and comprehending of the sub-intellectual creation by intellectual creatures is a perfection of the latter class of beings as opposed to the former. Intellectual beings return to God by imitating him in their operations of knowing the whole sub-intellectual order. But how does this knowing perfect the sub-intellectual creatures? How does it contribute to their good? This question

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<sup>152</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.46.7 in John C. McCarthy, "How Knowing the World Completes the World: A Note on Aquinas and Husserl," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993), 75-76.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>154</sup> McCarthy, p. 76.

becomes especially weighty when we consider Aquinas's position that knowing is a perfection of the knower and not of the thing known. McCarthy illustrates Aquinas's position with the following passage from *De veritate*:

Knowledge depends upon the knowable, but the converse does not obtain; whence the relation by which knowledge is referred to the knowable is real, but the relation by which the knowable is referred to knowledge is of reason merely...and thus is it in all things which stand to one another as measure and measured, or that which perfects and that which is perfected.<sup>155</sup>

So, if in knowing, human reason is measured and perfected by the object of intellection but this object itself is not measured or perfected by the knower how can it be, as we discussed earlier, that intellectual creatures contribute to the good of sub-intellectual creatures by knowing them?

McCarthy takes us to *De veritate* 2.2 to address this difficult question. In this text Aquinas marks out two different ways that created things are perfected. The first way is the perfection of its first act, or *esse*. Aquinas does not here distinguish first act from second act as he does in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 46; the two kinds of perfection Aquinas noted there are reduced to one in this section. After stating that "a thing is perfect with respect to the perfection of its act of existence."<sup>156</sup> he goes on to say that any created being remains imperfect. Why?

Since the specific *esse* of one thing is distinct from the specific *esse* of another thing, therefore in any created thing of this kind the perfection in each single thing falls short of perfection simply speaking to the degree that perfection is found in other species (*De Veritate*, Q. 2, A. 2 as quoted in McCarthy 1993, 78).

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<sup>155</sup> *De Veritate* 21.1 in McCarthy, p. 77.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate (Truth) 2.2*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J., vol 1, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1954), p. 61.

A cat has its own perfection as a cat but insofar as it is not a mouse or a louse or a member of any other species, its particular feline perfection is incomplete for it does not possess the perfection of these other species. Aquinas further states that:

The perfection of any thing considered in itself is imperfect as being a part of the perfection of the whole universe, which arises from the perfection of single things gathered together (*invicem congregatis*).<sup>157</sup>

Any created thing by itself remains imperfect or incomplete because it is only a part of the whole universe and therefore does not contain the perfection of the whole universe in itself. It gains its perfection by being gathered up with other beings of the universe. How does this integration occur? What is the remedy for the problem of singular created beings lacking perfection and needing to be “gathered together” with other created beings? Aquinas goes on:

In order that there be some remedy for this imperfection another mode of perfection is found in created things according to which the perfection which is proper to one thing is found in another thing: and this is the perfection of the knower insofar as he is knowing, because something is known by the knower according to this, namely, that the known thing itself is in some way in the knower.<sup>158</sup>

With this passage we come full circle to the section from *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.46.4 where Aquinas argues that intellectual creatures are able to contribute to the good of sub-intellectual creatures. Even though these creatures have their own perfection (through their existence and operations) they lack the perfection of other beings. They are able to gain this perfection by being joined with them in the soul of a knowing being. When intellectual creatures “contain corporeal creatures..by way of understanding them”<sup>159</sup> they perfect them as they unify them with other species which they also hold in their intellect.

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<sup>157</sup> *De Veritate* 2.2, in McCarthy, p. 78.

<sup>158</sup> *De veritate* 2.2, in McCarthy, 78.

<sup>159</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.46.7

It is, as it were, that the various species of sub-intellectual creation find their proper place within the knower. They are perfected by being intellectually recognized as an integral part of the universe, a recognition that they obviously do not have on their own.

Now, every being whose existence is distinct from its essence has the kind of imperfection noted above, that its specific *esse* is distinct from the specific *esse* of another being. And thus intellectual creatures are in need of the same remedy that they are able to provide for sub-intellectual creatures. They must be known by an intellectual being who can unify them with all the other beings in the universe. This other being is, of course, God himself who contains all created intellectual substances along with sub-intellectual beings in his own intellect and is therefore ultimately responsible for the perfection of creation and its return to himself. Because God is the fullness of *esse* and every creature takes its existence via participation in this *esse*, he does not suffer from the imperfection of not containing perfection found in other species. Humans and angels are designed to contribute to the perfection of the sub-intellectual creation by knowing them for through this act God's creation is an adequate image of him but these created intellectual substances are, in turn, perfected by God as he contains them and the rest of the whole universe in himself.

I have so far not distinguished the separate roles of angels and human beings in the return of the universe to God. None of the texts I have been treating distinguish their functions but it is certainly the case that their roles are not the same. Indeed, just as the whole sub-intellectual creation depends upon human beings for their return to God, insofar as they are known by them, so too does the human species depend upon the



angels for their return to God.<sup>160</sup> How so? Aquinas believes that “beings that participate more fully in the power of the divine providence are executive agents of divine providence (*executiva divinae providentiae*) in regard to those that participate less.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, the angels, who participate more fully in God’s power than human beings, who are closer to him in being, are responsible for exercising Divine providence over human beings and helping them return to their source.<sup>162</sup> This happens in at least two ways. First, human beings are actually enlightened by the angels with regard to universal truth.<sup>163</sup> Second, human beings are assisted by the angels to do good.<sup>164</sup>

In this relatively lengthy, but necessary, excursus into Aquinas’s overall metaphysical schema of the universe, the human being occupies a central linking place

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<sup>160</sup> Aquinas believes that Divine providence is accomplished in large part through the work of the angels. The universe would be incomplete without the existence of the angels and the return of human beings and the sub-intellectual creation to God would be impossible without them. See, for example: *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, Chapter 77 - *That the Execution of Divine Providence is Accomplished by Means of Secondary Causes*, Chapter 78 - *That Other Creatures are Ruled by God by Means of Intellectual Creatures*, and Chapter 79 - *That Lower Intellectual Substances are Ruled by Higher Ones*.

<sup>161</sup> SCG III.78.2.

<sup>162</sup> See Oliva Blanchette’s discussion of the special function human beings have in the perfection of the universe. Blanchette argues that although the Angels are closer to God in terms of spiritual power and have a higher role than human beings in their exercise of Divine Providence, human beings are still at the center of Aquinas’s theory of the universe in part because sub-intellectual creatures and the separated substances are ordered to serve them. See Chapter 7, “The Human Being’s Special Affinity with the Total Perfection of the Universe,” and “The Human Being’s Own Promotion of the Perfection of the Universe,” in *The Perfection of the Universe According to Aquinas*, (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 280-85.

<sup>163</sup> See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.111.1: “The human intellect..cannot grasp the universal truth itself unveiled; because its nature requires it to understand by turning to the phantasms...So the angels propose the intelligible truth to men under the similitudes of sensible things.”

<sup>164</sup> See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.113.2: “human knowledge and affection can vary and fail from good in many ways; and so it was necessary that angels should be deputed for the guardianship of men, in order to regulate them and move them to good.”

between separate or intellectual substances — God and the angels — and corporeal substances. Aquinas takes great delight in the marvelous connections between the various beings of the universe and how “divine wisdom has united the ends of higher things with the beginnings of the lower.”<sup>165</sup> Human beings are the lowest of intellectual substances because our intellectual souls, though immaterial, depend upon sense perception through our bodies to gain knowledge. But we are also the highest of corporeal creatures because our bodies are designed to be infused with the intellectual substance of our rational souls.

### **C) Aquinas’s Epistemology**

Unlike modern philosophers, who often consider first philosophy to be epistemology, and who often begin philosophical inquiry with questions about what can be known and how it is known, Aquinas places his epistemology within the context of his metaphysical theory and philosophical anthropology (which includes his psychology). He begins, as we saw above, both of his *Summae* with proofs for the existence of God, and then addresses the creation of the universe. In both *Summae* Aquinas then goes on to address the nature of the angels before getting to the nature of the human being. Now, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas does not specifically thematize questions of human knowing. However, he does in the *Summa Theologica’s Treatise on Man*. Here Aquinas first describes the essence of the soul (Ia.75), then the human soul’s union with the body (Ia.76), then the various powers of the soul (Ia.77-83), and then how and what human beings know (Ia84-89). Thus, after establishing his theory of the essence of the human being Aquinas then addresses the way of knowing that is natural to us given our composite nature.

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<sup>165</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.6

If Aquinas's approach is to address philosophical anthropology prior to questions of human knowing, why should I reverse the procedure here and address the later before the former? Although Aquinas thematically treats questions of our knowing after his metaphysics and his anthropology, he nevertheless utilizes epistemological principles to prove the existence of God and establish his theory of human nature. Thus, in his natural theology he makes certain assumptions about how we know—e.g. that our perception of movement in concrete singulars is the first step to a philosophical grasp of God's existence—and then later he specifically addresses these assumptions (e.g. in *Summa Theologica* Ia.84). Furthermore, his definition of truth actually occurs in both *Summae* in the context of his treatment of God. In this present section I address some basic dimensions of Aquinas's epistemology because they are operative in his philosophical anthropology. I will first address his theory of truth, second how our souls operate in order to gain knowledge, and finally the primacy of sense perception for Aquinas's theory of human knowing.

For Aquinas, truth as well as goodness, is intimately related to being (*ens*). Goodness is convertible (*convertantur*) with being in that it presents being under the aspect of desirability. A thing is good as it is desirable, but a thing is only desirable insofar as it is perfect and a thing is only perfect insofar as it has actual existence. Thus, insofar as there is being, there is goodness.<sup>166</sup> Truth also is convertible with being as Aquinas tersely presents in the following passage from *Summa Theologica*:

Now everything, in as far as it has being, so far is it knowable. Wherefore it is said in *De Anima* iii that *the soul is in some manner all things*,

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<sup>166</sup> This argument is taken from *Summa Theologica* 1a.5.1.

through the senses and the intellect. And therefore, as good is convertible with being, so is the true.<sup>167</sup>

A particular person's soul may not actually know all things, but it exists *in potentia* to know all things and to the extent that it does gain knowledge of a thing, it somehow contains that thing within itself. As I will discuss below the knower does not have the matter of a thing within its soul, but the immaterial form of a thing. But because it is precisely the form of a thing in a form/matter composite that gives existence to the whole composite, by grasping the form, the knower gains understanding of the thing.

Essentially, truth is the knowability of being, just as goodness is the desirability of being.

However, being is not exactly the same as either goodness or truth, because if it were exactly the same it would be both superfluous and confusing to call being by different names. Goodness and truth each expresses a different relationship of creatures to being. The creature who seeks goodness also seeks being insofar as it is desirable. Here the term or end of the creature's appetite is primarily being as an object. The intellect of the creature who seeks to know goes out toward being, insofar as it is knowable, but here the end of the act is primarily within the intellect itself. In very basic terms, a creature's primary relationship to being as goodness is a subject-toward-object relationship in which being is desired and a creature's primary relationship to being as truth is an object-toward-subject relationship in which being is known—i.e. brought within the mind of the knower.

So, truth expresses a certain kind of relationship that intellectual creatures have with being, but what is truth? Aquinas follows Aristotle in defining it as the “adequation

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<sup>167</sup> *Summa Theologica* 1a.16.3.

of thought and thing (*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*).<sup>168</sup> Truth means that a thing is in the intellect as understood. Thus, Aquinas embraces Augustine's definition of truth, which is "that whereby what is, is manifested (*veritas est, qua ostenditur id quod est*)."<sup>169</sup> The being of a thing is clearly grasped by the knower but such understanding is not in the thing known but in the knower.

Although truth as "adequation of thought and thing" primarily means, at least for created beings, truth as the conformity of intellect to the thing known, there is a secondary aspect of this fundamental definition—"the truth of things insofar as they are related to the intellect"<sup>170</sup>--and this expresses the dependency of being on intellect. We can see this with artificial things that come from humans. For example, an architect designs a house. The very concept of the house emerges from the mind of the architect and thus it depends upon him/her for its truth. When the house is built it is true insofar as it conforms to the concept that the architect established for it. We can also see that being depends upon intellect with regard to the whole universe, which was created in God's mind. Things in the universe are true, Aquinas says, "insofar as they express the likeness of the species that are in the divine mind."<sup>171</sup> Human beings have the capacity, because of their free will, either to properly express the likeness of the human species that is in God's mind—e.g. by living in charity—or to disfigure this likeness—e.g. by living in hatred. When we live in charity we are true to ourselves as intended by God; when we

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<sup>168</sup> *Summa Theologica* 1a.16.1. Benzinger renders *adaequatio* as 'equation,' but this suggests a literal and thus unworkable sameness between the objective reality of a thing and its presence in the intellect. Thus, I employ 'adequation' to allow for the ontological difference between a thing's objective reality and its presence in the intellect.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* My translation.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

live in hatred we are not. Truth is in things and depends upon a divine intellect. However, when we address the human knowing of the created order truth is primarily the equation of our minds with the being of things and in this sense the truth is in our intellects.

I turn now to how human beings actually come to gain truth and I want first to remark that for Aquinas the human being is most naturally ordered to know beings of a composite nature because it is a being of a composite nature: “The power of knowledge is proportioned to the thing known...[and thus] the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter.”<sup>172</sup> But because we are intellectual soul unified with a material body, we have access to two kinds of knowledge—sensitive knowledge and intellectual knowledge. The first gives us knowledge of material singulars (*singularia*) through the phantasms (*phantasmata*) or interior mental representations of material things that are sensed. The Latin term from which ‘phantasm’ comes, *phantasma –atis*, can also mean apparition or phantom and is at the root of the English words ‘phantom’ and ‘fantasy.’ Thus, the word seems ordered to something that we can visually grasp. Although ‘phantasm’ does include visual images or representations of material things it also means representations of material things brought by the other senses.<sup>173</sup> A blind person, for example, can have a phantasm of a piece of

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<sup>172</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.7.

<sup>173</sup> Unlike the intellect which is strictly immaterial the phantasms “are actual images of certain species, but are immaterial in potentiality.” *Summa Theologica* Ia.79.Ad4. Thus, the phantasms seem to have two modes of existence. On the one hand, they are actual images. This part of Aquinas’s theory is clarified and confirmed by modern scientific studies of physiognomy and neurology; that is, the sights, sounds, etc. to which we are sensitively attuned make a literal impact upon us and correspond to very specific neurological firings in our brains. I take these neurological groupings to be the “actual images” of which Aquinas speaks. Their potentiality for immateriality is actualized by the agent intellect as it abstracts their intelligible species from the particular conditions of brain activity and transfers them to the possible intellect.

music from a Handel oratorio. Intellectual knowledge gives us the universal forms of corporeal things as well as indirect understanding of separate intellectual substances: God and the angels. I do not mean to imply by distinguishing between these two kinds of knowledge that the one occurs strictly in the body while the second strictly in the soul. Aquinas is clear that sensitive and intellectual knowledge involve the whole composite. The sensitive powers of the soul orient the body to feel; thus one feels through his/her whole being, not simply through his/her body.<sup>174</sup> Although it is the case that intellectual knowledge is not directly affected by any corporeal organ, because the intellect is an immaterial power, this knowledge depends upon phantasms that are sensed by the body or imagined. Without the phantasms the human mind could know nothing.

Aquinas frequently quotes Aristotle's dictum that "the beginning of our knowledge is in the senses (*principium nostrae cognitionis est a sensu*)."<sup>175</sup> He believes that all the senses are helpful for gaining understanding, although there is a certain hierarchy among the senses. Sight is highest because it is less bound by matter and therefore able to have a wider scope of knowledge. We can see, for example, the whole field with its birds and trees but we can only feel the grass beneath our feet and perhaps the wind on our skin. But although the senses are all bound by matter and, for Aquinas, much less noble than the intellectual power of the human being they are the inescapable gateway to any kind of human knowing. Aquinas certainly recognizes that the senses can

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<sup>174</sup> See, for example, *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.6: "But [Aristotle] held that the sense has not its proper operation without the co-operation of the body: so that to feel is not an act of the soul alone, but of the *composite*. And he held the same in regard to all the operations of the sensitive part."

<sup>175</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.6. My translation. Aquinas takes this passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, i.1 and his *Posterior Analytics*, ii.15.

fail us and lead us to an initially wrong perception of reality but he also holds that the only way to correct such misperceptions is to check them using our senses.

We sometimes have the luxury of turning to another source of truth when we distrust a source that initially deceived us. We might, for example, rely upon the advice of one friend, who has shown herself to truthfully tell the facts, after receiving false information from another. But at the beginning point of our knowing Aquinas believes we have no other alternative (naturally speaking) than to draw upon our senses. The human intellect is a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate, and, according to Aquinas, does not have any innate knowledge of the intelligible species, the forms of things and their common matter—e.g. knowledge of the form of a horse and its orientation to a horse body. Because it is embodied, the intellect can operate only through the limitations and advantages of the body. It can know nothing by itself without access to material singulars that are presented to it through phantasms formed by the imagination on the basis of sense perception. According to Aquinas, the intellect cannot even know itself apart from an act of understanding directed toward a material being and made possible through the senses.<sup>176</sup> This is so because we can only understand what is in act and the intellect starts out in a state of pure potentiality. We therefore have knowledge of our own intellects only after they have been actualized through understanding.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> This point is brought out with great lucidity in Charles de Koninck's "Introduction à l'étude de l'ame," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 3 (1947): 9-65. See section III, "Notre Certitude De La Vie," pp: 15-17.

<sup>177</sup> Thus, Descartes's whole project of confirming his own existence by doubting sense perception and everything else but his own doubt is an impossible task because the mind could not even understand itself unless it first performed an act of understanding that depended upon the senses.



What actually happens within the soul in order for it to gain knowledge? One approach to answering this question is chronological and based upon the mental development of a human being from infancy, adolescence, and on to adulthood. In this approach it is especially easy to see both that the human intellect is *tabula rasa* and that our knowledge begins in the senses through phantasms formed from the senses by the imagination. Infants exhibit no innate understanding. They have a few basic bodily habits ordered toward their biological preservation—e.g. the reaction to suck when their mouth is touched and the instinct to cry when in pain or hungry—but this is reactive bodily knowledge and not of an intellectual nature. The infant’s entire world is initially one of sensitive contact with outside objects and his/her intellectual understanding only develops after exposure to this world. Aquinas’s approach, at least in the sections of the *Summa Theologica* from which I am drawing his epistemology, is usually to discuss how the already mature human soul, aware of its rationality, gains knowledge. Even this person, who already possesses intelligible species from previous acts of understanding, needs first to have phantasms in order to understand. Aquinas believes this is made evident through direct personal experience:

anyone can experience this of himself, that when he tries to understand something, he forms certain phantasms to serve him by way of examples, in which as it were he examines what he is desirous of understanding. For this reason it is that when we wish to help someone to understand something, we lay examples before him, from which he forms phantasms for the purpose of understanding.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.7: “Secundo, quia hoc quilibet in seipso experiri potest, quod quando aliquis conatur aliquid intelligere, format aliqua phantasmata sibi per modum exemplorum, in quibus quasi inspiciat quod intelligere studet. Et inde est etiam quod quando alium volumus facere aliquid intelligere, proponimus ei exempla, ex quibus sibi phantasmata formare posit ad intelligendum.”

If I want to understand, for instance, the various sample groups in some sociological comparison of working conditions in America, I might visualize examples of these groups-e.g. an immigrant farmer from Mexico, a white professional woman. The phantasms are necessary for me to adequately grasp what is meant by the study. Or, if I want to help a student understand how to make an effective argument on the basis of generalizations I need to provide examples of such an argument that the student can form phantasms of in order to understand what I mean.

To understand how precisely the intellect understands material objects via the phantasms we need to turn to a distinction Aquinas makes, following Aristotle, within the intellect. One dimension is called the possible intellect (*intellectus possibilis*) and the other is called the agent intellect (*intellectus agens*). Why make this distinction? Because, for Aquinas, it is demanded by experience. We recognize in ourselves both a hunger for knowledge as well as a great lack of it; thus, there must be some aspect of our intellect that remains in potential for understanding. This aspect of the intellect is the first dimension mentioned above, the possible intellect. When Aquinas says that the “*the soul is in some manner all things*” he is referring to this aspect of the intellect. And he means by this phrase not that it *actually* knows all but that it *potentially* can.

Now, the intellect is immaterial. We know this because it is capable of having knowledge of all material things and “whatever knows certain [material] things cannot have any of them in its own nature; because that which is in it naturally would impede the knowledge of anything else.”<sup>179</sup> For example, if the soul were literally fire it would not be able to know any other material thing with another essence; its own determinate make up

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<sup>179</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.75.2.

would block out its ability to know other beings of different matter, like water or wood. Another proof of the intellectual soul's immateriality is that it is able to know the universal natures or forms of things-e.g. a stone not as this piece of granite only but in a universal sense, as a stone in the same way that a piece of quartz or basalt is also a stone. But what is known, Aquinas regularly says, is known according to the mode of the receiver.<sup>180</sup> Thus, if the intellect were corporeal it would only be able to know things as individual and would not even be able to grasp the existence of their immaterial forms.

Experience shows that the intellect must be immaterial for otherwise it would not be able to know all things and their forms. Now, forms, as they exist in matter, are not intelligible because, as I noted above, things are known according to the mode of the receiver and the intellect is immaterial. "A thing is actually intelligible," Aquinas says, "from the very fact that it is immaterial."<sup>181</sup> If, as a thought experiment, we posit a thing that is not a form/matter composite but only material such a thing could not be known by the intellect. All things are, however, form/matter composites and thus within the range of the intellect's grasp. The form cannot be known as it exists in matter and thus the intellect must have some power of abstracting the form from the composite, as Aquinas explains below:

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<sup>180</sup> For example, *Summa Theologica* Ia.75.5: "For it is clear that whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the recipient (*Manifestum est enim quod omne quod recipitur in aliquo, recipitur in eo per modum recipientis*)." One implication of this principle is that our subjectivity is involved in our knowing not in such a way that we change what we know by knowing it but in the sense that the object known can only be known according to the contours of my own being. Of course, Aquinas has in mind here human nature as such but he also recognizes in other places (e.g. *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.4) that the particular person's ability to know may be hampered by subjective conditions (e.g. blindness).

<sup>181</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.79.3.

But since Aristotle did not allow that forms of natural things exist apart from matter, and as forms existing in matter are not actually intelligible; it follows that the natures or forms of the sensible things by which we understand are not actually intelligible...we must assign on the part of the intellect some power to make things actually intelligible by abstraction of the species from material conditions.<sup>182</sup>

The power, Aquinas refers to, is the agent intellect. Through the senses the human being forms the phantasms of material things. The agent intellect then acts upon these phantasms to abstract their forms from the conditions of individuating matter represented in the phantasms and brings them to the possible intellect, which is the proper seat of understanding in the human being.

If the form understood by the possible intellect is universal—e.g. the species of granite and its genus as stone—does not this fact suggest that the intellect as such cannot access concrete singulars? But Aquinas states, as we saw above, that the human being is naturally ordered to the knowledge of corporeal things, which only exist as concrete singulars. Are we not faced with a contradiction in Aquinas's epistemology? Although the intellect as such does not have direct access to concrete singulars it does, via the phantasms, have access to them as Aquinas explains:

Indirectly, and as it were by a kind of reflection, [the intellect] can know the singular, because, as we have said above (Q. 85, A. 7), even after abstracting the intelligible species, the intellect, in order to understand, needs to turn to the phantasms in which it understands the species.<sup>183</sup>

Although the intellect's knowledge of singular beings is indirect and although it has direct access only to its universal form, we must not suppose that the intellect is able to discard the phantasm of the singular and simply dwell in a world of universal forms. Indeed, Aquinas affirms in this passage the intellect must turn to the phantasms (and thus

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.86.1.

to singular things) “even after abstracting the intelligible species” in order to understand the species. Thus, our human knowing does not take place in some ethereal cognitive tower divorced from concretely existing beings, but always depends upon our engagement with them. Moreover, through our senses humans do have direct access to material things and since we are composite beings we can say that the human qua human does have direct knowledge of concrete singulars even if the intellect, as such, has only indirect access to them.

Another aspect of the human being’s power to know that must be mentioned is what Aristotle and Aquinas following him call the *passive* intellect or cogitative power. This dimension of the human being’s power to know is intermixed with the body, unlike the *agent* and *possible* intellects, and is shared with the higher animals. What is it? The *passive* intellect is a power to make judgments about particular things for the sake of the animal’s biological survival. It is called passive because it is related to the animal’s sensitive power, which is purely receptive. On the basis of sensing particular things, as well as imagining and remembering them, animals (including rational ones) are able to distinguish one individual thing from another and decide to pursue one and avoid another. Thus, the *passive* intellect is not part of the intellectual nature of the human being properly speaking, not part of what distinguishes the human being as rational.<sup>184</sup>

In the necessarily brief treatment of certain key components of Aquinas’s epistemology I have thus far highlighted the fundamental importance of sense perception.

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<sup>184</sup> One important relationship between the *agent* intellect and the *passive* intellect is that it is there, as well as in the imagination and memory, where the phantasms are found: “...the powers in which the phantasms reside, namely, imagination, memory and cogitation—the latter which Aristotle in *De anima* III calls the *passive intellect*..” - *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.73.14.

The act of ‘perceiving’ comes from the Latin verb ‘*percipio, -cipere, -cepi, -ceptum*’ which means, in part, to “to acquire possession of” or “to receive delivery of” or “to perceive, apprehend, notice,” or “to take in or grasp with the mind.”<sup>185</sup> Now, it is not always the case that what we perceive with our senses we concomitantly perceive with our intellects; thus, I can sense something white in the distance without really paying attention to it and without grasping precisely what it is. Of the various meanings of ‘*percipio*’ sense perception seems especially covered by the first two--“to acquire possession of” or “to receive delivery of”—and, to some extent by, “to perceive, apprehend, notice,” at least to the extent that these actions refer exclusively to sensitive knowledge. However, sense perception does not mean “to take in or grasp with the mind.” This last meaning of ‘*percipio*’ refers specifically to intellectual perception. Intellectual perception depends upon sense perception but the reverse is not the case. All knowledge (both intellectual and sensitive) begins with the human being’s sensitive engagement with material things. We cannot get beneath sense perception to justify it because any cognitive act depends upon it. For Aquinas, the philosopher can only move forward to explain and draw out the implications of our sense knowledge, but he/she cannot justify it. As John Haldane says, “our knowledge of the external world is the starting point for philosophical reflection, the task of which is not to *justify* this knowledge but to *explain* it.”<sup>186</sup>

I want now to address one instance of intellectual perception that is especially important in Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology because it concerns the human

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<sup>185</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1330.

<sup>186</sup> John Haldane, “Insight, Inference and Intellection,” in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 73 (2000), 43.

being's self-knowledge. Sense perception is experience of material and usually external things (excepting one's own body); the kind of perception I now address is one's immediate and internal mental grasp of his/her own intellect. It remains the case, as I discussed above, that any act of understanding ultimately depends upon sense perception because the intellect begins in a *tabula rasa* state and is not actualized unless it first engages concrete singulars. Once the intellect is in act it is able to know itself and this happens, as Aquinas explains below, in two ways:

In the first place, singularly, as when Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands. In the second place, universally, as when we consider the nature of the human mind from knowledge of the intellectual act.<sup>187</sup>

The first way that the intellect knows itself is reflexive and takes place within the subjective experience of the individual human person. I can perceive that I have an intellectual soul in the very act of understanding something. While figuring out a geometry problem and reaching a solution, I can recognize in myself my own intellect at work. And although it is true that this reflexivity necessarily pulls me back from a concentrated focus upon the problem at hand, it remains the case that I can perceive myself in my own act of understanding. The second way that the intellect can understand itself in its own act is a more abstract route. In this case I consider the human intellect in its universal sense and work up towards knowledge of my own mind by first considering basic cognitive experiences. To a limited way, we carried out this latter sort of inquiry when we outlined Aquinas's argument above that human beings depend upon phantasms

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<sup>187</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1: "Uno quidem modo, particulariter, secundum quod Socrates vel Plato percipit se habere animam intellectivam, ex hoc quod percipit se intelligere. Alio modo, in universali, secundum quod naturam humanae mentis ex actu intellectus consideramus."

to know and that experience indicates that we must have two distinct intellectual powers, the agent and the possible.

I offer a final word on the intellectual perception of one's own intellect because it will be an important dimension of my comparison between the epistemological methodologies of Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty as well as my examination of the claim made by Harvanek that Aquinas's notion of experience is broadly historical referring to the collective activity of humanity while the phenomenological notion of experience only takes place within the bounds of one's own subjectivity. In the following passage Aquinas notes a difference between the two different paths to intellectual self-knowledge and stresses that the first way, attained through immediate subjective experience, is superior to the second:

There is a difference between these two kinds of knowledge, and it consists in this, that the mere presence of the mind suffices for the first; the mind itself being the principle of action whereby it perceives itself, and hence it is said to know itself by its own presence. But as regards the second kind of knowledge, the mere presence of the mind does not suffice, and there is further required a careful and subtle inquiry. Hence many are ignorant of the soul's nature, and many have erred about it.<sup>188</sup>

The superiority of the first route to the intellect's knowledge of itself is found in its simplicity. I need only perceive my own action of understanding to know my intellect. The errors to intellectual self-knowledge which can arise through the various steps of "subtle inquiry" are precluded by the immediacy of "the mere presence of the mind" to itself.

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*: "Est autem differentia inter has duas cognitiones. Nam ad primam cognitionem de mente habendam, sufficit ipsa mentis praesentia, quae est principium actus ex quo mens percipit seipsam. Et ideo dicitur se cognoscere per suam praesentiam. Sed ad secundam cognitionem de mente habendam, non sufficit eius praesentia, sed requiritur diligens et subtilis inquisitio. Unde et multi naturam animae ignorant, et multi etiam circa naturam animae erraverunt."



## D) Aquinas's Open Philosophical System

In his essay, "The Timeliness of Thomism," Josef Pieper remarks that both critics and proponents of Aquinas's work have claimed that he built a closed system of philosophical thought in which the truth of the universe (including truth achieved by human thinking *and* that truth revealed by God) is comprehensively displayed. Pieper holds that there are a number of complex factors responsible for the development of this opinion but specifically points to two.<sup>189</sup> First, he blames Augustinian critics of Aquinas during the Reformation who were distrustful of human reason and believed that Aquinas had proudly presumed to build a comprehensive structure of philosophical and theological thought. Second, Pieper points to a completely opposite reason: neo-scholastics who wanted to defend their master against charges of agnosticism by stressing that his system was complete and closed.

There is no doubt that Aquinas is a philosophical system-builder as I illustrated in Section B of Part I above where I outlined Aquinas's teaching that the universe contains various kinds of creatures in a hierarchy of being and that each kind has its place in the perfection of the universe. God is the source and summit of the universe and in him alone existence and essence are one; every creature that comes from him is made up of two irreducible co-principles: existence, through which the being shares in God's existence, and essence, which functions as a limit principle channeling that existence into a definite nature. Of all created beings the angels are pure forms while every other creature's essence is a composition of the metaphysical co-principles of form and matter. Aquinas

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<sup>189</sup> See "Thomas Aquinas: Negative Philosophy" in *The Silence of St. Thomas; Three Essays*: 87-91.

thus employs basic metaphysical terms in an effort to provide some degree of explanation for every being; his metaphysical net leaves nothing out.

Furthermore, Aquinas believes that his metaphysical system is true, that he has proven God's existence and articulated metaphysical concepts that correspond with how things really are in the universe. God, as the fullness of being, is the most certain and most intelligible of all beings, and Aquinas believes that humans can make true statements about God based upon his effects in the universe. Created beings are also intelligible because of their nature as created beings. Pieper drives home this point from Aquinas in the following passage:

things can be known by us because God creatively thought them; *as* creatively thought by God, things have not only their *own* nature ("for themselves alone"); but *as* creatively thought by God, things have also a reality "for us." Things have their intelligibility, their inner clarity and lucidity, and the power to reveal themselves, because God has creatively thought them. This is why they are essentially intelligible. Their brightness and radiance is infused into things from the creative mind of God, together with their essential being (or rather as the very essence of their being!). It is this radiance, and this alone, that makes existing things perceptible to human knowledge.<sup>190</sup>

The eternal types of things and the specific natures of singular beings are themselves because they are creatively thought by God; without God's creative thought a thing would simply not be and would therefore not be accessible to human intellection. God and his creative action can here be likened to the Sun and its illuminating rays. Without the sun shining upon the objects of the universe they would not be available to be seen by the human intellect; similarly without God's creative energy that both designs and sustains the beings of the universe they would not be intelligible to the human intellect.

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<sup>190</sup> *Silence of St. Thomas: 55-56.*

Although Aquinas believes that humans can gain truth about God and his creatures, he did not presume that his system presented the whole truth about God and his creatures. God is the most intelligible of all beings but remains out of intellectual reach for any creature, angel or human, to grasp adequately because the vastness of his nature far exceeds the capacities of its intellect.<sup>191</sup> God's creatures are also intelligible, albeit to a lesser degree given their distance from the fullness of being, but even these cannot be adequately grasped by the human mind. Aquinas says that "the essential grounds of things are unknown to us, *principia essentialia rerum sunt nobis ignota.*"<sup>192</sup> Why? Because of the same reason which allows for their accessibility to the intellect, namely, their nature as created beings. Why is it that the created nature of things both allows for humans to know them but at the same time makes them, in Pieper's words, unfathomable?<sup>193</sup>

Truth, as the "adequation of thought and thing," primarily means for human beings that we can conform our intellects to the being of those things which we know. But, as I showed in the previous section on epistemology, Aquinas holds that there is a secondary aspect of this fundamental definition and that is the truth of beings as they are related to intellect. The essence of artifacts depends upon human minds—e.g. the house design from the mind of the architect. But the very being and substantial essences of

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<sup>191</sup> At the very beginning of his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas declares that the only knowledge human beings can have of God is negative: "Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not: "Sed quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit." *Summa Theologica* 1a.3.prologue.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary in Aristotelem, De Anima I, I, 15*, in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 65.

<sup>193</sup> See "Things are Unfathomable Because They Are Created" in *The Silence of St. Thomas; Three Essays: 57-67*.

created things depend upon the Divine intellect, in whom dwell the eternal types of all creatures. We can gain truth about creatures in the first sense because our intellects can conform to their immaterial forms, but we can never gain access to things *as they emerge from the mind of God*. Pieper illuminates this point while commenting on Aquinas's position that the essences of things are unknown to us:

This relation on which the truth of things is fundamentally based—the relation between natural reality and the archetypal creative thought of God—*cannot, I insist, be known formally by us*. We can of course know things; we cannot formally know their *truth*. We know the copy, but not the relation of the copy to the archetype, the correspondence between what has been designed and its first design.<sup>194</sup>

The human being is in the right position, as it were, to know the essences of material beings. We encounter them directly and, through abstracting their universal forms from the phantasms that we form via our senses, we have a true grasp of them. However, we can never take up a position, at least on the basis of our own powers, in the mind of God as he creatively thinks and sustains any being.

Still there is what Pieper calls a “hope structure” in Aquinas's philosophy which is located in the tension between our capacity to have our intellects truly conform to the forms of things because of the radiance they have from their being creatively thought by God and our inability to see fully into the truth of things insofar as they correspond directly to the thought of God. We experience in ourselves a restless drive to plumb fully the depths of being, but find ourselves unable, at least on the basis of our own minds, to do so. In Pieper's words we are in “a condition [of hope] that by its very nature cannot be fixed: it is neither comprehension and possession nor simply non-possession, but ‘not-

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<sup>194</sup> *Silence of St. Thomas*, 58-59.

yet-possession.”<sup>195</sup> The human being is a *homo viator*, a traveler or wayfarer, sent out by God in an act of creative love and ordered to return to God. The human being partly does this, as we saw in Section B, through knowing and thereby perfecting other material beings in the universe. We begin our existence in total intellectual ignorance or “non-possession” of knowledge and, through time, gradually grow in our knowledge of things but never to the point of total comprehension. As individual persons we can experience ourselves as *homo viator* and recognize in ourselves a gradual growth in the comprehension of things.

But Aquinas also holds that philosophy in general is in a state of development (which is not to deny that certain epochs can actually cover up through forgetfulness and error insights attained by previous ages of thought). For example, Pieper points to Chapter One of *De Veritate* where Aquinas provides his own theory of truth and then shows how this theory is suggested in a variety of different interpretations of truth that have come down through history. Pieper holds that Aquinas does not insist that his own theory is fully adequate but leaves the door open for ongoing discovery:

Not one of the traditional formulae is rejected entirely or accepted as exclusively valid. Though they are in no way fully concordant, he can appreciate the particular validity of each. What actually is happening here? It happens that St. Thomas is, in effect, placing himself within the stream of traditional truth nourished by the past; without claiming to give a final solution, he leaves the way open for future quest and discovery as that stream flows onward toward the yet unknown.<sup>196</sup>

Aquinas is surely not a truth relativist. He believes that certain propositions are valid and universally so. He presents various definitions of truth—e.g. from Augustine, Avicenna, and Anselm—and accepts that each is valid. But the very fact that he draws on several

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

different definitions without ever giving a final solution suggests an openness in Aquinas to the truth being more deeply known and more fully articulated by future generations.

## **Part II – Aquinas’s Understanding of the Integral Human Being**

In this section I will draw on two major books from Aquinas to present his understanding of the human being as an integral union of body and intellectual soul. The first book, which offers a more extensive treatment of the question at hand than the second, is the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II. I will concentrate largely on explicating Aquinas’s arguments from this text. The second book is the *Summa Theologica*, specifically the “Treatise on Man.” There are certainly some overlapping arguments between these two texts concerning the union of body and soul. The primary reason I draw from the *Summa Theologica* is because it contains argumentation that appeals more directly to the human being’s interior experience than the former text and therefore sheds light on a certain closeness between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty that is not as evident in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.

I have already provided in Part I the metaphysical and epistemological contexts within which Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology is placed and so I will not devote much space here to describing the overall context of *Summa Contra Gentiles* in which Aquinas’s argument about the human being’s integral nature is placed. But it is critical to contextualize this argument within Aquinas’s teaching about the nature of intellectual substances because of the systematic nature of Aquinas’s style; in order to complete an argument he often uses proofs that he previously established. The first major chapter of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II in which Aquinas begins to articulate his theory of human nature is 56, “In what way an intellectual substance can be united to the body.” But we

must not start here because prior to this question Aquinas examines fundamental characteristics of created intellectual substances. It is first necessary to address this teaching because it directly grounds the question about the human being's integral nature.

In Part B of this chapter I addressed Aquinas's teaching that the good is what all things desire. Things which have no knowledge whatsoever are able to have a basic natural appetite for the good; the rock, for example, desires the good proper to itself by wanting to go downward. The desire of animals which have sense, but not rational knowledge, is called animal appetite—e.g. the hungry lion which sees the gazelle is moved to hunt, kill and eat it. And the desire of rational beings is called intellectual appetite, another name Aquinas uses for will. Whereas natural things and animals are moved toward their own proper good by forms external to themselves, intellectual beings are able to move themselves to act because “the form understood, through which the intellectual substance acts, proceeds from the intellect itself as a thing conceived and in a way contrived by it.”<sup>197</sup> One clear illustration of this can be found in the artist who conceptualizes the form he/she wants to realize which then drives his/her creative exercise. Now, it could be that the artist, having conceived a form to realize, moves off to pursue some other good not artistically contrived in his/her mind—for example, the good of a whiskey sour. But even if the artist turns from the canvas to the booze, it remains the case that this other good must be conceived by him/her before he/she decides to pursue it. The point is that rational beings are not moved to act by external forms. Through the will intellectual substances have self-mastery, which means that they are free. Such autonomy is not absolute, of course, and it should not be likened to freedom in any Kantian sense—

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<sup>197</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.47.4.

i.e. the power to move oneself that prescind from the influence of any external natural good. Put in other words, intellectual substances are free to move themselves by exercising judgment concerning the various goods to which they are naturally drawn and can conceive of. Because the intellectual substance, *as intellect*, is ordered to understand all things, its rational appetite or will is concomitantly ordered to a desire for all things. Thus, “it is possible for the will to be inclined toward anything whatever that is presented to it under the aspect of good, there being no natural determination to the contrary to prevent it.”<sup>198</sup>

It is precisely because the intellect is ordered toward all things that Aquinas concludes it cannot be a body. For a body is only able to contain things in a quantitative fashion. A five-gallon bucket can contain only a certain amount of material. If it is filled with 2.5 gallons of water then it has only 2.5 of capacity left and cannot hold Lake Tahoe. The intellect, on the other hand, does not contain things quantitatively. Understanding algebra does not inhibit it from understanding calculus. On the contrary, whereas objects that hold material things have depleted capacity the more they hold, the intellect seems to work in the opposite direction; one level of understanding often opens the door for a greater and deeper understanding at another level. The intellect that learns to read is in position to understand a great deal more without depleting its ‘capacity;’ once it grasps concrete subject matter it is able to move on toward far more abstract subject matter. The intellect can ‘hold’ both an understanding of water molecules and Lake Tahoe and the entire universe without losing any capacity to understand other things. Furthermore, the intellect does not contain things with only a part of itself as bodies do. The five-gallon

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<sup>198</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.48.6.



bucket, for example, contains one gallon in only the lower 1/5<sup>th</sup> of itself; it does not hold the gallon with its whole being. “By its whole self,” the intellect “ understands and encompasses both whole and part, things great in quantity and things small. Therefore, no intelligent substance is a body.”<sup>199</sup>

A follow-up conclusion that Aquinas makes after showing that the intellectual substance is not a body is that it must be an immaterial self-subsisting form. If the intellectual substance is not a body then it is not composed of matter and form, for only bodies are made up of matter and form. If the intellectual substance is not composed of matter and form then what is it? It must be an immaterial self-subsisting form. If the intellect were material or a material form (e.g. a granite rock whose form of granite is wholly imbedded in matter) it would only be able to know things as individual and would not even be able to grasp the existence of their forms as such. But it does know things in a universal fashion—e.g. the human *qua* human—and thus it must be immaterial and must be able to subsist by itself. The intellect does know but clearly does not know in any way that is directly dependent upon matter because it transcends matter in its knowing. And yet the intellect does have existence. It must be, therefore, an immaterial self-subsisting form.

Another characteristic of intellectual substances is that they are incorruptible. In Chapter 55 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas spends several paragraphs demonstrating this characteristic of intellectual substances, but I will only briefly touch upon the first few of these. His initial demonstration proceeds on the basis of the definition of corruption. The term itself applies to composite things and means the

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<sup>199</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.49.2

dissolution of the form of the composite being from its matter. Why is it that the separation of the form from its corresponding matter leads to the corruption of that thing? Because “so long as the form remains, the thing must exist, since by the form the substance is made the proper recipient of the act of being.”<sup>200</sup> In composite substances the act of being of the whole composite comes from its form so that when the form is removed that thing suffers corruption. If a substance is not composed of matter and form, then it cannot suffer corruption. But an intellectual substance, as we saw above, is a subsisting form, rather than being composed of matter and form. Thus, the intellectual substance is incorruptible.

The next chapter I will address is the beginning point of Aquinas’s direct discussion on the human being as an integral union of body and intellectual soul. In this chapter, 56, he addresses “In What Way an Intellectual Substance Can be United to the Body?” In Chapters 45-46 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, as I addressed above in Part B of this chapter, Aquinas argues that the universe requires the existence of a variety of different types of beings so that it can be as perfect a likeness to God as possible and so that it can make a complete return to God. Briefly, intellectual creatures are necessary because God is intelligent, but sub-intellectual creatures are necessary so that the intellectual ones can contribute to their good and thereby express the goodness of the Creator. Now, all of the sub-intellectual substances of the universe are material beings and subject to corruption. As we have just discussed there are intellectual substances in the universe which are immaterial and incorrupt. Aquinas now addresses the possibility of a metaphysical oddity in the universe, a creature that on the one hand is intellectual

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<sup>200</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.55.2.

(and therefore immaterial and incorrupt) but at the same time corporeal and thus, in some sense, subject to material constraints and corruption. How could there be a creature which combines in itself seemingly contradictory characteristics—immateriality and materiality, incorruptible intellectual form, and corruptible matter? How could these two basic dimensions possibly come together and if such union is possible how could it be called ‘one being?’ How could intellect and matter actually be integrated?

In Chapter 56 Aquinas begins to answer these questions. He does not prove by the end of the chapter that the human being is an integration of body and intellectual soul but he does establish the platform for this claim by showing that it is possible for an intellectual substance to be united to a body by being its form.

He first argues that it would be impossible for an intellectual substance to be united to a body by being mixed with that body. When things are mixed together they are necessarily altered—e.g. blue and yellow paint mixed to make green. Such alteration depends upon the substances having a common material denominator—e.g. paint in the example just used. If the blue was paint but the yellow a beam of light the two could not mix to achieve green paint. Now, an intellectual substance is immaterial while the body is obviously physical. There is not a common material denominator between them and so the two could not possibly be united by way of mixture.

Nor could an intellectual substance be united to the body “*by way of contact properly so called.*”<sup>201</sup> Contact between bodies only occurs at their outside surfaces. When one clasps the hand of another he/she has made contact; the surfaces of their bodies have touched. But the one does not have direct contact with the tendons and blood

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<sup>201</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.56.6.

beneath the skin of the other's hand and vice versa. An intellectual substance is not a body and therefore cannot be united with the body by way of contact, at least properly speaking.

But there may be, Aquinas ventures, a way that an intellectual substance can be united to the body through "a certain kind of contact."<sup>202</sup> When bodies come into contact with one another they are both altered, at least to some extent, as the form of the one is impressed upon the other and vice versa. People who clasp their hands together are both active and passive; a man squeezes the hand of his lover so that she receives the form of his hand and yet he must also conform his hand to receive her grasp. She passively receives his hand while at the same time with her own squeeze makes his hand conform to her own. However, "if attention is given to activity and passivity, it will be found that certain things touch others and are not themselves touched."<sup>203</sup> The moon, for example, touches the ocean waters of the earth and succeeds in moving them, but these waters do not in turn touch the moon. Here we see a one-sided kind of touching because the celestial body acts upon terrestrial elements without being acted upon by them. It is possible, therefore, for things not in contact via their extremities to still touch other things insofar as they act upon them. Aquinas offers the example of how a person in sorrow touches us not in a physical sense but we passively receive her action of sorrow and therefore experience a certain kind of contact with her. "Hence, it is possible for an intellectual substance to be united to a body by contact,"<sup>204</sup> that is by acting upon the

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<sup>202</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.56.8.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

body which passively receives the touch of the intellectual substance without the reciprocal action of touching that substance.

The kind of contact just described between an intellectual substance and the body is not quantitative but a contact of power and the latter kind of contact differs from the former kind in at least three fundamental ways, according to Aquinas. First, in contact of power “the indivisible can touch the divisible.”<sup>205</sup> Now, there is a kind of quantitative indivisible reality, the point, which is able to touch the indivisible, namely its own logical place at the end of some quantitative body (e.g the end of the road is a point).<sup>206</sup> However, an intellectual substance is indivisible in a different way than the point is indivisible because the former is “outside the genus of quantity, and that is why no quantitative indivisible entity with which it can make contact is assigned to it.”<sup>207</sup> The point, by definition, is unable to touch divisible entities but an intellectual substance can touch them by acting upon them. A second difference between quantitative contact and contact of power is that the former is carried out only at the outermost boundaries or extremities of a body while “the latter regards the whole thing touched.”<sup>208</sup> I might physically touch another person as he goes about his daily affairs without that other even being aware of my touch. In this case the contact is merely superficial. However, if a boxer hits his opponent so that he tumbles to the ground and is knocked unconscious the first boxer, in one sense, has touched the whole person. But this is only an indirect touch of the whole person mediated through the outside contact of the boxer’s blow upon his opponent’s

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<sup>205</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.56.9.

<sup>206</sup> In Euclidean geometry the point is that which has no part, so it is logical construct and yet used to understand what is the very end of a quantitative entity, like the end of a line.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

chin. The initial contact still only involves the extremities of their bodies. However, in contact of power a thing is acted upon and moved so that the contact of the one directly touches the whole of the other. A third difference, which arises from the second, is that the bodies which come into quantitative contact with one another are necessarily extrinsic to one another because such contact only involves the extremities of these bodies. But contact of power “extends to the innermost [of the thing touched and] makes the touching substance to be within the thing touched, and to penetrate it without hindrance.”<sup>209</sup> According to Aquinas, there is no reason why intellectual substances, which are immaterial and have a greater level of actuality than bodies, could not enter the innermost parts of bodies and be united to them via contact of power.

At this point in the argument it appears as if Aquinas’s position will be that the human being is a unity between an intellectual substance and a body established via contact of power but, in reality, he is simply exploring at depth the *possibility* that such a union could take place. There is no theoretical hindrance to an intellectual substance being united to the body through contact of power. However, such a being would not be unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*) one, Aquinas argues: “It would be one with respect to acting and being acted upon, but this is not to be unqualifiedly one.”<sup>210</sup> When the space shuttle is fitted with a massive rocket and launched into the sky we see one thing surging upward, but this thing is not unqualifiedly one because the rocket is a separate piece of equipment acting upon the space shuttle. It is not part of the form (which in this case is an accidental form) of the space shuttle established by its makers. The space shuttle plus launch rocket may appear to be one thing but it is not unqualifiedly one. Similarly, a being established

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.56.10.

by an intellectual substance uniting to a body by contact of power is not unqualifiedly one, but only one with regard to acting and being acted upon.

Is it possible then that the human being is not unqualifiedly one, but one only in the sense that an intellectual substance acts upon the body? Aquinas next explores three meanings of one in its unqualified sense in an attempt to identify whether the human being, as a union of body and intellectual substance, could be unqualifiedly one. He says that one refers to the indivisible, the continuous, and the one in reason. The human being cannot be one in the first sense because as a union of body and intellectual substance he/she is a composite and any composite is at least potentially divisible. Nor could humans be continuously one because this kind of unity is only quantitative and therefore does not apply to the intellectual substance, which is immaterial and not subject to simply quantitative description. The only remaining possibility is that the human being is unqualifiedly one as a thing one in reason.

I now turn to the passage in which Aquinas argues that the human could be a thing one in reason if he/she is a composite of substantial form and matter:

Now, from two permanent entities a thing one in reason does not result unless one of them has the character of substantial form and the other of matter...So, it must be asked whether an intellectual substance can be the substantial form of the body.<sup>211</sup>

This passage raises some interesting questions. Aquinas is asking whether or not there can be a concretely existing thing, composed of an intellectual substance and a body, that is unqualifiedly one, but how can this unity be achieved “in reason?” Is not the concrete human being unqualifiedly one as a singular being? Is Aquinas saying here that a human is not one being unless somehow recognized as such by an intellect?

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<sup>211</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.56.12.

These questions can be answered by a closer look at what Aquinas means by one in reason (*ratione unum*). Asking whether a thing is one in reason is the same as asking whether it has an essence. Essence has both a universal and a particular meaning. A horse, for example, is called such because it belongs to the species of *Equus caballus* which describes the horse's essence in a universal sense. The particular essence of each individual horse refers to how the universal essence is found to exist (*esse*) according to the concrete conditions of that horse. If a particular thing has an essence (in both meanings of the word), according to Aquinas's metaphysics, it must be a unity between a substantial form and its corresponding matter; it cannot be an artificial thing made of an accidental form and matter. Further, essence in the universal sense refers to species and an individual refers to a member of a species. So, asking whether a thing is one in reason is also the same as asking whether or not it participates in a species.

I turn to a passage in Aquinas's early work, *De Ente et Essentia*, in which Aquinas explains how human nature, considered as a species, can only exist in the intellect. This passage should help us better understand what Aquinas means when he says that a thing that is one in reason is the unity between a substantial form and its corresponding matter. He says that:

Human nature, then, can have the character of a species only as it exists in the intellect. Human nature itself exists in the intellect in abstraction from all individual conditions, and it thus has a uniform relation to all individual men outside the intellect, being equally the likeness of all and leading to a knowledge of all in so far as they are men. And from the fact that the nature has such a relation to all individual men, the intellect forms the notions of species and attributes it to the nature. That is why the Commentator asserts, on the first book of the *De Anima*, that it is the intellect which causes universality in things...And although the nature existing in the intellect has the character of a universal from its relation to things outside the intellect, since it is one likeness of them all,



nevertheless, as it exists in this or that intellect, it is a certain particular species apprehended by the intellect.<sup>212</sup>

Thus, Aquinas is not saying in the aforementioned passage from *Summa Contra Gentiles II* that the concretely existing human is not unqualifiedly one unless somehow recognized as such by an intellect. To be unqualifiedly “one in reason” is to participate in a species. A species in an abstract sense can exist only in the intellect where it is divorced from the particular conditions of existing of this man or that woman. But the species is only identified in the abstract because the intellect apprehends it in its particular instances within individual human beings. Thus, concretely existing humans, if they are a unity of intellectual substance as form and the body as its corresponding matter, will be “one in reason” and thus unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*) one. The question now becomes whether or not the human actually is a unity achieved by intellectual substance as substantial form of the body.

Reasonable people, Aquinas allows, contend that the intellectual substance cannot be the form of the body. Why not? One reason is that a thing is distinguished from another by its act. Aquinas has already shown (as we covered above) that the intellectual substance is an incorruptible and self-subsisting form. Obviously the body is corruptible and therefore cannot have an act that is the same as that of the intellectual substance. If the body and the intellectual substance have two different acts then they cannot be one being via the intellectual substance functioning as form of the body. Another argument against their substantial union is that “it is impossible for a thing that has its being in a

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<sup>212</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia (On Being and Essence)*, trans. Armand Maurer, (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 41.

body to be separate from the body.”<sup>213</sup> If the intellectual substance is form of the body then its being is woven together with the body but Aquinas has already shown (as covered above) that intellectual acts do not depend upon the body; thus, it cannot be the form of the body.

For these and other reasons Plato argued that the intellectual substance and the body could not be unqualifiedly one in a form/matter composite. Rather, it could only be united as “mover to movable, for Plato said that the soul is in the body ‘as a sailor in a ship.’”<sup>214</sup> Now, in Chapter 56 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas has already said that it is at least theoretically possible for the intellectual substance to be united to the body as mover to movable. In Chapter 57, “The Position of Plato Concerning the Union of the Intellectual Soul with the Body,” Aquinas looks more closely at this position and concludes that it does not square with our perception of the human being.

Plato acknowledged that the human being appears to be one but asserted that he/she is not unqualifiedly one. Instead, he claimed that “the *soul itself using the body* is man; just as Peter is not a thing composed of man and clothes, but *a man using clothes*.”<sup>215</sup>

Aquinas’s fundamental response to Plato’s claim, a response that indicates his trust in the basic perception of the human and which guides many of the more detailed arguments he makes against Plato is that “animal and man are sensible and natural realities.”<sup>216</sup> When I encounter a human being I see a unified living thing. I can feel its

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<sup>213</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.56.17.

<sup>214</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.2.

<sup>215</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.3.

<sup>216</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.5: “Animal enim et homo sunt quaedam sensibilia et naturalia.”

warm flesh. I can listen to it speak. I grasp through my senses that this man or that woman is a particular natural thing that also encounters me through his/her senses. I can say when my wife walks into the kitchen every morning as I rise to greet her that “*there is my wife.*” Thus, our basic experience of encountering human beings is that they come to us as embodied and Aquinas trusts this experience while, as we shall see, also philosophically justifying it.

Now, if the soul is the entire essence of the human being, as Plato claims, and simply uses the body as a man uses his clothes then we could not say that we sensibly encounter a human being “for the soul is neither a sensible nor a material thing.”<sup>217</sup> But this is impossible, Aquinas declares. It completely contradicts our basic experience of another human being as one that we actually encounter in flesh and blood. It does not square with our experience of the human being as a natural and sensible reality.

Furthermore, Aquinas argues, “it is impossible that things diverse in being should have one operation.”<sup>218</sup> This one operation does not refer to a thing in which action has its end, but rather to a subject who initiates the operation. The members of a rowing team working together to speed their boat through the water work together to affect the one operation of the boat’s movement. But the kind of operation Aquinas refers to is that which comes forth from the human being and we experience that he/she has some operations in which body and soul are unified. Aquinas says that the body does not directly share in the operation of understanding because understanding involves a grasping of immaterial and universal forms, which is impossible for the body to accomplish. However, there are many operations that the soul and body have in common

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<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.6.

such as anger, joy, or fear. These emotional actions “occur through some transmutation in a determinate part of the body and, therefore, are obviously operations of soul and body together.”<sup>219</sup> In moments of great joy, for example, the whole of our consciousness is filled with exuberance and we might shout or shed tears. But in whatever parts of the body the emotion is especially expressed, it is clear that the emotion involves both soul and body, according to Aquinas. And because it is not possible for different beings to enact the same operation it must be the case that the human is one thing composed of both body and soul.

At this point, however, Aquinas anticipates a Platonic objection. It may be that the one operation we have just described in acts of emotion that clearly involve both soul and body could be explained according to the soul (a distinct being) as mover and the body (a different being) as moved.<sup>220</sup>

But it cannot be that the soul is simply the mover of the body, Aquinas argues. He presents several reasons for his opposition to Plato’s position mostly on the basis of Aristotle’s *De Anima*. First, the “sensitive soul has not the function of mover and moved in sensing, but of that whereby the patient is passive.”<sup>221</sup> For example, when walking to school the other day I encountered two massive Rottweiler dogs which, upon seeing me, began to growl menacingly and approach with teeth bared. I became fearful, started sweating, felt adrenaline pulse through my veins and, a moment later, felt relief as the master of the dogs successfully called them back. My sensitive soul responded in passivity to the outward stimuli of the menacing animals. It is the nature of the sensitive

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<sup>219</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.6.

<sup>220</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.7.

<sup>221</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.8.

soul to be moved by objects that it senses, not to function as mover to the body that is moved. A second argument Aquinas raises against Plato's position is that if the soul is united to the body as a movable thing then "the body and its parts do not owe to the soul that which they specifically are" which would mean that at death, when the soul passes, the "body and its parts will remain of the same species."<sup>222</sup> However, this is clearly false for at the departure of the soul, body parts lose their proper function. Third, if the soul is merely a mover and the body merely a moved object then the body owes its movement to the soul but not its life. And yet the body lives – how then to explain its life? There is no other probable explanation for its life than its soul. A fourth argument is that movable things are not corrupted by their separation from the mover. Thus, if the body were simply a movable thing and the soul simply its mover it should not be corrupted at death. But this is clearly false. A fifth argument is that if the soul is united to the body simply as its mover then "it will be in the soul's power to be separated from the body at will and to be reunited to it at will"<sup>223</sup> but this is obviously not true. Thus, it cannot be that the soul is separate in being from the body and merely functions as a mover to a movable body.

After providing many reasons for why the soul cannot be simply the mover of a movable body Aquinas positively argues in the final part of Chapter 57 that the soul is united to the body as its form. This argument, taken from Aristotle's *De Anima II* and also repeated in the *Summa Theologica*, is as follows:

That by which something becomes a being in act from a being in potency is its form and act. But it is through the soul that the body becomes a being in act from being potentially existent, for living is the being of the living thing. Now, the seed before animation is living only in potency, and,

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<sup>222</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.10.

<sup>223</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.13.

through the soul, becomes living in act. Therefore, the soul is the form of the animated body.<sup>224</sup>

I now turn to an explication of this brief argument, which is highly significant for understanding Aquinas's integral anthropology. In any natural thing the form has fundamental priority over the matter because it is through the form that the whole composite has the kind of act or *esse* that it does. In other words, without the form in any form/matter composite there is no actual thing to speak of.

A potentially confusing aspect of Aquinas's passage is the language of "something..being in potency" and "the seed before animation." Does Aquinas mean that a thing can concretely exist that does not have form, that the seed can exist as 'seed' before animation? Aquinas does not mean this. A concretely existing thing in potency to form already has its own form/matter composition. For example, the apple that I recently consumed was made up of the form 'apple' giving its act to various water molecules and other physical elements but, as it came into my self, I broke up the apple and separated its form from its matter so that now the matter is subsumed under my own form. When Aquinas says that "something becomes a being in act from a being in potency" by its form, he means that the something only takes on concrete existence because of the act of the form. And he is not referring to an actually existing seed that is present, then infused with soul, which then becomes animated. Any seed to have actual concrete existence must already be a concrete form/matter composite.

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<sup>224</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.14: "Illud quo aliquid fit de potentia ente actu ens, est forma et actus ipsius. Corpus autem per animam fit actu ens de potentia existente: vivere enim est esse viventis; semen autem ante animationem est vivens solum in potentia, per animam autem fit vivens actu. Est igitur anima forma corporis animati."

Now, all natural things are form/matter composites. Inanimate objects such as stones do not have forms that are souls. Rather, as we covered in Part I, Section B of this chapter, they have material forms which means that the forms themselves have the dispositions of matter—e.g. moisture, density. The form of an animate object, however, is the soul (*anima -ae*) which Aquinas, following Aristotle, defines as follows: “soul is defined as the first principle of life in those things which live: for we call living things *animate*, and those things which have no life, *inanimate*.”<sup>225</sup> There are, of course, different orders of animate things starting with beings whose life is simply nutritive—i.e. vegetative life that grows by taking in nutrients from the sun and soil. The souls of animals, in addition to being nutritive, are also sensitive. Their bodies live not only by absorbing vitamins and minerals but also by engaging the environments appropriate to their species via their sense organs.

An interesting characteristic of inanimate objects is that if their forms are eliminated it is clear to our senses that the objects themselves are eliminated. Sand that is subjected to high temperatures and becomes glass loses its form and is obviously not present in the glass. However, when the form of a living thing, its soul (*anima -ae*) departs the thing that remains often looks much like it did before the form left. When I pluck the lettuce from my garden it remains stiff and green so that I call it by the same name I did before I plucked it. The Romaine lettuce growing in the dirt is now the Romaine lettuce in my salad bowl. But for Aquinas the natural thing ceases to be itself when its form/soul is separated from it which means that the gardener Thomist should speak of “former” Romaine lettuce in her salad bowl, rather than Romaine lettuce strictly

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<sup>225</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.75.1 corpus.

speaking, because the leaves have undergone a fundamental ontological change; previously they were parts of a living plant but now are bereft of life.

The soul of a living thing is the very being of that living thing and without that form the thing becomes another object altogether. When the seed sprouts up and manifests itself as an oak all of its matter is incorporated into the life of the tree. The thing is wholly an oak tree because of the act of this form, or soul, which gives living “oak ness” to its every twig, bough, and leaf. The same is true with animals; living is their very being and there is no aspect of their nature that is not expressive of the kind of life that they are. For example, every part of the rabbit expresses the soul of rabbit.

For human beings also our bodies and each of its parts are alive with our particular human souls. Without the form of our souls our body and its parts would no longer be our own, would no longer be human. “It is through the soul that the body becomes a being in act from being potentially existent” and there is no middle ground between potentially existent and actually existent. We live as nutritive and sensitive beings because of our souls and without them we have no life. “Therefore,” Aquinas says, “the soul is the form of the animated body.”

At this point in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas believes he has shown that the human being is an integral unity of soul and body. He believes he has shown the human being is unqualifiedly one because the human is “one in reason,” in other words, that it has a nature or essence due to the soul being the substantial form of the body. Although Aquinas finishes his argument in Chapter 57 that the soul is the form of the body he has not yet demonstrated that it is the intellectual soul that is its form and this task takes up the next several chapters. In certain descriptions of the human being as composite (e.g. in



St. Paul and some of the Fathers of the Church<sup>226</sup>) the human being is considered a tripartite composite of body, soul, and spirit. But Aquinas, following Aristotle's hylomorphism, has the soul do "double duty" as it were. He argues that the spiritual or intellectual principle of the human being is at the same time its soul, its substantial form. Thus, in the next chapter he argues that there are not several souls in the human being, but only one and that this soul is intellectual in nature.

Aquinas begins Chapter 58 by allowing that his previous argument that the soul is the form of the body does not adequately demonstrate that the human being is an integral union of body and soul because of a potential objection from Plato that there are three souls in the human being, the intellective, the sensitive, and the nutritive. Thus, "even if the sensitive soul were the form of the body, it would not be necessary to conclude that some intellectual substance can be the form of a body."<sup>227</sup> In response to Plato, Aquinas offers eight separate arguments. I will present the first of these. Aquinas argues that characteristics attributed to one thing "according to diverse forms are predicated of one another by accident."<sup>228</sup> Thus, one might say of Socrates (whom Aquinas, along with other philosophers, often gives the honor of standing as a logical dummy) that he is a white and a musical thing but neither whiteness or musicality are predicated of Socrates as substantial forms; rather, they are attributed to him by accident because Socrates would still be himself if he took on a deep tan or lost his musical ability. Now, if the intellective, sensitive and nutritive souls are diverse forms and only the sensitive soul the

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<sup>226</sup> For example, in I Th. 5:23 St. Paul writes: "May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness. May he preserve you whole and entire, *spirit, soul* and *body*, irreproachable at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

<sup>227</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.58.1.

<sup>228</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.58.3.

substantial form of the body, then the characteristics associated with the other forms would be predicated of the human accidentally. Accordingly, we would be said to be human because of our intellectual soul, animal because of our sensitive soul, and living because of our nutritive soul. This would then mean that the predication “[a human] is an animal or an animal is a living thing, [would] be by accident.”<sup>229</sup> But this is impossible, Aquinas argues as he turns to the common language we use to define one another, a common language that emerges from our basic experience that the human I encounter is one being. It is impossible because this predication is not by accident, but *through itself*, meaning that the predication is already a part of the subject. If any of these fundamental characteristics is predicated of the human being accidentally then we would be able to assume that they are not essential dimensions of the human being, which is absurd. Finally, if the human being does not have three souls but only the one intellectual soul, then we cannot refer to the sensitive and nutritive aspects of human existence as souls, but rather as powers.

If there is only one soul, which serves as the substantial form of the human being, why should we hold it to be the intellectual soul? Because there is an order of priority among the three parts of the human being under discussion such that “the sensitive is subordinate to the intellectual and the nutritive to the sensitive, as potency is subordinate to act.”<sup>230</sup> The intellectual soul subsumes the other powers of the human being which stand in potency to its acts and which exist for the rational operation of the human being. It is perhaps easiest to see this when we consider a deliberate intention to learn about some facet of the world. I might, for example, want to learn about the family of cardinals

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<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

nesting in my backyard and my sensitive and nutritive powers fall into place with this intention. I look for the birds in order to learn about them and my observation demands that the nutritive powers of my body continue to function appropriately. But even when I am not deliberately employing my sensitive and nutritive powers—while I sleep my organs work to keep me alive—it remains the case that these powers are subordinate to my intellectual soul because they exist for the purposes of a being that is ordered toward knowledge.

After showing that there is only one soul in the human being, the intellectual soul, Aquinas proceeds to address various arguments for how this soul could be unified with the body. Essentially his argumentative strategy, as in many other places in his writings, is to eliminate all competing explanations of a given reality except for one that remains as the only possible option. He has already shown that the intellectual soul cannot be united to the body simply as its mover. I now turn to Aquinas's treatment of Averroes's claim that the intellectual soul is united to the body by means of the phantasms and is not the substantial form of the body. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, Chapters 59-61, Aquinas specifically addresses Averroes's claim. Aquinas offers a much more succinct retort to Averroes in his *Summa Theologica* I.76.1 and it is to this latter argument I will now turn. The passage below contains Aquinas's brief presentation of Averroes's claim followed by his initial response:

The Commentator held that this union is through the intelligible species, as having a double subject, in the possible intellect, and in the phantasms which are in the corporeal organs. Thus through the intelligible species the possible intellect is linked to the body of this or that particular man. But this link does not sufficiently explain the fact that the act of the intellect is the act of Socrates.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.76.1.

According to Averroes, or “The Commentator,” the possible intellect is not the substantial form of the body but exists as a separate substance.<sup>232</sup> It is linked to the body by the medium of the intelligible species (e.g. the universal form of granite inhering in all granite stones). The intelligible species are also in the phantasms which are themselves found within the corporeal organs of the human body; thus there is a link of the possible intellect to the body through the intelligible species. Now, Averroes claims that his position was an authentic interpretation of Aristotle. Aquinas disagrees and therefore opposes Averroes’s position by appeal to Aristotle. Aquinas, following Aristotle, shows that the act of the intellect is at the same time the act of a concretely existing human being by comparing the relationship of phantasms to the intellect with the relationship of colors to sight. The red of the wall I look upon is in my sight; similarly, the species of phantasms are in the possible intellect. “Now it is clear,” Aquinas urges, “that because the colors, the images of which are in the sight, are on a wall, the action of seeing is not attributed to the wall.”<sup>233</sup> On the contrary, the wall is seen but it does not see. Likewise, it is absurd to predicate that Socrates, in whom are the phantasms, understands as if this embodied person is somehow distinct from Socrates’s possible intellect. Rather, the phantasms are understood and they are understood by Socrates himself. Aquinas here appeals to a basic conscious experience that my act of understanding is, in fact, my act of

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<sup>232</sup> In fact, Averroes famously argues that this possible intellect was one in all human beings and not diversified according to particular human beings. Aquinas refutes this interpretation of Aristotle in a number of ways but most forcefully by an appeal to our direct perception of distinctness among human beings. If Averroes were right then: “it would follow that Socrates and Plato are one man; and that they are not distinct from each other, except by something outside the essence of each. The distinction between Socrates and Plato would be no other than that of one man with a tunic and another with a cloak; which is quite absurd.” *Summa Theologica* I.76.2.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding not a separate substance doing its understanding in me. Further, when I encounter another who is figuring out a problem and coming to conclusions I readily and rightly attribute that person's cogitation to him/her not to some other being doing its cogitation in him or her. Averroes is wrong; the union between one's intellect and his/her body is not through a mediating linkage of the intelligible species but must be more direct.

Before going further it is worth pausing again at the distinction between the *possible* and *agent* intellects. Aquinas will argue, again following Aristotle, that the former dimension of the intellect is the substantial form of the body. For example, in Chapter 60 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, "That Man Derives His Specific Nature, Not from the Passive, But From the Possible Intellect," he shows that it is specifically the possible intellect that "must be part of man as his act and form."<sup>234</sup> In Question 76, Article One of the *Summa Theologica* I, devoted to explaining how the intellectual principle of the human being is united to the body as its form, Aquinas does not highlight the technical distinction between the *agent* and *possible* intellects with regard to form/matter question. Instead he just argues that the intellect is form of the body. But why elsewhere does he claim that it is the *possible* intellect that is the substantial form of the body? In short, because the understanding of the human being takes place in the *possible* intellect. The *agent* intellect, as we already discussed, brings the intelligible species to the *possible* intellect. If the human being is ordered toward understanding and it is specifically in the *possible* intellect that we do understand then this dimension of our

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<sup>234</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.60.15.

being is our nature and puts into motion all the other dimensions of our being for its purposes; it must, therefore, be the substantial form of the body.

But now to another proposal for explaining the union of intellect and body that Aquinas opposes. This one is offered by Alexander of Aphrodisias. Alexander argues that our intellectual power is not grounded in a subsistent intellectual substance but emerges from the elements of the human body. He holds that the possible intellect is not exactly a blending of physical particles in the human body, but rather the relation between these particles which becomes a “*preparedness* in human nature to receive the influx of the agent intellect.”<sup>235</sup> Aquinas, again following Aristotle, argues that the possible intellect must be free from an admixture of bodily elements because it is in potential to know all things and it would be unable to know all things if it had the nature not only of any physical thing or combination of several physical things but also the relations between these physical things. Furthermore, even if preparedness could be thought of as transcending an admixture of bodily elements preparedness “does not mean to receive, but to be prepared to receive.”<sup>236</sup> Because the *possible* intellect directly receives the intelligible species it cannot be a mere preparedness in human nature.

There are other similar arguments that Aquinas takes up which attempt to explain the intellectual soul as somehow emerging from the body. Galen, for example, held that the soul is a temperament:

He was moved to say this because of our observation that diverse passions, ascribed to the soul, result from various temperaments in us: those possessed of a choleric temperament are easily angered; melancholics easily grow sad.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.62.3.

<sup>236</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.62.4.

<sup>237</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.63.1.

Galen had, we could say, a bottom to top view of the soul; because of certain bodily ingredients the human is determined to act in certain ways. Very close to this perspective on the relation between soul and body is that espoused by Empedocles and others who claim that the soul is a harmony of various physical parts—e.g. as between the sinews and bones. A basic Thomistic retort to both theories is that the intellectual soul cannot be greater than its cause. Now, we know that the intellectual soul is capable of grasping immaterial realities, of seeing the universal forms in things. If the soul were merely bodily temperaments or a harmony between physical parts than it would not be capable of the kind of understanding that it clearly has. Thus, the intellectual soul cannot emerge from physical parts. Furthermore, if the soul were only a temperament or a harmony it would not be capable of resisting, for example, a melancholy mood. But we see that the soul “rules the body and resists the passions, which follow the temperament.”<sup>238</sup> If the soul resists the body, then it cannot be a result of the body.

Other philosophers diminish the intellectual nature of the human being by arguing that there really is no difference between the intellect and the sense. In this way they stress the common links that human beings have with the animals. While it is true that humans are animals and act in large part according to their senses, Aquinas points to some fundamental differences between sensible acts and acts of the intellect in opposition to the views of these philosophers. Our senses are aware only of singulars, but the intellect is aware of the universal forms of things; our senses are only capable of grasping corporeal things, but the intellect is capable of receiving incorporeal realities like wisdom, truth and beauty; our senses are not aware of themselves during acts of sensing,

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<sup>238</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.63.5.

but the intellect has a reflexive power both to understand and to grasp that it is understanding. Each of these differences marks the intellect as fundamentally different from the senses.

Others hold that the possible intellect is the imagination itself but this cannot be because “imagination has to do with bodily and singular things only [but] the intellect..grasps objects universal and incorporeal.”<sup>239</sup> Thus, the possible intellect cannot be the imagination.

Finally, in Chapter 68 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas gives his final proof that the intellectual soul must be the form of the body. He had shown, contra Plato, that the soul must be the form of the body in Chapter 57 but he had not shown that it was the intellectual soul that was this form. Now, after surveying and disproving various theories about the intellect’s relation to the body, which do not support the intellectual soul as form of the body, Aquinas argues that Aristotelian hylomorphism is the only available option:

For, if an intellectual substance is not united to the body merely as its mover, as Plato held that it is, nor is it in contact with it merely by phantasms, as Averroes said, but as its form; and if the intellect whereby man understands is not a preparedness in human nature, as Alexander supposed it to be, nor the temperament, according to Galen, nor a harmony, as Empedocles imagined, nor a body, nor the senses or the imagination, as the early philosophers maintained, then it remains that the human soul is an intellectual substance united to the body as its form.<sup>240</sup>

Aquinas then makes this conclusion evident by examining two requirements that must be met for one thing to be another’s substantial form. First, “the form must be the

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<sup>239</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.67.3.

<sup>240</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.68.2.



principle of the substantial being of the thing whose form it is.”<sup>241</sup> There are other forms present in a being which are accidental – e.g. whiteness. Obviously, the intellectual principle cannot be the substantial form of the body if it is merely an accidental form that can pass from the human being without eliminating the reality of the human being. If the intellectual soul is the substantial form of the body, then its absence from the body would mean that the human being itself were no more. And we know that the intellectual soul is the formal principle of the human being because when the soul departs, the body immediately becomes a different thing altogether; it ceases to be human.

The second requirement, is that “the form and the matter be joined together in the unity of one act of being” so that it is “this single act of being..in which the composite substance subsists: a thing one in being and made up of matter and form.”<sup>242</sup> In order to satisfy the first requirement Aquinas reminds the reader of what he has argued in Chapter 51 that “the fact that an intellectual substance is subsistent does not stand in the way of its being the formal principle of the being of the matter.”<sup>243</sup> There are not two acts of being Aquinas stresses; there is not the being of the subsistent intellectual substance and then the being of the composite. Rather, because the intellectual substance is the substantial form of the body, the body only exists as body because of the soul that forms it. Thus, the act of being of the intellectual soul is the same act of being of the composite.

However, Aquinas presses an objection to his own position. He supposes that some may argue that the intellectual substance could not communicate its being to the body so that one act of being results because “diverse genera have diverse modes of

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<sup>241</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.63.3.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

being” and also because “to the nobler substance belongs a loftier being.”<sup>244</sup> Aquinas satisfies this objection by arguing that this single act of being belongs in a different way to the matter, the body, than it does to the intellectual substance or form. It belongs to the former as “its recipient and subject” and belongs to the latter “as its principle.”<sup>245</sup> Thus, although there is a single act of being of the composite it is not the case that this single act of being occurs in the same way with the matter as it does with the form of the matter. The intellectual soul retains its position as a loftier mode of being than the matter; indeed, without the existence of the intellectual soul informing the matter become human body there would be no body properly speaking at all. Aquinas thus concludes his argument that the intellectual soul is the form of the body by explaining that the requirements for the intellectual soul acting as the substantial form of the body have been met.

A potential objection to Aquinas’s position is that if we admit that the intellectual soul can subsist by itself and at the same time admit that it functions as the substantial form of the body then are we not allowing that the intellectual soul can be two essentially different kinds of beings? Can the same thing, on the one hand, be an immaterial substance capable of a purely spiritual existence apart from the body and, on the other hand, be the fundamental principle of a physical thing limited by the space/time continuum and subject to the physical laws of the universe? How could the same being that is not limited by matter form for itself a body that is subject to material limitations? Either we have here two essentially different beings or, as the objection might go, we have a strange metaphysical case of a spiritual thing seeking to diminish its own kind of existence.

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<sup>244</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.63.4.

<sup>245</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.63.5.

A basic response to this potential objection is that Aquinas is clear that the intellectual soul separated from its body by the physical death of that body exists in an unnatural state. As Aquinas argues in the following passage, the separated human soul is outside of its proper place in a purely spiritual existence and longs to return to the body:

To be united to the body belongs to the soul by reason of itself, as it belongs to a light body by reason of itself to be raised up. And as a light body remains light, when removed from its proper place, retaining meanwhile an aptitude and an inclination for its proper place; so the human soul retains its proper existence when separated from the body, having an aptitude and a natural inclination to be returned to the body.<sup>246</sup>

Helium gas has a natural desire to go up. It can be trapped and held, as in a child's balloon, but when that balloon gets popped the Helium returns to its proper place. In similar fashion, the soul has a desire to be with its body. It is not an essentially different kind of being when separated from the body, just outside of its proper place.

Because the soul is not in its natural state when separated from the body its ability to know is compromised. The Platonist might blissfully long to be separated from the supposed prison house of the body in order to directly apprehend pure essences, but Aquinas is clear that knowledge gained by the separated soul is "imperfect, and of a general and confused nature."<sup>247</sup> Why? Because although the intellectual souls of human beings are immaterial they do not (as angels do) have the natural capacity to know things directly through universal species; rather "they were so made that their nature required them to be joined to bodies, and thus to receive the proper and adequate knowledge of sensible things from the sensible things themselves."<sup>248</sup> Aquinas does allow that the human soul in a separated soul is able to know by turning to intelligible universal species

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<sup>246</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.76.1.ad 6.

<sup>247</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.89.1.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

(e.g. mathematical principles, human nature, principles of beauty) but that it generally cannot understand singular sensible things by means of the universal species. Aquinas believes that the separated human soul can have some knowledge of concrete singulars through the habit of knowing them attained while embodied, or through affection, or natural inclination or divine dispensation but that it remains fundamentally impaired in its capacity to know.<sup>249</sup>

Thus, there is not an essential difference between the intellectual soul in its separated state and when it functions as substantial form of the body. Indeed, Aquinas is clear that the separated human soul is in an unnatural state and unable to function properly without its body.

I now turn to two additional dimensions of Aquinas's teaching on the union of body and intellectual soul. These are logical implications of Aquinas's hylomorphism but drawn out in separate chapters following Aquinas's final proof that the intellectual soul is the form of the body in Chapter 68 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.

I turn first to Chapter 71 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, "That the Soul is United to the Body Without Intermediation." Aquinas argues that the conclusion of this chapter can be inferred from the very nature of the relationship between form and its corresponding matter because the form makes the matter to be what it actually is; the form permeates matter so that it becomes the very expression of the form. When we encounter an active human body we immediately encounter an active human soul. It is the soul, as form, which reduces the matter of the body from potentiality to act. Thus, the soul does not

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<sup>249</sup> See *Summa Theologica* I.89.4.

function through an intermediary in its relation to the body; rather the body is what it is because of its total passivity to the activating power of the human soul.

A further conclusion Aquinas makes, as a logical inference from the fact of the soul functioning as substantial form of the body, is “That the Whole Soul is in the Whole Body and in Each of its Parts:”

Now, the soul is the act of an organic body, not of one organ only. It is, therefore, in the whole body, and not merely in one part, according to its essence whereby it is the body’s form.<sup>250</sup>

The body functions as an organic whole, each of its parts having a function and existing in interdependence with one another. The soul, as act of the body, forms the body for itself and is directly responsible for all the various parts of the body functioning together in one integral whole. It could not at the same time be act of the whole and not be in each of its parts. “This explains,” Aquinas argues, “why it is that, when the soul departs, neither the whole body nor its parts remain of the same species as before; the eye or flesh of a dead thing are only called so in an equivocal sense.”<sup>251</sup> Each part of the body only functioned as it did because of the soul’s presence within it. Each part’s failure to retain its proper act at the soul’s departure shows, according to Aquinas, that the soul must have been present in that part. Finally, because the soul is immaterial and has no parts in any physical sense it is present as its whole self in each part of the body.

## **Conclusion to Chapter Two**

The foregoing arguments from Part II that Aquinas gives for why the intellectual soul must be the substantial form of the body are not phenomenological in any sense of

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<sup>250</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.72.

<sup>251</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.72.3.

the word. Aquinas does not directly appeal to the human being's experience of his/her own consciousness of embodiment either to demonstrate that the human being is by nature an integral composite of body and intellectual soul or to lay an experiential basis for this demonstration. However, we have seen in Part I of this chapter that Aquinas is not adverse to appealing to interior experience. In Section C, I showed that Aquinas presents us with two ways that the intellect can come to know itself:

In the first place, singularly, as when Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands. In the second place, universally, as when we consider the nature of the human mind from knowledge of the intellectual act.<sup>252</sup>

The first way that the intellect knows itself is reflexive and takes place within the subjective experience of the individual human person. I can perceive that I have an intellectual soul in the very act of understanding something. While figuring out a geometry problem and reaching a solution I can recognize in myself my own intellect at work. Further, Aquinas notes a difference between the two different paths to intellectual self-knowledge and stresses that the first way, attained through immediate subjective experience, is superior to the second because of its greater simplicity. This argument is a sort of touch down to the phenomenological ground so heavily traversed by modern philosophers. Aquinas recognizes that the best way for me to understand my own intellect is to dwell in the interior experience of my own thinking.

Although Aquinas does not appeal to the human being's experience of his/her own consciousness in the positions covered in Part II of this chapter he does turn to

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<sup>252</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1: "Uno quidem modo, particulariter, secundum quod Socrates vel Plato percipit se habere animam intellectivam, ex hoc quod percipit se intelligere. Alio modo, in universali, secundum quod naturam humanae mentis ex actu intellectus consideramus."

interior experience in Question 76 of the *Summa Theologica* I where he addresses whether or not the intellectual soul is the form of the body. The initial part of his affirmative response to this question is taken from Aristotle's demonstration in *De Anima* ii, 2. Aquinas also draws from this demonstration in Chapter 57 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II to show that the soul is the form of the body, but in this chapter he only posits that the soul, as such, is form of the body; he does not demonstrate that it is precisely the intellectual soul that is the form of the body. In the Aristotelian demonstration from the first part of Aquinas's response in the *Summa Theologica*, he does argue that the intellectual soul is form of the body but wants to supplement this argument by appealing to the direct consciousness every human has of being an embodied intellectual creature. This appeal, which is not found in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II arguments we have covered, is as follows:

If anyone however wishes to say the intellectual soul is not the form of the body he must explain how it is that this action which is understanding may be the action of this man for every one knows by experience (*experitur*) that it is himself who understands.<sup>253</sup>

Thus, Aquinas depends upon a basic interior experience every human has of being an embodied thinking creature as an initial common sense indication that the intellect is at least a part of the human being. This is not a stand-alone demonstration that the intellectual soul is form of the body, but it does serve as an experiential touchstone for the rest of his argument—i.e. it is a fundamental human experience that any theory about the body/soul relationship must adequately account for. After showing problems with

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<sup>253</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.76.1: Si quis autem velit dicere animam intellectivam non esse corporis formam, oportet quod inveniatur modum quo ista actio quae est intelligere, sit huius hominis actio: experitur enim unusquisque seipsum esse qui intelligit. In this case I have slightly modified the Benzinger translation.

various faulty explanations for the relationship between the intellect and the body, Aquinas then concludes that “this [particular] man understands because the intellectual principle is his form.”<sup>254</sup>

I close, then, with what I will later argue is a point of strong common ground between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty, a point of intersection between their respective philosophical anthropologies that will hopefully show the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s own thought. What is this common ground? It is that for both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty our interior experience of being an integral union of body and spiritual soul is a fundamental starting point for philosophizing about the nature of the human being.

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<sup>254</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.4: “quod hic homo intelligit, quia principium intellectivum est forma ipsius.”



### Chapter Three – Merleau-Ponty’s Understanding of the Integral Human Being

It is critical for the purpose of showing how Merleau-Ponty might enrich Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology that we recognize the latter thinker’s appeal to subjective experience. However, this aspect of his thinking about the human being should not be overemphasized because it is such a limited part of his overall philosophical anthropology. In contrast to a subjective approach to studying the human being we could say that Aquinas’s approach is largely cosmological.<sup>255</sup> Why cosmological? First, because he repeatedly compares the human being to other kinds of creatures in the cosmos so as to define and characterize the human being. We are like the angels insofar as we are rational or spiritual beings. We are like the animals insofar as we have bodies. We occupy a middle place on the scale of being. A second reason for characterizing Aquinas’s approach as cosmological is that he emphasizes the human being’s purpose in the perfection of the whole universe. According to Aquinas, the existence of diverse grades of being is necessary in order for the created order to represent God as goodness. Through the presence of “higher” beings, i.e. rational ones, outpouring goodness upon “lesser” beings, i.e. inanimate and animate creatures, the universe is able to reflect God’s goodness.

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<sup>255</sup> I draw this description of Aquinas’s anthropology as “cosmological” from Karol Wojtyla. See his “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, tran. Theresa Sandok, OSM, Catholic Thought From Lublin, no 4., ed. Andrew N. Woznicki, (Peter Lang: New York, 1993). In this article Wojtyla argues that the subjective dimension of the human being is an objective part of being human and that exploring it through the resources of phenomenology by no means introduces a strain of subjectivism into philosophy but rather can enrich Thomistic anthropology with its tendency to explore the human being by comparing him/her to other beings in the cosmos and not through a close examination of subjective experience.

For Aquinas the meaning of the human person as an integral union of body and intellectual soul is asked and answered within a systematic metaphysical framework, which is why I needed to devote a large part of Chapter Two to outlining his metaphysics. Merleau-Ponty's approach to understanding the integral union of the human being is in stark contrast to Aquinas's. While it is true that Merleau-Ponty does address the nature of the human being, he also holds that there is no such thing as an unchanging essence and he does not believe that there is an ultimate purpose to either the human being or the universe, at least no purpose that a philosopher could know. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty does not directly thematize the following question: what is the human being? Rather, according to Merleau-Ponty, we come to see indirectly that the human being is an integral union of consciousness, soul and body while phenomenologically exploring perception. In short, we could say that while Aquinas's philosophical anthropology is carried out in an explicit and systematic metaphysical context, Merleau-Ponty's is carried out in a phenomenological context, although one which opens into ontological claims about the nature of the human being.

Another point of contrast between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical anthropologies is that while Aquinas does begin (at least in *Summa Theologica* 76.1) with our experience of being an integral unity of body and intellectual soul he concentrates more on arguing that the human being is an integral unity of body and intellectual soul. But Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the human being and thus the phenomenologist who attends to basic human perception always and already experiences him/herself as a unity of consciousness, soul and body. The unity of the human being, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a given, a non-negotiable point, a touchstone that serves to break apart monistic

or dualistic theories of human nature, rather than a position that the philosopher comes to through argumentation. For Merleau-Ponty, any philosophical anthropology that would deny the integral unity of the human being is not sufficiently attentive to the basic perception that is foundational to any philosophy because this perception can only occur if the human being *already is* an integral unity of body, soul and consciousness.

Although the primordial unity of the human being as revealed by perception is a given for Merleau-Ponty, this does not mean that it cannot be fruitfully explored and further understood. My purpose in this chapter is to present Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the human being as an integral union of body, soul, and consciousness as it appears in the major period of his philosophical work and, in particular, in his phenomenology of perception.

At this point I must make a brief aside to note that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty have different terms to describe the integral human being. For Aquinas the human being is a composite of intellectual soul and body, while Merleau-Ponty refers to an integration of body, soul, and consciousness. Even if it turns out that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty have compatible notions of soul and body so that the latter thinker can enrich the former's philosophical anthropology, what are we to do with the additional concept of consciousness? Does Aquinas have a comparable notion in his teaching about the integral human being? Does his notion of soul include consciousness? I raise this issue now simply to alert the reader before delving into Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the integral human being that the basic dimensions of the human being under discussion in Chapter Three will differ from the "parts" of the human being that we discussed in Chapter Two. I do hope to show that these differences do not preclude a Merleau-Pontian

enrichment of Aquinas's thought, but at this point I must beg the reader's forbearance to wait until later in the chapter for my argument that the terminological differences between them are not insurmountable.

What then will this chapter look like and how will I get at Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the integral human being? I devote Part I to the main themes and philosophical orientation of Merleau-Ponty's work. I outline his basic position as a modern philosopher of consciousness while at the same time explaining how his understanding of consciousness differs from an intellectualist and an empiricist portrayal of consciousness. I describe Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology noting some critical differences between himself and Husserl. Next, I turn to the foundational importance of perception for Merleau-Ponty's work; perception is the abiding *leitmotif* of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and all problems are solved, if in fact they can be solved, by appeal to the insights it reveals. I then examine Merleau-Ponty's concept of the subject-object dialogue, which is a fundamental dialectic between the embodied human, his/her world, and other people that perception reveals. Finally, I look at Merleau-Ponty's notion of truth.

Part II is devoted to Merleau-Ponty's teaching on the integral human being in his first major work, *The Structure of Behavior*. While this book is not strictly phenomenological, we will see that Merleau-Ponty does introduce the phenomenological method in the text, especially in its latter sections on body-soul unity. The text is essentially about the relationship between nature and consciousness. In developing this relation Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of 'form.' We will see that he believes all objects of the world exist according to their own laws of behavior that consciousness

calls ‘forms,’ but that these forms cannot be strictly “in” the objects. In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty first describes the human being as an integral union of body and soul, which he takes to be a form of the human being. He also argues that consciousness can be a form of the human being. He holds that whereas the forms of external objects exist in a kind of interplay between consciousness and nature (i.e. the subject-object dialogue that I explain in Part I)—objects having natural structures that bespeak ‘forms’ but needing a consciousness to identify these structures as ‘forms’—the form of the human being can be consciousness itself as it orients the body to achieve its ends. When we are conscious we are able to form the body around our intentions. But when we are unconscious our bodies still function as formed by virtue of our souls. Thus, there must be, for Merleau-Ponty, a distinction between consciousness as form and soul as form. I will further address this difference later in the chapter.

Part III of this chapter is devoted to *The Phenomenology of Perception*. In this text Merleau-Ponty does not directly thematize the question of the relationship between body, soul, and consciousness as he does in *The Structure of Behavior*, but through his analyses of perception he does provide many insights into how “the soul spreads over”<sup>256</sup> the parts of the body and how “the consciousness of the body invades the body.”<sup>257</sup> I will explore three different phenomenological findings which, for Merleau-Ponty, reveal the integral unity of the human being. First, I will look at his treatment of the relationship between the human being and external stimuli. An examination of experiences of exploring the objects of our surroundings and receiving the various sense impressions that they offer reveals that human beings are able to anticipate and select certain stimuli

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<sup>256</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 87.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

while ignoring or downplaying other stimuli. Second, I will explore how the lived body, as subject of expression, indicates the integral union between consciousness and its body. Third, I will explore Merleau-Ponty's treatment of human expression and how the body is not just a tool for consciousness to communicate words or gestures but that expression occurs in the very bodily acts of speaking, of writing, of gesturing, etc. All these explorations of experiences will serve to show that consciousness functions as a form of the body ordering and enveloping all of its parts according to its intentions. They will also serve to show that consciousness is ordered toward the body that it envelops and that the body can be adequately explained only according to consciousness which lives in and informs it.

One final introductory word is that I will not be addressing Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy in this chapter or in the following ones, even though some have argued that this stage of his philosophical career moves him closer to the scholastics and Aquinas than his phenomenology did.<sup>258</sup> The main reason for not addressing his later works is simply that doing so would take me away from the specific question that this dissertation is intended to answer: whether Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to understanding the human being can enrich Aquinas's own philosophical anthropology. Furthermore, I follow Gary Brent Madison's argument that there is not a sharp break between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological period and his later metaphysical works (e.g. his unfinished monograph, *The Visible and the Invisible*, and his last published

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<sup>258</sup> See, for example, Ernest Joós's study: *Intentionality-Source of Intelligibility: The Genesis of Intentionality*, vol. 69, American University Studies, Series V Philosophy, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1986).

article, “Eye and Mind”).<sup>259</sup> Rather, his later ontological claims—e.g. that being is an intertwining between its visible aspects which can be objectified and its invisible aspects which cannot--is, in Madison’s words, an “unthought thought” in the earlier philosophical texts, a “meaning which is nowhere fully expressed, but which winds through Merleau-Ponty’s various writings binding them together.”<sup>260</sup> I will have occasion later in this chapter to illustrate Madison’s claim somewhat, but I do not intend to fully address the extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works lead to his explicitly metaphysical writings. On the other hand, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is never strictly the description of phenomena, but that he uses it to argue that the human being is an embodied consciousness. Thus, his phenomenology opens out into ontological claims.

## **Part I – Main Themes and Philosophical Orientation of Merleau-Ponty’s Work**

### **A) Merleau-Ponty as a Modern Philosopher & His Understanding of Consciousness**

Those who specialize in medieval or ancient philosophy will likely be surprised by Merleau-Ponty’s frequent references to “classical philosophy” or “traditional analyses” or “classical psychology” because he applies these terms to early modern as opposed to pre-Christian or pre-modern thought.<sup>261</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty occasionally references Greek or scholastic thinking, it is clear that his philosophical home is what the contemporary academic community calls “modern philosophy.” He seems to believe that philosophy in its proper sense really began with Descartes and he contrasts “traditional” or Cartesian thought with what he called “modern” thought, which includes post-

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<sup>259</sup> See his work, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Series in Continental Thought: Vol. 3, eds. Lester Embree, et al., (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981).

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, xxx.

Newtonian physics, contemporary Gestalt psychology and, most certainly, phenomenology.

However, Merleau-Ponty is also strongly critical of several key thinkers and schools of thought that are representative of modern philosophy (as understood by the contemporary academy). For example, Merleau-Ponty considers Descartes a leading representative of intellectualism and he sees this mode of thinking, along with empiricism, to be full of error in its claims about the nature of the human being and the nature of human knowing. In what sense then can we say that Merleau-Ponty is a modern philosopher? Much of Merleau-Ponty's work is devoted to a polemic against what he sees are the major schools of post-Cartesian philosophy: intellectualism or critical thought, and scientific empiricism. I will have plenty of occasions in the pages which follow to expose this polemic because it is impossible to do any examination of Merleau-Ponty's work without addressing it. But even though Merleau-Ponty is critical of post-Cartesian or modern philosophy (even though this is "classical" philosophy for him) we can still call him a distinctly modern philosopher. Why? Because he squarely addresses himself to problems that arise from modern thought and he seeks to answer them through a distinctly modern conceptual framework. For example, at the beginning of his *Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty writes that his main purpose is to "to understand the relations between consciousness and nature."<sup>262</sup> He understands nature, in the sense given by scientific empiricism, as "a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound

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<sup>261</sup> See, for example, Part I, Chapter Two of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, entitled "The Experience of the Body And Classical Psychology."

<sup>262</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 3.



together by relations of causality.”<sup>263</sup> Certainly, the medievals understood that there are causal relations in nature, but they also believed that nature was sustained by God’s presence and that living forms are immaterial. Merleau-Ponty accepts a basically materialistic concept of nature, one which is quite foreign to the medieval mind, although there were certainly ancient Greek thinkers who shared this belief (e.g. Democritus). And although Merleau-Ponty is highly critical of Descartes, he is also highly indebted to Descartes in that he is, in many respects, a philosopher of consciousness. On the one hand, he accepts an empirical view of the natural world but on the other hand he believes that the beginning stage for any philosophical activity is the examination of consciousness and its relation to the world.

But what does Merleau-Ponty mean by consciousness? Is it an active power of directing the human being or simply a basic self-awareness? Does it encompass our intellection, volition and affectivity or need to be understood as reflexively accompanying those powers? Does Merleau-Ponty believe consciousness functions as a form, as Ralph Ellis has claimed?

One helpful way to begin clarifying Merleau-Ponty’s notion of consciousness is briefly to compare it with Descartes’s *cogito*. In one sense Merleau-Ponty is indebted, like Husserl, to Descartes. Husserl opens up the riches of phenomenology by dwelling on what happens within the *cogito*, within conscious experience. Merleau-Ponty himself concentrates his philosophical work on taking inventory of interior experience. But one of the first things he notices about interior experience is that it is inevitably ordered toward the physical milieu within which a person finds him/herself. And here is the

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

critical difference between his and Descartes's notion of consciousness. Descartes believes that the mind is an unextended substance that is not essentially a part of the body and that consciousness is not inherently involved with the body. If I can doubt everything except my own doubt then I can only be truly sure that I am a pure thinking substance; I can doubt whether or not my body is actually an integral part of me. But Merleau-Ponty believes that Descartes simply fails to take into full consideration the meaning of the very doubt he uses to justify the *cogito*. Merleau-Ponty insists that the only way I could doubt at all is if my consciousness was in the first place embodied. I have doubts about existence precisely because consciousness does not dwell in a purely for-itself (*pour soi*) realm of spiritual interiority but is woven into a body with its physical limitations making consciousness perpetually thrust into ambiguities and perspectival thinking.

One way that Merleau-Ponty establishes that consciousness is inherently ordered toward the world is through an examination of child psychology. He argues that the:

influence of the milieu in the formation of the mind is sufficiently evident; it is clear that a child who had never seen an article of clothing would not know how to act with clothing; nor would he be able to speak or to envisage other persons if he had always been absolutely alone.<sup>264</sup>

Thus, the very ability to have a thinking mind is dependent upon external factors. For Merleau-Ponty consciousness begins with the child thrust outside of him/herself into a living and active world. The *cogito* is thus essentially dependent upon the world and therefore upon a body which allows us to dwell within the world. And it is merely a forgetfulness of his own beginnings that permits Descartes to assume (when he wrote as an adult philosopher) that his now developed consciousness is most secure of itself by doubting the world that helped enable his consciousness to develop in the first place.

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<sup>264</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 170.

But even when consciousness has developed so that the person has a strong sense of subjectivity and inwardness, consciousness is never simply a sphere of interiority but always depends at some level on the bodily comportment of the human being that engages him/her in the world. Consciousness would not even be, Merleau-Ponty wants to say, unless it existed in a dialectical relation with the world to which it has access via its body. “Hence one cannot say that man sees because he is Mind,” according to Merleau-Ponty, “nor indeed that he is Mind because he sees: to see as a man sees and to be Mind are synonymous.”<sup>265</sup> This is so because our perceptions are always grounded in some concrete and particular bodily engagement with the world.

Although Merleau-Ponty holds that a fundamental part of “consciousness..[is] my actual presence to myself”<sup>266</sup> he will not allow that consciousness is adequately defined as self-presence. I have briefly touched on why this is so with perceptual consciousness because consciousness depends upon the external objects of the physical milieu in which it is placed through its body. Thus, Merleau-Ponty says that:

the universe of consciousness revealed by the *cogito* and in the unity of which even perception itself seemed to be necessarily enclosed was only a universe of thought in the restricted sense: it accounts for the thought of seeing, but the fact of vision and the ensemble of existential knowledge remains outside it.”<sup>267</sup>

The fact of vision reveals that we are thrust outside of ourselves to an ensemble of things on which we depend for our vision.

Although consciousness depends upon the external milieu within which the human being is placed for its emergence and ongoing operation, Merleau-Ponty does not

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<sup>265</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 158.

<sup>266</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, xvii.

<sup>267</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 197.

believe that consciousness exists merely in a state of receptive dependence upon outside objects. Rather, he holds that consciousness becomes *dialectical*. Yes, the little baby must first be introduced to the ball in order to actually see it and pick it out from the array of objects before his gaze, but once he does see the ball this vision leaves what Merleau-Ponty calls “sedimentation”<sup>268</sup> in his mind and this “sedimentation” is a sort of springboard which enables him to declare that other round objects like tires and balloons and the little spherical heads drawn by his sister are also “balls.” When consciousness awakens to itself it finds itself thrust open to the world which is already laying down “sedimentation,” already providing a means for consciousness to act into the world. As consciousness receives (vision, hearing, tasting etc.) from the outside at the same time it approaches the world on the basis of what it has perceived.

Thus far I have only focused on consciousness as the seat of *perception*. For Merleau-Ponty it is also the seat of *action* and this aspect of conscious life is also dialectical. Merleau-Ponty offers as an example a football (i.e. soccer) player operating on the field of play to illustrate what he means:

For the player in action the football field is...pervaded with lines of force (the ‘yard lines’; those which demarcate the ‘penalty area’) and articulated in sectors (for example, the ‘openings’ between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the ‘goal,’ for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body. It would not be sufficient to say that consciousness inhabits this milieu. *At this moment consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action* (my emphasis). Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes in it new lines of force

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<sup>268</sup> This language of “sedimentation” is sprinkled throughout Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of how the world forms and shapes our interior life. For example, see *Phenomenology of Perception*, 150.

in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field.<sup>269</sup>

The player is thrust outside of himself to such an extent that his consciousness is absorbed by the field of play. The ball, the opposing players, and the possible courses of action he could take to score seize his attention and set the parameters for his action. He moves right because of that big opponent on his left; he moves toward the net because scoring is the very purpose of the game. But however limited the range of possible actions might be, the player is not completely constrained by the forces and objects arrayed before him. He takes one course of action—e.g. dribbling the ball—but could have taken others—e.g. passing it--and in his action he alters the whole field of play; the big defender on the player's right lunges forward because he decides to dribble straight for the net. The dynamism of give and take between players on the football field is immanent to consciousness; the field is so flooded into the player's consciousness that all else is set aside but this very field which is, in part, a result of his actions upon it.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of consciousness, which the example above illustrates well, is that consciousness is not simply a sphere of self-awareness but also the seat of the human being's thinking and willing and bodily comportment. Consciousness does not simply accompany action (either mental or physical) but is the source of it. Merleau-Ponty speaks about the power of consciousness for personal acting as Aquinas speaks about the intellect as a source for the acting of human beings.

However, this does not mean that Merleau-Ponty considers the body to be a sort of tool or instrument. For the player on the field (as for all of us even in the most mundane of activities) the body is instead so infused with conscious intentions that we

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<sup>269</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 168-169.

can experience a seamlessness between them. Merleau-Ponty says that “consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think’ but of ‘I can.’”<sup>270</sup> This means that the body is involved in intentionality from the beginning of our conscious acts. There is not first deliberation and then consciousness moving the body as an instrument, but from the beginning of any movement we make the body itself and its possibilities are an inherent part of a basic pre-reflective consciousness of ourselves and the objects which surround us and which call out certain bodily responses to them.

Another fundamental aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of consciousness, which I will further address below in the section on perception, is that it is never in full possession of itself. For Merleau-Ponty, borrowing from Gestalt psychologists, every perception is a figure on a background so that while the figure might be clear and fully grasped by the mind, the background is in a half-light and contains latent shapes and therefore latent meanings that the mind only grasps by turning away from the first figure and directly towards the contents of its background. In the passage below Merleau-Ponty explains that the possibility of hallucinations (taken in a broad sense as an ostensible sensory experience of something that really does not exist) depends upon consciousness not being in full possession of itself:

To ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called into question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn. The percept taken in its entirety, with the world horizon *which announces both its possible disjunction and its possible replacement by another perception*, certainly does not mislead us. There could not possibly be error where there is not yet truth, but reality, and not yet necessity, but facticity. Correspondingly, we must refuse to attribute to perceptual consciousness the full possession of itself, and that immanence which would rule out any possible illusion. If hallucinations are to be

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<sup>270</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 159.

possible, it is necessary that consciousness should, at some moment, cease to know what it is doing, otherwise it would be conscious of constituting an illusion, and would not stand by it, so there would no longer be any illusion at all.<sup>271</sup>

The statement that consciousness can “cease to know what it is doing” indicates a significant part of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project. A sphere of ambiguity attends consciousness. Because consciousness is inherently perceptual, inherently ordered toward the world in which the person is interwoven through his/her body and because perceptions never gives us a full grasp of the intended object but instead announce the possibility of further exploration, consciousness cannot be in full possession of itself.

### **B) Merleau-Ponty’s Understanding of Phenomenology<sup>272</sup>**

One of the best explanations of phenomenology in general, let alone Merleau-Ponty’s specific understanding of this philosophical method, can be found in the Preface of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the first place, Merleau-Ponty says,

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<sup>271</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 401.

<sup>272</sup> There are at least four different directions phenomenology has taken according to Dermont Moran. See his *Introduction to Phenomenology*, (London: Routledge, 2000). *Realist* phenomenology proceeds on the basis of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901) and assumes that analysis of intentionality can lead us to a direct grasp of the essences of objects and actions. This group includes Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Transcendental* phenomenology follows the direction taken by Husserl with the publication of his *Ideas I* (1913) in which Husserl seems to embrace idealism with his claims that the world is constituted by a transcendental ego. *Existential* phenomenology inaugurated by Heidegger with his *Being and Time* (1927) turns away from an examination of the structures of consciousness and towards a description of being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, & Simone de Beauvoir are best classified as existential phenomenologists. Finally, there is a *hermeneutic* interpretation of phenomenology which came to the fore in Hans-George Gadamer’s *Truth & Method* (1960) but which has its origins in the early Heidegger. Gadamer and Paul Ricouer, another prominent advocate of this phenomenological orientation, stress that we dwell in the world and engage it through language and so can only properly understand experience hermeneutically.

“it is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing.”<sup>273</sup> What is described? Our perceptions of the world, other selves and objects within it, and our relationship with these others are described. By perception Merleau-Ponty does not simply mean our visual access to the world, rather it includes every mode of this access. He means by it the basic and unreflective awareness we have of being connected to others and to ourselves as embodied creatures. “Perception,” Merleau-Ponty says, “is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.”<sup>274</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, any scientific explanation is a “second order expression,” grounded in a more fundamental experience of the world. For him the main task of phenomenology will be to reveal this unreflective perception. “We must rediscover,” he says, “the structure of the perceived world through a process similar to that of an archaeologist. For the structure of the perceived world is buried under the sedimentations of later knowledge.”<sup>275</sup> Our own cultural habits of scientific thinking might, for example, lead us to think mainly about material objects according to their strictly defined elemental properties. But when we explore our fundamental perception we find that objects are always interrelated with other objects and, because of the perspectival nature of our perception, remain theoretically impossible to comprehend exhaustively.

Unlike Husserl, who mainly uses the phenomenological method to describe the structures of consciousness (for example, the manifold layers of time consciousness),

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<sup>273</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>275</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work,” tr. Arleen B. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 5.



Merleau-Ponty generally utilizes phenomenology to shed light on our unreflective connection to the world and to the objects of the world; thus, the phenomena shed light on reality, they provide access to ourselves and those objects to which we are related which means that they are ordered toward ontological claims. Merleau-Ponty does see value in the epoché or the bracketing of existence from his descriptions. Why? Not because he wants to retreat to consciousness, not because he believes that a transcendental ego literally constitutes the world making the merit of philosophy to consist in clarifying the means of this constitution, but because we are so “compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity...to put it ‘out of play.’”<sup>276</sup> We loosen the cords of intentionality that tie us to the world so as to better appreciate it and bring it to reflective understanding. Merleau-Ponty does not, then, put existence out of play in any radical way. And perhaps a better way of explaining his version of the *époche* is that he momentarily steps back from his existential immersion in the world so as to better understand the world.

Because of the distance created by the epoché between the phenomenologist and the world into which he/she is thrust, the phenomenologist is able to study the essences of realities (which include individual things and their relationships with other objects as well as the world itself). Essences are ideal, according to Merleau-Ponty. They do not exist in any Platonic sense but are concepts that the thinker draws out from a multitude of concrete experiences in order to explain a common denominator of those experiences. The concept of ‘perception’ is itself an essence; indeed it is the primary essence that

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<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.

Merleau-Ponty investigates throughout his philosophical career. We are able to detach perception from the myriad instances we have of experiencing it and examine the basic similarities of these experiences—e.g. that perception is always from an embodied perspective.

Merleau-Ponty believes that studying essences is central to phenomenology; he even defines this philosophical method as “the study of essences.”<sup>277</sup> However, he insists that this study is a means to an end, not an end in itself:

But it is clear that the essence is here not the end, but the means, that our effective involvement in the world is precisely what has to be understood and made amenable to conceptualization, for it is what polarizes all our conceptual particularizations. The need to proceed by way of essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but, on the contrary, that our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to be acquainted with and to prevail over [the world's] facticity.<sup>278</sup>

Merleau-Ponty does not intend philosophy to be about essences; rather, he wants essences to provide a way for the philosopher to better understand the world and his/her engagement with it. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of essences as means to understand the world (and our engagement with it) is one more indication that Merleau-Ponty is not strictly a philosopher of consciousness and certainly not one who believes that the field of ideality is the starting point for philosophy. The starting point is the existential situation within which the philosopher finds him/herself, a situation that is prior to thinking and which shapes and informs all of the philosopher's conceptualizations. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is the beginning point of philosophy because it is the world which first imposes

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<sup>277</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, xvi.

itself upon consciousness, but it is also the end point because philosophy is ordered toward an understanding of this world.

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty addresses how the human being is in the world and we can therefore say that his phenomenology is *existential*, like Heidegger's; both philosophers explore our being in the world. But though Heidegger never adequately thematizes embodiment, the body is central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations. While it remains true that he is in many respects a philosopher of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty's insistence on how consciousness is embodied and, as a result, is a part of the world means that we cannot adequately describe him as a philosopher of consciousness. His philosophy is rightly called existential because of his exploration of how the body (i.e. the phenomenal or experienced body, as opposed to the objective body) makes us inhere in a concrete situation and weaves us into the being of the world.

Another important dimension of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is that he consistently uses it to critique two other modes of philosophy and their respective interpretations about the nature of the human being. On the one hand, he argues against reductive scientific empiricism (e.g. Hume, Freud) and on the other hand, intellectualist idealism (e.g. Kant, Hegel). For empiricism, the human is an exterior being without an interior, an object in-itself (*en soi*) that can be lined up alongside any another physical object and, in theory, fully explored. For intellectualism the human is a consciousness that is purely for-itself (*pour soi*) and an interior without an exterior because the whole world is constituted from within. But neither of these theories takes seriously our basic experience of embodied consciousness and of therefore being an integration of the *en-soi*

and the *pour-soi*, that is, objects because of our bodies but infused with consciousness by which we are able to set things at a cognitive distance from ourselves.

Now, Merleau-Ponty's method is largely descriptive and he does not write in explicitly logical propositions. Nonetheless, it is quite easy to draw deductively valid propositions from his phenomenological illustrations. For example, a typical argument against intellectualism can be put in the form of *modus tollens*: If the human being constitutes the world (p) then we would find in experience no ambiguities, no uncertainties (q). But our experience is fraught with ambiguities. We have no experience of deliberately constituting uncertainties but of encountering them – that object, for example, in the half light that appears like a crouching dog but which, on latter investigation, I realize is a tree stump. So, not q, and therefore not p: we are not pure constituting consciousnesses. It is true that Merleau-Ponty himself does not write in explicitly syllogistic form but he does use his phenomenological findings to make deductively valid arguments. His statement that phenomenology is “a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing”<sup>279</sup> is too limited or modest a claim because he does use it to analyze and disprove the ideas of intellectualist and empiricist thinkers regarding the nature of the human being.

### **C.) The Foundational Importance of Perception**

I have already addressed the significance of perception for Merleau-Ponty when introducing his understanding of consciousness and phenomenology, but more needs to be said about this theme. Merleau-Ponty makes the centrality of perception to his thought

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<sup>279</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

abundantly clear in a resume of his work provided to a committee of professors overseeing his candidacy to the Collège de France:

My first two works [*The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*] sought to restore the world of perception...The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness. These philosophies commonly forget—in favor of a pure exteriority or of a pure interiority—the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body, and correlatively, with perceived things.<sup>280</sup>

By “world of perception” he does not mean so much the world that is perceived, but the vastness and richness of perception itself through which the human being is opened up to the world. Perception reveals about itself that the human mind is incarnated in a body and, therefore, that the human being is an integral union of body and consciousness (which for Merleau-Ponty encompasses the mind). In one sense this integral union cannot be proven because it is at the root of any experience which could be drawn upon to “make the case” that the human being is an integral union of consciousness and body. However, the basic fact that our thinking is inherently grounded in a body has been forgotten by many philosophers and thus needs to be recovered. Perception has been, as Merleau-Ponty says, “buried over by the sedimentations of later knowledge”<sup>281</sup> and his hope is to uncover it as a sort of phenomenological archeologist. My intention with this section is to illustrate some of the foundational insights Merleau-Ponty offers regarding perception. These will help us better understand Merleau-Ponty’s more specific claims

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<sup>280</sup> *Prospectus*, 4.

<sup>281</sup> *Prospectus*, 5.

about the integral union of the human being which I introduce in Parts II and III of this chapter.

One clarifying word before we get to what Merleau-Ponty uncovers through his phenomenological investigations is that perception includes “the common act of all our motor and affective functions, no less than the sensory.”<sup>282</sup> We often associate perception with a visual grasp of things but, for Merleau-Ponty, perception refers to awareness achieved through all the senses. It also includes our emotional grasp of the world and the values of things which can be accessed via affectivity—e.g. aesthetic or cultural values. Perception also gives, Merleau-Ponty says, “at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them.”<sup>283</sup> Thus, perception also includes a basic sense (more general than the sense of ‘touch’) not only of things themselves, but of our relationships with them.

A fundamental epistemological fact that is revealed by examining perception phenomenologically is that all knowledge begins with it. “All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception.”<sup>284</sup> The first premise of any argument about the nature of anything, of any statement about the world, of any declaration of truth is first of all grounded in perception. Any abstraction whatsoever involves stripping a thing of its facticity. We can only gain an understanding of essences on the seedbed of living concrete experience.

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<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>284</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 241.

Second, by exploring perception we make contact with ourselves since we are the subjects of perception. What do we discover about ourselves? That we are our bodies, as Merleau-Ponty describes below:

We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.<sup>285</sup>

Immersed as we are in scientific ways of thinking about ourselves—e.g. that the human body has a certain genetic make-up and that our thinking depends upon correct neurological functioning—it is perhaps easy to have a detached and objectivistic notion of our own bodies. Ironically, this objectivistic approach might also arise because we live with our bodies so closely that we forget to reflect upon the experience of actually living in them. In any case, by exploring the act of perception itself Merleau-Ponty concentrates our attention on the fact that we *are our bodies*. He does not mean by this that we can be reduced to what science says of our bodies; this is no declaration of materialism. He means by this that we are what he elsewhere calls our “lived bodies.” Our consciousness infuses our bodies; we are an integral union of body and consciousness.

Third, when we examine perception in its primary form—e.g. I awake to the experience of being sensibly aware of the world—we discover that it happens in us. Perception in its raw state is really an occurrence in us, not a personal act, as Merleau-Ponty explains below:

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<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

I cannot say that I see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I say that I understand a book..My perception, even when seen from the inside, expresses a given situation: I can see blue because I am *sensitive* to colours, whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I have decided to be one. So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive.<sup>286</sup>

The “one” who perceives in me is nothing other than the world as it is given to me in my particular situation and prior to my judgments or conceptualizations about the world. This means that I cannot be a self-enclosed sphere of consciousness and that because of perception the very make up of my mind is due, in part, to an imposition (not meant in any violent sense) of the world upon me. I find that I am what I am in part because I am naturally opened up to colors, sights, sounds, and so on.

If we find that our consciousness is fundamentally open to things which, in sensory fashion, impose themselves upon us, then perception provides, as Merleau-Ponty says, a “knowledge of existing things.”<sup>287</sup> The experience of perception is a phenomena immediately tied to the real existences of things. For Merleau-Ponty, we can have no doubt that the world we perceive is “out there” in concrete form. In fact the only way to understand the phenomenon of hallucination is against the backdrop of our faith in perception’s ability to actually grasp things. If perception did not have this faith, then the very question—“what is a hallucination or not?”—would not even arise.

But, one might counter, in an effort to charge Merleau-Ponty with subjectivism, that the real world to which Merleau-Ponty refers is only the world *as perceived*, only the world *as it appears* in consciousness. He never gets, so the objection might go, to the world as it is. Rather, he simply addresses himself to interior phenomena and remains

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>287</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 211.



locked in his own mind. But, for Merleau-Ponty, the only way I have access to the world is through my embodied consciousness of it. Yes, it is true that he addresses the phenomena of the world but this does not mean that he denies its objective reality. His wonderment as a philosopher is not in the phenomena for themselves but in the world revealed (in however limited a form) by the phenomena. The only way I have access to the world, Merleau-Ponty would say, is through my limited, body-bound perceptual access. This is not subjectivism, at least not of a radical kind, but an honest look at the means at our disposal for understanding the world.

To embrace the perspectival nature of our knowing, far from leading us toward subjectivism, actually moves us closer to the truth. First, it is a truth about who the human being actually is. When we counter modernistic claims that the human being can occupy a sort of “view from nowhere” and theoretically can have a complete grasp of the world with the fact that we are always involved in the world because of our corporeal imbeddedness in it and cannot remove ourselves from perspectival knowing, we are closer to the objective truth about the human being. A second reason Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the perspectival nature of our knowing leads away from subjectivism is that it shows forth the inexhaustible richness of the world and its objects. He amplifies this point below in a passage from *The Structure of Behavior*:

Perspective (*la perspective*) does not appear to me to be a subjective deformation of things, but, on the contrary, to be one of their properties, perhaps their essential property. It is precisely because of it that the perceived possesses in itself a hidden and inexhaustible richness, that it is a ‘thing.’ ...Far from introducing a coefficient of subjectivity into perception, it provides it on the contrary with the assurance of communicating with a world which is richer than what we know of it, that is, of communicating with a real world. The profiles of my desk are not

given to direct knowledge as appearances without value, but as 'manifestations' of the desk.<sup>288</sup>

The objects and situations to which we address ourselves only provide a limited manifestation of their reality at any given time and place. I cannot fully grasp them and the fact of this limitation coupled with my own drive to fully know propels me to further and deeper explorations. The perspectivism to which I am bound in my knowing assures me that I am communicating with a world that is boundlessly rich and not a fiction of my own making.

#### **D.) The Subject – Object Dialogue**

The previous section is important for helping us to see that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not subjectivistic in any radical idealistic sense; he does not hold, as with Hegel, that the world is entirely constituted through the resources of consciousness. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty believes that we do approach the world on the basis of our concrete historical and social situation so that in one sense we receive from the world and project unto the world according to subjective filters. According to Merleau-Ponty, our knowing emerges from a subject-object dialogue with the world. I turn now to an important passage from Merleau-Ponty where he stresses the priority of the world in our human knowing (also emphasized in the last section) but also begins to introduce us to the subject-object dialogue which is so critical for understanding his philosophy:

It is a question of recognizing consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world which it never embraces nor possesses but towards which it is perpetually directed--and the world as this pre-objective individual whose imperious unity decrees what knowledge shall take as its goal. This is why Husserl distinguishes between intentionality of act, which is that of our judgements and of those occasions when we

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<sup>288</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 186.

voluntarily take up a position..and operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), or that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language.<sup>289</sup>

Although the term subject-object dialogue is not used here we can begin to get at this central theme through Merleau-Ponty's discussion of two dimensions of intentionality: intentionality of act and operative intentionality. The previous treatment of primary perception above was essentially a treatment of operative intentionality. Our basic stance upon waking up is one of operative intentionality, or operative perception. We receive the world laid out in front of us before we even make any judgments about it. Operative intentionality is passive in that through it we are fundamentally receptive of the world. In a sense, Merleau-Ponty will say, the world speaks itself into us. When we open our senses we do not dictate what we will perceive; rather, we take in what is available. The world gives itself to us. Operative intentionality is a necessary precursor to intentionality of act—i.e. I must have some context within which to reflectively act. I stand before a horizon and I receive what is presented to me (operative intentionality) but then I “take up a position” and then deliberately look to one particular place. I pay attention to the play of light on the trees and marvel at the colors—e.g. intentionality of act.

It would be a mistake to think of operative intentionality and intentionality of act as discrete acts of consciousness that can be separated from one another. We can distinguish them in theory so as to better understand the working of consciousness, but in practice operative intentionality and intentionality of act cannot be clearly marked off from one another. This is because operative intentionality naturally unfolds into

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<sup>289</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, xx.

intentionality of act. “We found,” Merleau-Ponty says, “beneath the intentionality of act, orthetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former’s possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgement.”<sup>290</sup> It is already at work in that it orients consciousness to a particular place in the world and then calls for consciousness to take up a position or make a judgment. And as I do so—e.g. as I figure out what the pleasant smell is that has captured my interest—I am able to realize that it has been given to me through my more generalized bodily hold on the world: operative intentionality.

How does this dual intentionality introduce us to the theme of the subject-object dialogue? The world that I take in according to operative intentionality is one that I am already attuned to in some sense. That is, I see it according to my pre-existing desires, according to natural and/or habitual patterns of evaluation. There is what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘sedimentation’ in consciousness which helps to orient intentionalities of act. For example, a young boy might have some nascent musical ability and interest in the tempo and rhythm of his older brother’s piano playing. Because of this he directs himself to the playing and listens attentively to the sound of the older boy going over and over his beginner Suzuki piece. This intentionality of act—attentive listening--adds another layer of “sediment” to consciousness—i.e. memories of the music—and this sediment enters into the younger boy’s operative intentionality. He has a new layer of experience upon which to approach the world although he will not likely be directly conscious of this experience.

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<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

I turn now to another example of the subject-object dialogue but this time in the context of a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's ideas about motivation. I present these ideas while also introducing an example of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological treatment of pathology. Merleau-Ponty is famous for discussing the experiences of patients with various neurological disorders and showing how certain phenomenological findings (e.g. that consciousness is ordered toward the perception of wholes) enable us to adequately explain the disorders. Merleau-Ponty often draws upon the experiences of Mr. Schneider, a man who had suffered a brain injury during fighting in World War I and whose pathology had been carefully studied and documented by the psychologist Kurt Goldstein. In what follows I discuss Merleau-Ponty's treatment of Schneider's pathology according to his phenomenological finding that there is a subject-object dialogue in consciousness between motivated phenomena and motivating phenomena. I show further how his teaching provides a better explanation of Schneider's illness than the mechanistic explanations offered by scientific empiricism.

There are a wide variety of symptoms that emerge from Schneider's pathology. The following are just some of the many that Merleau-Ponty addresses. For example, Schneider cannot grasp the essence of a story and thus, when telling it back, "finds nothing to emphasize" and can only reconstitute it "part by part."<sup>291</sup> In conversation he is unable readily to grasp the meaning of language spoken to him; instead, "the words of others are for him signs that have to be severally deciphered."<sup>292</sup> Although Schneider would like to have specific opinions about, for example, the way the government levies

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<sup>291</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 153.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

taxes or conducts its foreign policies, he is unable to formulate them and “must be content with large-scale beliefs, without the power to express them.”<sup>293</sup>

What then is Merleau-Ponty’s concept of motivation and how can we employ this idea to provide a non-mechanistic account of Schneider’s illness? In the first place it is important to note that motivation should not be understood in intellectualist terms as a purely internal phenomenon whereby a person is moved as a result of her own ideas alone or, in an empiricist sense, as the result of sense impressions entering into the person from the “outside” world. It would be simplistic to call Merleau-Ponty’s concept a combination of these two perspectives because neither of them explicitly address the idea of motivation. However, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of motivation involves both consciousness as a constructive power as well as objects from the “outside” acting upon consciousness and in this way he draws upon both intellectualist and empirical traditions in philosophy. Motivation is, as we see in the following passage, a fluid concept which can be understood only as a dialogue or as a give and take movement between the conscious subject and the world which surrounds him/her:

To the degree that the motivated phenomena comes into being, an internal relation to the motivating phenomenon appears; hence, instead of the one merely succeeding the other, the motivated phenomenon makes the motivating phenomenon explicit and comprehensible, and thus seems to have preexisted its own motive.<sup>294</sup>

A simple example from my former commute to Duquesne serves nicely to illustrate this concept. The first time I approached the University while driving on Forbes Avenue the front right tire of my car dipped into an unusually deep pothole. The tire thudded down and the car shook while I tightly gripped the steering wheel and experienced the irritation

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<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

that often accompanies such encounters. Immediately prior to driving into the pothole it was either entirely outside my field of perception or, at the most, experienced as a slight indentation within the pavement, a vague object within the more explicit object of the road itself. After my car dropped down and I experienced ensuing irritation the pothole became for me explicit and comprehensible. The motivating phenomenon—my bumpy experience of the hole set alongside its physical surroundings which included my own body--was not present by itself in my consciousness; it appeared in relation to the motivated phenomenon—my tight gripped irritation. However, the latter phenomenon clarified the existence of the object which gave rise to the motivating phenomenon and drew it out of an implicit place on my field of perception into a very distinct object on that field.

Another important dimension of motivation is that we constantly form habits of consciousness which *impact* and *develop* our experience of motivation. It is here that we see Merleau-Ponty's concept of the subject-object dialogue further developed. Prior to my first commute to Duquesne the pothole was not a mental factor for me, but after dropping my car into it, the sediment of my consciousness now holds the experience of that first encounter. Thus, when I currently drive down Forbes Avenue the pothole leads to motivating phenomenon of "pothole is present!" but now I project meaning into it; it has become an explicit and potentially dangerous object in my perceptive field that motivates me to swerve around it. The pothole is now internally related to my experience of satisfaction, the motivated phenomenon, when I have successfully avoided it.

For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness functions according to motivation, which means that any experience I have of being in the world can be explained by appeal to an

internal relationship between motivating and motivated phenomena. For example, when I now drive by a stately grove of sugar maples in late summer I am prompted (but not determined!) to look forward to those same trees when their leaves turn crimson in a few weeks time because my consciousness holds the memory of those trees in their autumn glory. The grove of maples in summer serve as motivating phenomena in relationship to certain motivated phenomena--i.e. the expectation of fall color.

How then can we draw upon motivation to explain Schneider's illness? For Merleau-Ponty the normal human being experiences motivation in the context of "an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects."<sup>295</sup> I experience motivation while being "situated" in a world rich with meaning that I both project into and receive meaning from. As the normal body-subject acts into the world the whole horizon of his/her consciousness is filled with interconnected motivating phenomenon. However, for Schneider the intentional arc of his consciousness is flaccid and his motivation is anemic; he is not able to easily hold onto the various features that have informed his "human setting" and use them both to project meaning into and understand the various objects of his world. He is able to walk from point 'A' to 'B' and to experience the motivating phenomenon of objects interposed between his destination and his current position which bespeak "distance" (the motivated phenomenon). However, a rich variety of motivating phenomena, which are available to most people, do not even appear to Schneider. Unless an object is directly related to an explicit course of action that the patient has taken—e.g. walk to the grocery store to

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<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.



purchase a loaf of bread—it will not function as a motivating object. He will not, for example, even notice the home of his doctor while en route to the market because it does not figure into his plans for the bread he wants to buy. “In his case, the possible situation at every moment is so narrow that two sectors of the environment not having anything in common for him cannot simultaneously form a situation.”<sup>296</sup>

Schneider’s extremely thin experience of motivation can, therefore, explain the symptoms of his pathology noted above. He cannot grasp the essence of a story because the sedimentation of “story” in his consciousness is either thin or non-existent. Further, he has hardly any concept of a whole narrative that he could use to grasp the nature of a new story. He is unable readily to grasp the meaning of language spoken to him because unlike others, who have a developed internal lexicon that they use to immediately understand another, Schneider must, in a sense, define anew each word in a sequence. The patient cannot formulate or express political opinions because they are outside the range of his very practical and sequential existence; political meaning is not in the sediment of his consciousness. For Cesar Chavez the back breaking and underpaid labors of the farmhand is a motivating phenomenon related to the motivated phenomenon of protest precisely because he sees political meaning (among other meanings—e.g. racial) in those labors. But Schneider is unable to project political significance into or out from the practical details of his existence. His whole experience of motivation is profoundly weak or, in other words, the subject-object dialogue that he has with the world about him is profoundly limited like a discussion made up of basic words that remains on a trivial level.

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<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

Schneider's situation casts into relief that normal human functioning depends upon consciousness having certain kinds of sedimentation or habits. When listening to another tell a story we must have a previous understanding of narrative and its beginning, middle, and end structure to fully grasp its meaning. At a more basic level we have to already understand the words another speaks in order to properly receive what he/she has to say. There are what we can call universal kinds of sedimentation that allow for normal social intercourse, but the subject-object dialogue is also unique to each person in that my particular consciousness has layers of sedimentation that emerge from my own life course, my family of origin, my innate inclinations and temperament, etc. Each one of us is uniquely oriented such that what is motivating phenomena for one might not even register for another and even if it did, the motivated phenomena might be very different between them depending upon the different "groundwork" of their different consciousnesses.

Now, up to this point I have been considering the subject-object dialogue within the context of our lived body experience of it and have been concentrating upon how human capacity for understanding objects in the world is affected by the sedimentation of our consciousness. But I would be remiss not to add that for Merleau-Ponty the subject – object also has an effect upon the objects which we direct ourselves toward, which means that the truth-hungry philosopher is not oriented toward unchanging essences, but rather toward a world which exists, like the human being, in developmental flux. For example, let us consider the first Native Americans or Colonial settlers who first saw an "old man" in the rocky face of New Hampshire's "Man on the Mountain" and then shared their experience with others. From a geological perspective the rocky face was not changed by

humans seeing it as a “man” but nonetheless the rocky object became imbued with meaning from the subjects who gazed upon it. The object became a symbol and in one sense was made more rich by Native Americans or Colonial settlers imbuing the rock with the meaning of “old man.” Further, each generation of viewers develops the symbol so that it now means more than simply “old man in the rock” but also “historical landmark,” emblem of “New Hampshire,” and so on. In Merleau-Ponty’s vision of the world human subjects and the objects to which they relate exist in a state of mutual developmental flux. Human consciousness continues to be altered by engagement with the world and the meaning of objects in the world continues to change due to our engagement with it.

#### **E.) Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Truth**

Let us consider Merleau-Ponty’s teaching that all things, including physical objects and material situations that we access through our senses as well as abstract concepts/ideas that we think about, are never completely revealed to us, but presented according to aspects or perspectives. It is perhaps easiest to understand this teaching by considering how we see physical objects; as we walk around them we gain, from each new angle, new dimensions. But we also necessarily approach ideas, problems, social situations and other more abstract realities from various angles. We try to wrap our minds around the contemporary global financial crisis by considering mortgage backed securities, predatory lenders, reckless Wall Street money managers, irresponsible buyers, false assumptions about the rise of home values, and so on. Clearly the objects which we seek to know can never be fully grasped from each perspective all at once by the human mind.

And even if we could accomplish this for one moment, we find ourselves and the objects we seek to know immersed in time and under constant change as a result not only of engagement with physical forces but also with meaning-giving human subjects so that completely defining “what they are” becomes even more difficult. If this is true and it is also true that what we can know depends upon the development of our minds, how is it possible to have truth? If what we know is what it is because I imbue it with meaning then how can I have access to an essence beyond my limited scope? How can one know anything at all in an absolute or permanent sense? Does Merleau-Ponty even have a concept of truth?

I want to approach an answer to these questions by considering truth in the context of the human being. There are many places where Merleau-Ponty speaks about the human being ambiguously, claiming on the one hand that there is some necessary and universal aspect of our being, some dimension of our existence that we can consider a given “nature,” while on the other claiming that human beings have no universal essence. For example, in a section where Merleau-Ponty explains his notion of freedom he writes the following:

Everything in man is a necessity. For example, it is no mere coincidence that the rational being is also the one who holds himself upright or has a thumb which can be brought opposite to the fingers; the same manner of existing is evident in both aspects. On the other hand everything in man is contingency in the sense that this human manner of existence is not guaranteed to every human child through some essence acquired at birth, and in the sense that it must be constantly reforged in him through the hazards encountered by the objective body. Man is a historical idea and not a natural species.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 197-198.

For Merleau-Ponty there are certainly defining features of human beings. Our bodies indicate our rationality as we walk upright, enabling us to better examine the world around us rather than be huddled face-first to an environment satisfying our biological needs, and as we use our hands for making tools out of objects. Indeed, the majority of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical career was spent defending and promoting what he saw as an essential aspect of humanity—embodied rational consciousness—which he believed was valid across times and cultures. Still, Merleau-Ponty clearly does not believe in unchanging essence. He does not hold, as Aquinas does, that the nature of the human being is derived from an immortal and immaterial soul. There is no “human nature finally and immutably given.”<sup>298</sup> There are stable features of human existence that we can articulate as we examine normal human experience but these must be developed and established and then re-established in our individual lives, according to Merleau-Ponty.

So, if Merleau-Ponty does not believe that there are permanent essences to things is he able to have any firm notion of philosophical truth? To provide an answer let us first look, as Merleau-Ponty does, to our experience of the possession of truth. It is important to note while doing so that Merleau-Ponty writes against the backdrop of skepticism, which decries any notion of truth, and strong rationalism, which assumes that the world can be fully explained according to rational categories and the assertions of consciousness. He writes:

We know that there are errors only because we possess truth, in the name of which we correct errors and recognize them as errors. In the same way the express recognition of a truth is much more than the mere existence within us of an unchallengeable idea, an immediate faith in what is presented: it presupposes questioning, doubt, a break with the immediate, and is the correction of any possible error. Any rationalism admits of at

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<sup>298</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

least one absurdity, that of having to be formulated as a thesis. Any philosophy of the absurd recognizes some meaning at least in the affirmation of absurdity.<sup>299</sup>

By their very declaration of skepticism philosophers of the absurd take for granted that there must be some kind of truth (even if they can only hold do a semantic theory of truth and deny the possibility of knowing the world as such), else the declaration itself would be meaningless and just another exercise in sophistry. On the other hand, rationalism must be formulated on the basis of a claim which cannot be clearly proven. Merleau-Ponty believes in truth and uncovers how even the skeptic takes for granted that it exists. But he is unwilling to walk with rationalists, either of an empirical scientific or intellectualist sort, who believe that our minds can fully possess it.

But how does Merleau-Ponty define truth and what does it mean in the context of the integral human being? I know of no passage in Merleau-Ponty's work where he succinctly defines truth but, on the basis of several different passages where he broadly describes what he means by it, I believe we can succinctly summarize his definition as follows: *the truth is an optimal correspondence between my consciousness and the thing*. He explains that when we are viewing an object that "there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency."<sup>300</sup> If we stand too far away from the tree on the horizon then it can only be faintly grasped, but if we stand at two inches from it the tree is a blurry mess and impossible to focus upon. When I am in a place where my eyes and therefore my

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<sup>299</sup> *Ibid*, 344.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid*, 352.

consciousness can best see the tree, when it is in optimum focus, then I have a true grasp of it.

But there are two corollaries to the truth as an optimum correspondence between consciousness and the thing. The first is that the truth is not absolute because I participate in it. I come to objects with a sedimentation of consciousness (that I can be more or less aware of) that both limits and provides access to the objects I wish to know but which disallows me from having an absolute or all encompassing access to anything. Knowing, for Merleau-Ponty, does not take place through a purely receptive consciousness somehow receiving an unchanging universal essence of a thing; rather we participate in what we know.

Second, an optimum grasp of a thing can give us a definition that we can count upon but there is a teleology of consciousness toward more and more perfect formulations of a thing's truth, as Merleau-Ponty further explicates below:

*Habemus idem verum*, we possess a truth, but this experience of truth would be absolute knowledge only if we could thematize every motive, that is, if we ceased to be in a situation. The actual possession of the true idea does not, therefore, entitle us to predicate an intelligible abode of adequate thought and absolute productivity, it establishes merely a 'teleology' of consciousness which, from this first instrument will forge more perfect ones, and these in turn more perfect ones still, and so on endlessly.<sup>301</sup>

There is an optimal angle from which I can stand before and describe a thing but I cannot have a complete grasp of it from this optimum angle because one step to my left (to speak of knowledge purely from a visual perspective) gives me another angle that I did not have at the optimum place and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus, the initial truth or true picture that I

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<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

can have is incomplete and I can always go beyond the existing truth I have to more precise formulations.

After addressing the main themes and philosophical orientation of Merleau-Ponty's work, I now turn to his treatment of the human being as an integral union of body, soul, and consciousness. In Part II I will address the philosophical anthropology of *The Structure of Behavior*. In Part III, I will address it by examining *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

## **Part II – Merleau-Ponty's Teaching on the Integral Human Being in the *Structure of Behavior*<sup>302</sup>**

In *The Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty attempts “to trace out, on the basis of modern psychology and physiology, the relationships which obtain between the perceiving organism and its milieu.”<sup>303</sup> He wants to show on a foundation of scientific studies that objects in the world act according to their own structures or forms such that the whole of the object is greater than the sum of its parts and thus cannot be understood in any atomistic sense.

Merleau-Ponty's examinations of contemporary scientific research to better understand the relationship between the perceiving organism and its milieu are not phenomenological in a methodological sense, however they do show his sympathies with philosophers of consciousness. He shows, for example, that any scientific experiment

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<sup>302</sup> Normally, behavior (*comportement*) is used to describe the life of animals but Merleau-Ponty employs this term in the broadest sense. Even a bubble of gas acts a certain way, as a whole system in fact, and thus exhibits a behavior.

<sup>303</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *A Prospectus of His Work*,” in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 4. Hereafter referred to as *Prospectus*.



necessarily takes place within the fundamental context of the scientist's perceptual consciousness. However, he does hold that an object's form is, in part, constituted by consciousness and he argues for this position partly through phenomenological analysis. Later in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty is explicitly phenomenological and almost every theme Merleau-Ponty raises in this text is taken up again in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>304</sup> Thus, we can count *The Structure of Behavior* as partly a work of phenomenology although it does not start off explicitly so.

As Merleau-Ponty says in his introduction, the basic purpose of this book is "to understand the relations between consciousness and nature." What is nature? "By nature we understand here a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by relations of causality."<sup>305</sup> Nature includes the whole cosmos: the entire physical world, other human beings, and oneself. The central question he raises is what is the relationship between one's consciousness and the rest of the cosmos. Merleau-Ponty is not primarily interested in ontology here. He is not asking what is nature and what is the order that exists between things in the cosmos. By relations between consciousness and nature he primarily means how consciousness properly understands nature. Now, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty is clear that nature does speak of itself to consciousness, that meaning emerges from things for consciousness. Merleau-Ponty is no idealist in any radical sense,

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<sup>304</sup> The word 'phenomenology' does not even appear in the *Structure of Behavior* until the later part where Merleau-Ponty defines the term: "The analysis of the act of knowing leads to the idea of a constituting or naturizing thought which internally subtends the characteristic structure of objects. In order to indicate both the intimacy of objects to the subject and the presence in them of solid structures which distinguish them from appearances, they will be called 'phenomena'; and philosophy, to the extent that it adheres to this theme, becomes a phenomenology, that is, *an inventory of consciousness as milieu of the universe* (emphasis mine)." *The Structure of Behavior*, 199.

<sup>305</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 3.

although he does believe that we know the world according to subjective filters. He does not believe that the understanding of nature can be reduced to consciousness constituting nature by projecting meaning on to it. However, he is clearly a modern philosopher in that he assumes that one's basic relationship with the world is through consciousness, that one stands in relation to the world from his/her consciousness.

Now, a significant part of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical career is dialogue with empiricist and intellectualist thought. In *The Structure of Behavior*, his first book-length work, this dialogue is central. In fact, Merleau-Ponty frames the whole thrust of the work around the problem of the competing explanations given by empiricist and intellectualist thinkers regarding the relationship between consciousness and nature. The explanation given by empiricism (what Merleau-Ponty also calls realism or causal thinking) for the relationship between nature and consciousness rests on the assertion that the "mental" (is) a particular sector of the real world."<sup>306</sup> Merleau-Ponty allows that empirically minded thinkers recognize the need to distinguish physical organisms from consciousness, but they treat consciousness as if it were a physical thing governed by tangible cause and effect relationships. For example, "the doctrine of Freud applies metaphors of energy to consciousness and accounts for conduct by the interaction of forces or tendencies."<sup>307</sup>

Alternatively, critical thought, or intellectualism, holds that "there is nothing in the world (i.e. nature) which is foreign to the mind...[that] the world is the ensemble of

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

objective relations borne by consciousness.’<sup>308</sup> Here nature is swallowed up by consciousness and the relations between things are posited by the mind.

Merleau-Ponty’s study emerges from his desire to find some solution to these competing explanations, as he describes in the following passage:

Thus..there exist side by side a philosophy, on the one hand, which makes of every nature an objective unity constituted vis-à-vis consciousness and, on the other, sciences which treat the organism and consciousness as two orders of reality and, in their reciprocal relation, as ‘effects’ and as ‘causes.’ Is the solution to be found in a pure and simple return to critical thought? And once the criticism of realistic analysis and causal thinking has been made, is there nothing justified in the naturalism of science— nothing which ‘understood’ and transposed, ought to find a place in a transcendental philosophy? We will come to these questions by starting ‘from below’ and by an analysis of the notion of behavior. This notion seems important to us because, taken in itself it is neutral with respect to the classical distinctions between the ‘mental’ and the ‘physiological’ and thus can give us the opportunity of defining them anew.<sup>309</sup>

Whom does Merleau-Ponty refer to by philosophers who make nature an objective unity constituted by consciousness? These are philosophers who trace their origin from Descartes, in particular Kant and the post-Kantian critical tradition. Within the critical tradition there is not, generally speaking, a denial of the reality of the physical world, but rather a basic belief that the human being can only know what his/her mind projects on to raw sense data supplied by the senses. Empiricist thinkers, on the other hand, reduce consciousness to a dimension of the physical world. And while they recognize that consciousness does not appear to have the characteristics of material extension and therefore appears to be second order of reality, the initial physical order is foundational for consciousness. Consciousness is an epiphenomenal reality for many empiricist

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<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

thinkers, a by-product of physiological forces which falsely appear to itself to act upon the body.

How does Merleau-Ponty address these competing explanations? He examines behavior, as explored by the contemporary scientists of his day and as we experience it in basic perception. Raw behavior makes no distinctions of itself between physiological and mental realities. Thus, it is a sort of neutral field in which to study competing explanations of the relationship between consciousness and nature. Merleau-Ponty ends up drawing on the traditions of both critical and empirical thought as he examines behavior and our experience of it. He holds with the former group that we are unable to access anything apart from the involvement of consciousness, that experience necessarily occurs in consciousness. On the other hand, he pays close attention to scientific studies of behavior and, in particular, to the notion that there is meaning within the objects of nature that can be fruitfully studied and named, a meaning which is not put into the objects of nature, but which emerge from nature for consciousness.

The problem we have been addressing between competing explanations of the relationship between nature and consciousness is one that Merleau-Ponty tackles fundamentally on the grounds of epistemology, not ontology. This does not mean that Merleau-Ponty altogether avoids ontological claims. On the contrary, his notion of immanent signification—that the objects we perceive declare their own meaning to us—is an ontological claim. His belief, which I will address below, that the universe is a single totality and that we are unable to comprehensively define specific forms, because changes in the whole universe lead to changes in these forms, is also an ontological claim. Further, it appears that Merleau-Ponty has a fundamentally materialist view of the

cosmos and this is an ontological presupposition, but one that he cannot ultimately prove because of his commitment to perceptual consciousness as the beginning point of philosophizing.

In the first chapter of *The Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty critically examines classic reflex theory and unfolds a foundational idea which will occupy us for the rest of Part II of this chapter: the concept of form (*la forme*) or structure (*la structure*), terms which Merleau-Ponty uses interchangeably. Classic reflex theory assumed the existence of a one-to-one correlation between external stimuli and discrete nerve conductors. It assumed that organisms were basically organic machines and that external stimuli could act upon distinct parts of the organism and cause a reaction without the whole involvement of the organism. Merleau-Ponty challenges this idea by drawing upon, for example, the research of Sherrington.<sup>310</sup> The latter thinker, while still committed to classic reflex theory, had revealed several truths about the behavior of organisms which seemed to belie this theory. For example:

Sherrington has pointed out that the limits of the reflexogenic field for the scratch reaction varies with days and circumstances. It can be added, with the intensity and frequency of the excitants. The receptive field is strictly defined only under the artificial conditions of the laboratory experiments or again in pathological conditions.<sup>311</sup>

If an organism's reflexes are separable from one another and operate like light switches that can be turned on by external stimuli, then the scratch reaction (i.e. an organism's propensity to touch or scratch that part of its body which is prodded by an external stimulus) should not vary with days and circumstances. Nor should it vary depending

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<sup>310</sup> See *The Structure of Behavior*, 10-22, "The Classical Conception of the Reflex and its Auxiliary Hypotheses."

<sup>311</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 15.

upon the intensity or frequency of the excitants, but it does. Merleau-Ponty shows that the findings by Sherrington and many others reveal that “the fate of an excitation is determined by its relation to the whole of the organic state [of the organism].”<sup>312</sup>

Certainly, factors in an organism’s external environment cause that organism to act in fairly predictable ways but Merleau-Ponty shows that the organism’s whole system is involved in reacting to stimuli. For example:

In general, when a reaction is produced, all those which other stimuli could provoke at the same moment turn out to be inhibited; and when two antagonistic reflexes enter into competition in this way there is no compromise; only one of the two is achieved. Everything happens as if the nervous system could not do two things at once.<sup>313</sup>

It turns out that the nervous system functions as an interrelated whole so that if it is undergoing one reaction, other reflexes are inhibited. Merleau-Ponty also shows that organisms (especially the more complex ones) are able to select or ignore certain stimuli depending upon their own motivated inclinations or avoidances. Here he draws on an example from higher primates and humans:

As soon as it is a question of fine movements of the hand, or even of grasping movements, a simultaneous innervation of the antagonistic reflexes is observed, the distribution of which depends on the goal to be obtained and on the type of movement to be executed.<sup>314</sup>

When the organism is directing itself toward some objective it is able to redirect reflex routes according to its purposes. Thus, classic reflex theory, which assumed the existence of a one-to-one correlation between external stimuli and discreet nerve conductors, is incorrect. The nervous system self regulates in holistic fashion when faced with stimuli.

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<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

Further, it exists not merely in passivity to external activity but partly determines which stimuli to receive and which to ignore.

Now, the holistic nature of an organism that enables it to deny or receive certain excitations, is its form. How does Merleau-Ponty define form? His basic explanation, which covers not only living beings but non-living ones as well, is taken from Gestalt psychology:

The 'forms' ..are defined as total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess... We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.<sup>315</sup>

This definition, also given in our Chapter One discussion of Ralph Ellis's work in neuropsychology, clearly covers the reflex behavior we have just examined above; each reflex circuit is intimately related not just to other reflex circuits but to the whole behavior of an organism depending upon its objectives. The various aspects of a form are unexplainable apart from the larger wholes of which they are part. They would not explain the behavior of the whole if their various properties could be added up and summarized. Rather, they only make sense in light of the behavior of the whole being which arranges and orders its parts.

At this point it is tempting to outline and differentiate Merleau-Ponty's treatment of various kinds of forms—physical, vital (including amovable and syncretic) and human (or symbolic)--because of its cosmological nature and the interesting comparisons between it and Aquinas's own use of form to explain life in the cosmos. However, the necessary limits of the dissertation prevent this exploration and I must be content to

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<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

summarize certain essential aspects of forms which will help me respond to questions raised in Chapter One regarding the feasibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's philosophical anthropology.

A first characteristic of form, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that it is not *exactly* a real characteristic of anything, but an object of perception. In the next chapter I will show that Merleau-Ponty backs off some from this position. Nonetheless, his most consistent claim is that "form" is not an object in the world, but an object of perception. By not "*exactly* real" I indicate that Merleau-Ponty is a bit vague on where the form actually lies, as we shall see. By real he means physical. For Aquinas, form is not necessarily physical and therefore not necessarily real in the sense employed by Merleau-Ponty but the former thinker clearly holds that forms can be immaterial and therefore inform actual things. Merleau-Ponty seems to presuppose that there is nothing immaterial to any being, but at the same time he does not want to reduce consciousness to physical processes and ideas to physical things. In any case, at one point Merleau-Ponty denies that the form is actually in the object that is said to be informed:

Thus, form is not a physical reality, but an object of perception..in the final analysis form cannot be defined in terms of reality but in terms of knowledge, not as a thing of the physical world, but as a perceived whole.<sup>316</sup>

Merleau-Ponty does not believe that forms are in objects, but this does not mean he believes they are simply constituted by consciousness. He declares in another place that "behavior is not a thing, but neither is it an idea."<sup>317</sup> In the passage above he says that we need to define form in terms of knowledge (*la connaissance*), but this is knowledge not in

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



an abstract sense but in the raw received sense that occurs in perception. I see the tree and know it is there and know it has a given shape, size, color, and so on. Thus, the form is not, strictly speaking, in the thing, but nevertheless it is grasped by, rather than imposed by, the mind. Thus, there is an intrinsic orderedness about the thing which bespeaks a certain “form.” If we dissected an object we would not find its form so it is not real in the sense employed by empiricists, but nonetheless it must be present to some extent in the thing, otherwise the object would not be able to declare to consciousness that it is formed.

One commentator on Merleau-Ponty, Gary Brent Madison, argues that we must understand this question about the place of form in light of perception and the subject-object dialogue, addressed in Part One of this chapter, which are so important to Merleau-Ponty’s overall philosophical project. He writes that:

Form belongs *at one and the same time* to the world (it is a structure) and to consciousness (it is a meaning); and thus its proper locus is neither in-itself nature nor pure internal self-consciousness, but rather perception which is the life of a subject engaged outside of himself in the world and who is at once active and passive.<sup>318</sup>

We can think of form as existing in a dialectical relationship between the human being and the world. In one sense form is in my consciousness because it is here that I come up with concepts and language to describe what I perceive. But we definitely find ordered behavior within objects which bespeak a certain form. This form does not express the total structure of the thing because this total structure is itself never complete. It arises from the object’s own dialectical relationship with the objects of its milieu. And as a perceiver, my ability to grasp the meaning of objects develops through my own dialectical relationship with the world. Thus, we have here two meanings of dialectical

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<sup>318</sup> Gary Brent Madison, 150.

relationship. Human beings gain various kinds of sedimentation in consciousness as we engage the world and we also impact objects of the world through our engagement with them. But non-conscious objects of the world—e.g. rocks and trees—also have a kind of dialectical relationship with other objects in the world. For example, the tree which grows upon the rock is obviously affected by it and vice versa.

Even though Merleau-Ponty is fundamentally interested in the relationship between consciousness and nature and even though he claims, at certain places in *The Structure of Behavior*, that forms are only *perceived* wholes these statements do not preclude the possibility that things might actually be ordered by some kind of formal reality. If things function a certain way such that we perceive them as having definite structures of behavior does this not suggest that something like ‘forms’ inhere in them? If we cannot say that forms inhere in objects, we must at least say that their behavior is holistically ordered, that there is a real orientation in an organism of preferred behavior so that it has the meaning of structure or form which is held out to perceptual consciousness. Towards the end of the book Merleau-Ponty will even say the following:

It is not only the matter of perception which comes off the thing as it were and becomes a content of my individual consciousness. In a certain manner, the form also makes up a part of the psychological individual, or rather is related to it; and *this reference is included in its very meaning, since it is the form of this or that thing which presents itself to me* here and now and since this encounter, which is revealed to me by perception, does not in the least concern the proper nature of the thing and is, on the contrary, an episode of my life [emphasis mine].<sup>319</sup>

How are we to understand this passage? On the one hand Merleau-Ponty here says that the form of something presents itself to me, which obviously implies that it is a reality of that object. He will not go so far as to say that this form permanently defines an object,

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<sup>319</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 211-12.

however; this form does not “concern the proper nature of the thing.” I interpret this latter phrase as meaning that we can never completely have a thing’s full meaning in our consciousness. Rather in episodes of my life—i.e. from the perspective I now have from this time and place—I gain real access to at least part of the ordered meaning of a thing—its “form”—but this meaning can change.

Merleau-Ponty is resistant to say that the forms of objects are, strictly speaking, in those things in part because he is thinking of “in-itself” nature in empirical terms and he does not think that we could adequately identify a thing’s form through scientific techniques. Furthermore, he resists saying that structure or form is in a thing because he does not want to cut off a thing’s behavior and the form that we use to describe that behavior from the larger whole of which they are part. This leads me to a second characteristic of forms, that each should be considered as part of more comprehensive forms which can alter their specific behavior:

One cannot even say that structure is the *ratio essendi* of the law which would be its *ratio cognoscendi*, since the existence of such a structure in the world is only the intersection of a multitude of relations—which, it is true, refer to other structural conditions.<sup>320</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty—and here is where we have a strong sense of the underlying ontological current in his thought—the entire universe is one ordered whole, one ultimate structure or form which exists in an ongoing state of evolutionary development. When it changes there is change distributed to all parts of the universe such that we can never say that there is a permanent form in any of its parts. A particular form really makes sense only in the context of the universe which remains in a state of flux and which, moreover, can never be adequately comprehended by the human mind.

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<sup>320</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 142.

Merleau-Ponty offers a helpful example to explain further what he means by the impermanency of particular forms and the need to understand them in light of larger wholes:

Doubtless it is by means of laws that we are able to reconstruct the architecture of a civilization which has disappeared: each step of progress in Egyptology modifies the history of Egypt. But the reconstituted structures function to complete a 'time' of the universe, the idea of which they presuppose. They are not themselves real forces which would direct the course of history or add a 'causality of idea' to the causality which links together the partitive events. But Egypt, as an economic, political and social structure, remains an object of thought distinct from the multiple facts which have constituted it and brought it into existence. It is an idea, a signification common to an ensemble of molecular facts, which is expressed by all the facts and which is not contained completely in any one of them. In the same manner, the actions and reactions of which a physical form is the seat are conceived by the physicist as the components of a physical system, lacking which his science would be without object.<sup>321</sup>

So, Egypt is a form, a whole that is found in its social, historical artifacts, etc. but it is not *in* any of these artifacts although the artifacts unquestionably indicate the cultural unity of Egypt. They declare their belonging to Egypt and each in its own way expresses something of this form. However, the form changes as new discoveries are made, which necessitates renewed interpretation of each part of the form "Egypt." Similarly, when I see the structure of a physical object and name it, that form is not in any of the parts. The form itself, as a description of an immanent order, will change as my knowledge of the physical object changes.

At the beginning of Part II, I indicated that the central question of *The Structure of Behavior* is how best to explain the relationship between nature and consciousness. Examining the form or structure of behavior is Merleau-Ponty's philosophical strategy for answering the question. He believes that our experience of perceiving forms "saves us

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<sup>321</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 143.

from the alternatives of a philosophy which juxtaposes externally associated terms and of another philosophy which discovers relations which are intrinsic to thought in all phenomena.”<sup>322</sup> In one sense Merleau-Ponty embraces the picture of the world painted by scientific empiricism: the world is made up of physical objects which relate to one another in causal fashion and which can be identified and named by the thinker. He does not want to isolate consciousness in a purely for itself sphere that would be basically immune to the causal forces of nature acting upon it. Thus, when we perceive a thing it has some degree of causal impact upon us in that a distinct meaning emerges for us, declares itself to us. But Merleau-Ponty also holds that consciousness meets the objects of the world half-way. Consciousness is not a physical process that can be reduced to other objects in the world or, if it were, there would be no way to prove it (!) because consciousness is always present and prior to any experiment that would demonstrate the physicality of consciousness. Consciousness approaches the objects of the world with its own sediments of understanding by which it understands the world and draws out the meanings which are immanent to the world. Consciousness exists in a dialectical relation with nature such that it articulates forms or structures to explain the behavior of things. Merleau-Ponty does not want to say, therefore, that forms/structures are “in” things. On the other hand, he is very clear that the behavior of objects are so ordered that consciousness, which is true to perception, will see them as ordered wholes. Merleau-Ponty’s final words of *The Structure of Behavior* sum up this dialectical relationship between consciousness and nature:

The natural ‘thing,’ the organism, the behavior of others and my own behavior exist only by their meaning; but this meaning which springs forth

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<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

in them is not yet a Kantian object; the intentional life which constitutes them is not yet a representation [as in scientific empiricism]; and the ‘comprehension’ which gives access to them is not yet an intellection [as in Cartesian intellectualism].<sup>323</sup>

The preceding discussion about form has been preliminary to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas regarding the relationship between a human being’s own consciousness and his/her body. Merleau-Ponty has a whole section on this theme and its critical aspects will be outlined below. The basic questions raised here are as follows: What is the form of human life? We have discussed in general the relationship between consciousness and what we could call external nature, those objects I encounter outside of me. But what is the relationship between the consciousness of a human being and his/her own self?

I begin a response to this question with Merleau-Ponty’s frequently quoted but difficult definition of the soul and body and their relationship to consciousness. What we will find is that he sees the human soul as an animating form, but with a dynamism that is hard to understand. I offer the definition in full:

But it is not a duality of substances; or, in other words, the notions of soul and body must be relativized: there is the body as mass of chemical components in interaction, the body as dialectic of living being and its biological milieu, and the body as dialectic of social subject and his group; even all our habits are an impalpable body for the ego of each moment. Each of these degrees is soul with respect to the preceding one, body with respect to the following one. The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher “formation” is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then established. The relations of the soul and the body can indeed be compared to those of concept and word, but on the condition of perceiving, beneath the separated products, the constituting operation which joins them and of rediscovering, beneath the empirical language—the external accompaniment or contingent clothing of thought—the living *word* which is its unique actualization, in which the

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<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

meaning is formulated for the first time and thus establishes itself as meaning and becomes available for later operations.<sup>324</sup>

In the passage the soul is first introduced as a vital principle; the soul is form of the body as a living mass of chemical components in interaction. However, soul is more than the living principle of its body but also appears to be the biological milieu which sustains the body. For Merleau-Ponty, the soul encompasses the environment specific to the human's vital survival. He sees the human being as irrevocably integrated into the fabric of the world (or environment). The lived body is part of the world and upheld by the world to such an extent that the world itself is taken as soul for the body, at least when we consider it a mass of chemicals. But in the dialectic of body-soul relations what we have just seen as soul becomes body; the living being in relation to the environment which sustains it is body for the soul of the social subject and his/her group. Now, we are no longer speaking about the soul in relation to its body, no longer talking about a singular human being; rather "soul" refers to a societal structure that includes not only a particular human subject, but the whole group to which he/she relates. This is taken to be the soul of the living being *and* his biological milieu, that is, if we take Merleau-Ponty's words at

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<sup>324</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 210; *La Structure du Comportement*, 227: "Mais ce n'est pas une dualité de substances, ou en d'autres termes les notions d'âme et de corps doivent être relativisées: il y a le corps comme masse de composés chimiques en interaction, le corps comme dialectique du vivant et de son milieu biologique, le corps comme dialectique du sujet social et de son groupe, et même toutes nos habitudes sont un corps impalpable pour le moi de chaque instant. Chacun de ces degrés est âme à l'égard du précédent, corps à l'égard du suivant. Le corps est en général un ensemble de chemins déjà tracés, de pouvoirs déjà constitués, le sol dialectique acquis sur lequel s'opère une mise en forme supérieure et l'âme est le sens qui s'établit alors (1). On peut bien comparer les relations de l'âme et du corps à celles du concept et du mot, mais à condition d'apercevoir sous les produits séparés l'opération constituante qui les joint et de retrouver sous les langages empiriques, accompagnement extérieur ou vêtement contingent de la pensée, la *parole* vivante qui en est la seule effectuation, où le sens se formule pour la première fois, se fonde ainsi comme sens et devient disponible pour des opérations ultérieures."

face value. But then Merleau-Ponty takes a confusing turn and goes back to a treatment of the singular human being: “even all our habits are an impalpable body for the ego of each moment.” Does he mean here that each moment is an ego or that at each moment the ego acts? If we assume the latter, the “self” or “I” stands as soul to the habit body of the human being, that body whose motor skills are trained to function in certain ways (e.g. daily exercise we do without much thought.)

At an ontological level Merleau-Ponty’s description of the body/soul relationship does not make much sense. Barral describes it as “tantalizing.”<sup>325</sup> It strikes me as downright confusing, at least from the perspective of ontology, from the perspective of one trying to identify the real make up of things in the world. In what sense is the body at the same time the biological milieu and myself as a living being? What are the distinctions between them if they are both ‘body?’ And how then does this dialectic become soul for the mass of chemical components in interaction?

However, from the standpoint of conscious experience in which unseen connections between things are experienced and symbolisms drawn which create unseen unities between things Merleau-Ponty’s “tantalizing” description of the body-soul relationship does make a bit more sense, although it does not become crystal clear by any means. I can live as a body subject with a singular focus on satisfying biological needs and here my soul, or animating principle, concentrates upon utilizing the body, “as a mass of chemical components” for the satisfaction of my vital needs. At this level of conscious experience my intentional drives are for survival; at these moments I

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<sup>325</sup> Mary Rose Barral, “Body-Soul-Consciousness Integration,” *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. XVI, ed. A-T. Tymieniecka, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), 123. Hereafter referred to as: “Body-Soul-Consciousness Integration.”



experience my soul at a vital level. Now, as a social being, my concern is with living well with other people. I might, for example, want to celebrate work with my colleagues over a good meal. Here my experience of the soul is that it animates the body toward such social ends. The body can be experienced as an organism given to its own biological survival through the consumption of food, but we can also experience in ourselves a social drive. Thus, we can orient a meal for the purposes of celebration and social discourse; here we experience our drive to biologically survive as subordinate to our social intentions. My point here is that we do have experiences of functioning in different ways with our bodies. Surely Merleau-Ponty is not denying the concrete reality of distinct physical organisms that we call bodies or that individual bodies are different than the “body politic.” But our experience indicates that one’s particular body and soul do have different modes of existence, that we live in our body in various ways, that at times our conscious intentions are simply to consume food and in such cases the soul, if we interpret it as animating principle, is about directing that body towards the food. These various modes of conscious experience correspond to different ways for the soul to be the soul and the body to be the body.

In commenting on the lengthy passage we have been addressing, Douglas Low argues that it indicates Merleau-Ponty holds to what he calls “emergent materialism.” He says that “in the *Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty) develops a form of emergent materialism to explain the appearance of a consciousness that can be understood neither as a mere thing nor as a separate force somehow introduced from the outside.”<sup>326</sup> He then quotes from the first part of the same passage on which I have been commenting as

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<sup>326</sup> Douglas Low, “The Continuing Relevance of the *Structure of Behavior*,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (September 2004), 427. Hereafter referred to as Low.

evidence that consciousness somehow emerges from the body in interaction with its environment. He also claims that, for Merleau-Ponty, it is “the body that intimately integrates mind and matter.”<sup>327</sup>

Low may be right that Merleau-Ponty holds to a kind of emergent materialism and believes that somehow consciousness was birthed in an evolutionary process. In several places of the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty does make statements which suggest this belief. He says, for example, that:

A normal man is not a body bearing certain autonomous instincts joined to a ‘psychological life’ defined by certain characteristic processes—pleasure and pain, emotion, association of ideas—and surmounted with a mind which would unfold its proper acts over this infrastructure. The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them. This is why we have spoken of a human order rather than of a mental or a rational order. The so frequent distinction of the mental and the somatic has its place in pathology but cannot serve for the knowledge of normal man, that is, of integrated man, since in him the somatic processes do not unfold in isolation but are integrated into a cycle of more extensive action.<sup>328</sup>

However, if Merleau-Ponty does believe that the mind is birthed through lower somatic processes this would be more of a presupposition that he has than a position that he proves. Why? Because, for Merleau-Ponty “The body and the soul are significations and have meaning..only with regard to a consciousness.”<sup>329</sup> The dialectic between soul and body Merleau-Ponty discusses is not driven by the body, but by consciousness which is able to understand and experience the various meanings of the body-soul dialectic which it experiences the human being to be. There is a difference in meaning between the body as a mass of chemical components and the body as a living being operating in its

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<sup>327</sup> Low, 411.

<sup>328</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 180.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

environment and as a social subject. There is also a difference in meaning between the soul as the animation of the body in a chemical sense and as the animation of a living being to accomplish social purposes. *And the consciousness of the human being serves to integrate these meanings into its own life.* The human being is not a composite of different substances as in Cartesian dualism, but a composite being of body and soul who has the power through consciousness to tighten the bonds of integration or to loosen them.

Moreover, the passage from which Low bases his claim that consciousness is established by lower orders does not bear out his interpretation, but rather indicates the point I am driving at: *consciousness performs the integration of body and soul.* Low does not quote enough of Merleau-Ponty's previously quoted passage regarding the meaning of soul and body. Let us look again at one portion of this text that Low does not offer in his article:

The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher "formation" is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then established. The relations of the soul and the body can indeed be compared to those of concept and word, but on the condition of perceiving, beneath the separated products, the constituting operation which joins them.<sup>330</sup>

What is the constituting operation which joins concept and word? Consciousness. Likewise the dialectical relationship between soul and body is achieved in and by consciousness. Bodies do not establish their own meaning, although they might hold out meaning to be discovered, just as words do not form themselves into concepts by themselves.

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<sup>330</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

If Merleau-Ponty's beginning point is perception and our conscious relation to nature (including our own bodies!) is through perception, then we cannot prove that perception arose through evolutionary processes. Any consideration of those processes would already have to be done on the basis of conscious awareness. Low does seem to acknowledge that Merleau-Ponty's starting point is always that of perception. He claims that "Merleau-Ponty does not wish to maintain any form of vitalism and insists that the more integrated and liberated forms of behavior are still seated in the material conditions of the body...[but also] insists that the neurological functions of the human organism cannot be understood without an appeal to the perceptual awareness of the perceiver."<sup>331</sup>

Because of Merleau-Ponty's stance within philosophy of consciousness or rather because he has seen that any theory of body/soul relations must take place within the purview of embodied consciousness it is clear that he is not arguing for emergent materialism. Low cannot claim that Merleau-Ponty concludes, on the basis of perception that it arises from simply bodily conditions.

Low does rightly point out that Merleau-Ponty rejects vitalism. The latter thinker declares in *The Structure of Behavior* that "we are upholding no species of vitalism whatsoever here [and that] we do not mean that the analysis of the living body encounters a limit in irreducible vital forces."<sup>332</sup> This does not mean, however, that he embraces the idea that consciousness emerges from matter, just that when consciousness first discovers itself, it finds itself incarnated, embodied and caught up in a milieu of which it is a part without being reduced to it.

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<sup>331</sup> Low, 414.

<sup>332</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 151.

Merleau-Ponty cannot outrightly embrace or reject a materialist characterization of the human being on the basis of his stance in perceptual consciousness. Nor can he embrace or reject claims that the human being is, at least in part, an immaterial being. He cannot prove that there is not an immaterial aspect of the human being and Mary Rose Barral is right to say that “nothing prevents this form [i.e. the human soul] from being nonmaterial.”<sup>333</sup>

In the foregoing discussion regarding the soul-body dialectic and the integrating position of consciousness, a question arises about the distinction between the soul and consciousness. If soul can be a social subject then it can obviously think and direct the body, but this is a power of consciousness as we saw in Part I of this chapter. What exactly is the distinction between soul and consciousness? Merleau-Ponty himself can be imprecise about the use of these terms. We have already seen that he believes soul can have different meanings, but at times he seems to confuse soul and consciousness. He refers regularly to the fact of our experiencing vision in the context of consciousness. And yet at one point in the *Structure of Behavior* he bluntly states that “it is the soul which sees and not the brain.”<sup>334</sup> Later, in the *Phenomenology of Perception* he declares that “consciousness of the body invades the body, that the soul spreads over all its parts, and behavior overflows its central sector.”<sup>335</sup> Here he implies that the soul is consciousness. And yet there are other passages where Merleau-Ponty marks a clear distinction between the soul and consciousness. This distinction is apparent in the lengthy passage we have been discussing where he addresses the meaning of body and soul. He

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<sup>333</sup> “Body-Soul-Consciousness Integration,” 123.

<sup>334</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 192.

<sup>335</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 87.

also clearly differentiates them when he declares that “the body and the soul are significations and have meaning, then, only with regard to a consciousness.”<sup>336</sup>

Let me propose, as an answer to questions about the distinction between soul and consciousness, that consciousness and soul periodically overlap within the human being. For Merleau-Ponty, as for most philosophers, soul is an animating principle. There are times when consciousness functions as an animating principle. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty will say that when human persons are most themselves—i.e. when their actions are permeated with intellectual intentions—then consciousness functions as form of the whole body. But of course there are times when consciousness is not overtly present within the human being. For example, during times of sleep consciousness does not function as a soul. We are still, however, maintained in our existence by our vital ordering principle because even in sleep all of our organs are ordered around the human being’s purpose to get rest. Here a vital soul must be at play which functions apart from the overt and self-present direction of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty also seems to hold that the human being has a psychic soul that can be distinguished from consciousness. For example, there are times when we become aware through recollection of perceptions that we had some time before but when they occurred we were not directly conscious of them. But these perceptions occurred through a holistic ordering process that we call soul or form because the various sensitive powers of the body were coordinated in them.

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<sup>336</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 216.

### **Part III – Merleau-Ponty’s Teaching on the Integral Human Being in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.**

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty thematized the relationship between body and soul. But, as we saw, the integral unity he discussed there was not specifically between body and soul, as it is in Aquinas’s anthropology. Rather, body and soul function for Merleau-Ponty in a dialectic with consciousness as a source of the dialectic. We saw that consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, can be identified with the soul but it is not strictly the soul itself, which can have many meanings depending upon the level of dialectic. When human beings function at a level of basic biological survival the soul is simply an animating principle given over to the vital drives of the human being and consciousness descends as it were to this vital level. But consciousness can also lift up the soul and therefore change the body-soul relationship so that the soul functions as a social principle drawing the body into engagement with others and with other types of societal intercourse.

Now, in *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty moves away from discussion about a body-soul relationship. Although he will speak about how “the soul spreads over”<sup>337</sup> all the parts of the body Merleau-Ponty does not strictly thematize differences between the soul and consciousness. Instead, he concentrates more on how human beings experience themselves as embodied. Consciousness takes on the function of form of the body, as it did in the *Structure of Behavior*, but there is little discussion about a dialectic between soul and body with consciousness functioning as the source of the dialectic. In the later text consciousness appears to simply take on the function of

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<sup>337</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 87.

form, of animating and directing principle over the body and the dialectic is between consciousness and its own body.

With both the *Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty hoped to “restore the world of perception.”<sup>338</sup> The former text sought to accomplish this end by examining the relationship between consciousness and nature primarily in the context of modern psychology and physiology. He explored the results of various studies not primarily to gain clarity about the objects under investigation but to more deeply understand what consciousness is vis-à-vis the natural world. This work established that this relationship should not be understood as if consciousness were able to stand apart from nature. Rather, Merleau-Ponty showed in this work that consciousness is already a part of nature by being grounded in a body. Consciousness literally takes into itself the very nature that it seeks to understand. Thus, his epistemology revealed key facets of his anthropology. Our knowing is fundamentally perceptual, grounded in a body, thus the knowing subject must be an integral union of body and soul. *The Structure of Behavior* established that consciousness is grounded in a body and that our most basic perceptions reveal an incarnate knowing subject. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty digs down into perception like an archeologist. His purpose is not expressly to show that the human being is an integration of consciousness and body; rather, he reaffirms our experience of this fact. While he sheds light on perception and gets down beneath the “sedimentation of later knowledge,”<sup>339</sup> which buried basic perception and thus buried an embrace of the human being’s primordial unity, he will shed light on this unity in a variety of ways.

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<sup>338</sup> *Prospectus*, 3.

<sup>339</sup> *The Primacy of Perception*, 5.



In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty offers a host of insights regarding the nature of perceptual consciousness which could be drawn upon as potential sources for enriching Aquinas's work. He comprehensively explores, for example, how our experiences of space, time, motility, sexual expression, and language depend upon our embodiment. In a word, he uncovers a wealth of phenomenological evidence of the *grounding* consciousness has in the body and how our bodily comportment (in many different ways) is infused with the purposes of a mind. I believe that much if not all of these insights are compatible with Aquinas's concept of the human being and that much of it could be drawn upon in a project to enrich Thomistic anthropology. I offer below three separate phenomenological analyses from Merleau-Ponty which I will apply in the next chapter to show that he can be utilized to expand the experiential basis for Aquinas's conclusions about the composite nature of the human being.

#### **A) The Human Being's Relationship to Stimuli Reveals Consciousness as Form of the Body**

Merleau-Ponty believes that consciousness/soul<sup>340</sup> is present throughout the parts of the body and orders them as a form. We see this in his discussion of the human being's relationship to external stimuli. In a chapter of *The Phenomenology of Perception* entitled "The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology," Merleau-Ponty critiques the machine-like notions of human sensation found in early modern scientific empiricism.

According to this latter perspective any object "exists *partes extra partes* [and has]..between its parts, or between itself and another only external and mechanical

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<sup>340</sup> In this case I refer to consciousness and soul simultaneously because Merleau-Ponty, at least in this example, does not distinguish them from one another. It is clear that he believes the thinking and self-reflective part of the human being can also animate the rest of the body as its soul.

relationships.”<sup>341</sup> On the basis of this presupposition the body is as *in-itself* as any other being in the physical world which means that a clear observable connection between stimulus and perception is theoretically possible. Moreover, it was assumed, that there is a “linear dependence of stimulus and receptor”<sup>342</sup> so that the impairment of one receptor (i.e. a nerve) would lead to the specific disruption of one sense power or one part of a sense power.

The beginning step Merleau-Ponty takes to dislodge this position is not first phenomenological but based on current (1945) scientific research, although as we will see he confirms scientific research with phenomenological findings. Merleau-Ponty’s methodology is an integration of contemporary findings from various scientific disciplines including physics, biology, neurology, and psychology as well as phenomenology. He often delves into the former research before confirming it in the latter, although a first principle of his philosophy is that unreflective perception, explored by phenomenology, is the primordial font for any scientific or philosophical claim. So, although he here begins with scientific findings, Merleau-Ponty does believe that science is a second order expression of basic perception.

In this case, he turns to various physiological studies of human perception. I want to look briefly at two of them. I draw on the first to show Merleau-Ponty’s teaching that the human being functions as a self-organizing whole in perception when the body is in relationship to external stimuli. For example, injuries to visual perception in whatever place along the sensory paths necessary for sight do not usually lead to the loss of specific colors. Rather, all the colors are affected and their shade remains basically the

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<sup>341</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 84.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

same although the saturation of color decreases. In time, the spectrum of colors moves from a nuanced palette to the basic shades of red, blue, yellow, and green. Lastly, the person suffering from loss of vision experiences a kind of monochrome grey. Thus, the “progress of the lesion in the nervous tissue does not..destroy, one after another, ready-made sensory contents.”<sup>343</sup> Instead, the whole gamut of visual sensation is affected by the presence of a lesion in one part of the sensory pathways associated with sight.

This piece of research shows that sense perception is not a linear process but is rather a dynamic and holistic process in which “elementary stimuli are spontaneously organized among themselves.”<sup>344</sup> There is no doubt that the lesion impacts visual perception but rather than directly cause the loss of a discrete color or particular sense power the whole nervous system interacts with the lesion and during perception brings about a holistic response to it—i.e. the shades of all colors lose their saturation. The suggestion here is that the human being, like the nervous system associated with visual perception, is a whole that self-organizes each of its parts.

An example from a second study addresses how the body organism can actually tune out certain stimuli:

If a given area of skin is several times stimulated with a hair, the first perceptions are clearly distinguished and localized each time at the same point. As the stimulus is repeated, the localization becomes less precise, perception widens in space, while at the same time the sensation ceases to be specific: it is no longer a contact, but a feeling of burning, at one moment cold and the next hot. Later still the patient thinks the stimulus is moving and describing a circle on his skin. Finally nothing more is felt. It follows that the ‘sensible quality,’ the spatial limits set to the percept, and even the presence or absence of a perception, are not *de facto* effects of the situation outside the organism, but represent the way in which it meets stimulation and is related to it. An excitation is not perceived when it

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<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

strikes a sensory organ which is not ‘attuned’ to it. The function of the organism in receiving stimuli is, so to speak, to ‘conceive’ a certain form of excitation.<sup>345</sup>

If the human being were simply a machine-like entity in which an excitation at one point of stimulus reception led automatically to a certain sensation the experience described above would be difficult to explain. Instead, the whole body through each sensory organ is either open or closed to stimuli. After repeated stimulation the human organism, as this example shows, can actually tune out certain stimuli so that they cannot even be felt.

What do these pieces of scientific study have to do with the soul being present in all parts of the body? The first one suggests that the human being functions as one structure, that the human being forms its own nervous system as it interacts with stimuli. The second goes further to show that sensory organs must be open to stimuli in order to receive them; this suggests that the human being is active and purposive, not merely receptive.

Merleau-Ponty believes that in order for me to deeply understand what it means for the human being to function according to a structure or to self-organize its parts or to be “attuned” to various stimuli, I cannot think about these processes in the third person but must enact them in the first person. While doing so we can begin to see the link between his use of physiological studies in human perception and his claim that the soul is in the parts of the body as its form. In the passage below he provides a phenomenological description of enacting what he has tried to explain with examples from claims established by science about the nervous system:

I cannot envisage this form which is traced out in the nervous system, this exhibiting of a structure, as a set of processes in the third person, as the transmission of movement or as the determination of one variable by another. I cannot gain a removed knowledge of it. In so far as I guess

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<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

what it may be, it is by abandoning the body as an object, *partes extra partes*, and by going back to the body which I experience at this moment, in the manner, for example, in which my hand moves round the object it touches, anticipating the stimuli and itself tracing out the form which I am about to perceive. I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises toward the world. Thus, exteroceptivity demands that stimuli be given a shape; the consciousness of the body invades the body, the soul spreads over all its parts.<sup>346</sup>

Let's say I am doing a car repair and have dropped a bolt into some cranny near the engine block. I lean over the hood of the car so that my toes are barely touching the ground and snake my hand down into the crevice anticipating the feeling of the steel bolt and concentrating my senses upon this expected feeling. I touch it with one finger, poke about a bit further with another, again anticipating the sense of having a grip on the bolt, of pulling it out with two fingers and then safely folding it in my palm. This kind of experience provides further illustration of what Merleau-Ponty is getting at above. I see in it that consciousness invades my body and orients it and all my other senses in a single direction. As I grope toward the bolt certain senses are downplayed because they are less central to my purpose of getting the bolt. Although I can feel my toe on the ground or the frame of the car thrusting into my belly these senses are less prominent to consciousness because they are subordinate to my drive to feel the bolt in my fingers. Thus, I experience in my body what Merleau-Ponty describes from the scientific studies touched on above. My consciousness or my soul structures my body parts and subordinates them to my objectives.

Merleau-Ponty does not, in the passage from which I have just quoted, make any kind of distinction between consciousness and the soul. It is as if he equates the two and

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<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

assumes that the experience I have of my consciousness permeating my body is synonymous with the soul being within each of the parts of the body. My previous suggestion that for Merleau-Ponty consciousness and soul overlap is apropos here; consciousness takes on the function of animating principle. But regardless of the problem of the proper distinction between consciousness and soul we should be able to see that, for Merleau-Ponty, the body of the human being is fundamentally different from a machine-like object because it can be infused with the life of the mind and appears in experience as an integral union of consciousness or soul and body.

### **B) Lived Body as Subject of Perception Indicates Integral Union of Consciousness and Body**

The thinking and willing part of the human being is normally considered to be the source of the human being's acting. Those who hold with Aquinas that the intellectual soul is the form of the body can agree with substance dualists like Descartes that the thinking part of the human being directs the body. Merleau-Ponty also agrees but in the text I am about to present he shows that we can sometimes experience our bodies as subjects of perception which, in a sense, run ahead of consciousness in our tactile engagement with the world. One preliminary comment is that in the passage Merleau-Ponty uses the experience of the body as subject of tactile perception to oppose the intellectualist idea that the perceived object is posited by consciousness. This text comes from a chapter Merleau-Ponty entitles "The Thing and the Natural World:"

The person who touches and who recognizes the rough and the smooth does not posit either their elements or the relations between those elements, nor does he think of them in any thoroughgoing way. It is not consciousness which touches or feels, but the hand, and the hand is, as Kant says, 'an outer brain of man.' In visual experience, which pushes objectification further than does tactile experience, we can, at least at first

sight, flatter ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents us with a spectacle spread out before us at a distance, and gives us the illusion of being immediately present everywhere and being situated nowhere. Tactile experience, on the other hand, adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object. Correspondingly, as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world, and tactile experience occurs 'ahead' of me, and is not centred in me. It is not I who touch, it is my body...I am able to touch effectively only if the phenomenon finds an echo within me, if it accords with a certain nature of my consciousness, and if the organ which goes out to meet it is synchronized with it.<sup>347</sup>

The first point I want to make is that the body to which Merleau-Ponty refers is what he calls the "lived body," "phenomenal body," or the "body subject." He is not saying that the body is radically disconnected from a self-aware person during touch or that the body is literally ahead of consciousness as if the mind were, in a Cartesian sense, connected with its own body from above its feeling members through some part of the brain. Second, his statement that it is the body, not "I" that feels points not to a radical separation between body and consciousness but to the presence of different levels of consciousness within us. There is, as he frequently indicates throughout *The Phenomenology of Perception*, a pre-reflective consciousness intimately associated with the body and a more self-aware or reflective consciousness which can be fixated in thought on something and which can, at times, feel itself disassociated from the body (as in times of meditation or contemplation). These two dimensions of consciousness are another way Merleau-Ponty speaks of a distinction in intentionality between its operative sense and intentionalities of act, a distinction addressed in Part I above. In this passage pre-reflective consciousness aligns with the hand that feels "ahead" of consciousness understood in its more reflective sense. For example, during a walk in the country I

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<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 368-69.

accidentally drop my wedding ring onto the ground and it slips down a hole. I thrust my hand into the hole not knowing precisely what to expect. There are certain substances that I have frequently experienced and can immediately think about or imagine. I feel dirt because my fingers recognize it and the phenomenon of the touch “finds an echo within me.” It “accords with a certain nature of my consciousness,” understood here in its more reflective sense. I have a memory of feeling dirt and am, therefore, attuned to what my fingers announce to me when they touch it. But there are other substances in the hole outside the range of my previous experiences or expectations of what ought to be there—perhaps some kind of milky foam or a silk handkerchief. I cannot see these substances to recognize them and although my hand feels them, it does not touch them effectively because there is no resonance of recognition of what they are. I push further into the hole and touch upon what feels like a metal band. I imagine it in my mind and experience a synchronization between what my finger is touching and my thought of the ring.

Tactile experience, as explained by Merleau-Ponty in the preceding passage and as just illustrated, shows not that body and consciousness are disconnected from one another but, on the contrary, that they are integral parts of one another. The human being is not only a self-reflective “I” peering out from an unlocatable area somewhere behind the eyes, but is also able to dwell, in a sense, on the outer fringes of his/her body. The unity between my various parts is first shown here because of the diversity of my experiences coupled with the sure knowledge that each of them is mine. When my fingers are groping along some unknown substance which does not resonate with me and which I cannot clearly think about, “I” am not feeling, but my body is as it passively receives according to its senses. In other words, there is a lack of synchronization between the



touch and what I am able to recognize or anticipate at the outer fringes of my body and yet the touch of an unknown substance is still directed by the thinking part of me. But when there is an echo of resonance between what I touch and my memory of the object touched or my intentions or expectations regarding the object, then I can be more present to what is at the outer fringes of my body and take it up directly into thought or imagination. Of course, I also recognize this perception as my own. A second way the tactile experiences just explained reveal the integral unity between my body and my consciousness (understood in a general sense) is because they show that the body is permeated with the intentions of consciousness even as it “runs ahead” of consciousness. My hand searching for the ring gropingly feels certain unknown substances even though they do not resonate with reflective consciousness and I am unable to clearly think about them but the hand remains ordered and purposive. My hand, along with the rest of the parts of my body, are all unified by my singular intention to find the ring, so even though they are “ahead” of consciousness they remain formed by consciousness. Another way to say this is that my operative intentionality functions even when I do not or cannot take a stance towards objects I am sensing through an intentionality of act and yet I have ordered my body in the receptive position of operative intentionality.

### **C) The Body Not Only Manifests But Also Completes the Expression of Consciousness**

For this final foray into Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological investigation of embodied consciousness I turn to our experience of expression and, in particular, how the expression of language reveals integral unity between consciousness and body. It may be that the phenomenon of speech, as explained by Merleau-Ponty, challenges Aquinas’s

correspondence theory of language. I touched upon this theory without directly mentioning it in Chapter II, Part I, Section C while addressing Aquinas's understanding of truth as an adequation of thought and thing. The implication here is that we are able to have concepts of things which directly correspond to those things. When we formulate words for these concepts we are able to speak the truth. Words in this correspondence theory of language are instruments for concepts already formulated. We will see that Merleau-Ponty takes issue with the idea that words are mere instruments of the mind as he examines the phenomenon of expression. However, I hope to show that this phenomenon can also be used to support Aquinas's idea that the human being is an integral composite of intellectual soul and body. I begin with a lengthy passage from Merleau-Ponty that comes from a chapter entitled "The Body as Expression, and Speech:"

If speech presupposed thought, if talking were primarily a matter of meeting the object through a cognitive intention or through a representation, we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them, as is shown by the example of so many writers who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it. A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself...[speaking] is indeed part of the experience of thinking, in the sense that we present our thought to ourselves through internal or external speech. It does indeed move forward with the instant and, as it were, in flashes, but we are then left to lay hands on it, and it is through expression that we make it our own.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

What Merleau-Ponty does not say directly here but which is the *sine qua non* of linguistic expression, whether spoken or written, is that it entirely depends upon the body or rather is meaningless without the body. The act of speech is through and through a bodily act involving not only the vocal cords of the throat but the cavern of the mouth, the lips, the tongue, the teeth and even the limbs of the speaking person. Writing too is a physical act. The bodily nature of speaking and writing perhaps need not even be stated and to do so might be tautological, a little like saying that books are made with paper. But blazingly obvious aspects of our existence are sometimes overlooked and by overlooking them we can lose sight of fundamental truths of our nature. In this case Merleau-Ponty points to a phenomenon that we all readily experience, that *thinking requires speaking*, that unless an idea is articulated it really never exists, that the very formulation of an idea occurs in the context of expressing it. Often, of course, this expression is inaudible but even in the silent sanctuary of our own minds we say words in order to think concepts which means that the body is never simply the instrument of consciousness but seamlessly interwoven with it. In a word, consciousness actualizes itself through the body.

This is also made clear in Merleau-Ponty's example of writing. Here we see a further piece of phenomenological evidence for the fact of thought actually occurring in bodily acts. Let's say we have a certain basic idea developed no doubt through speaking either aloud or to ourselves. For most writers the idea still remains latent, however, and needs to be literally worked out in a physical process of putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Rarely do we begin an article with an idea perfectly formulated. Rather, the ideas are fleshed out, made incarnate, as we write and type. We complete our thoughts by

making them tangible; without the physical manifestation of the ideas they often remain unclear.

In the first two phenomenological explorations we examined from Merleau-Ponty I sought to show how the body is an ordered whole through the purposes of consciousness. In this final phenomenological insight from Merleau-Ponty we also see evidence for consciousness as form of the body. For example, as we type away the poise of our back, the arch of our arms and the placement of our fingers are all oriented by the drive of consciousness to express itself on the screen of the computer.

But this latest investigation also indicates that consciousness really is not itself without the body. I do not mean here only that consciousness cannot achieve its purposes without the body as its instrument. Surely we do have experiences which indicate that the body is a tool for consciousness. For example, I find I am weary, but need to keep driving and so pull into Starbucks for a cup of French Roast. Its caffeine stimulates my mind and enables me to be alert as a driver; here the body is instrument for consciousness. But the experience that thinking actually occurs in the physical acts of speaking and writing help us to understand the integral nature of body and consciousness at a deeper level. At this level it becomes necessary to move away from approaching body and consciousness as dimensions of our existence that we can address separately. Rather, we must insist, at least according to Merleau-Ponty, that the action of consciousness is inherently bodily action.

### **Conclusion to Chapter Three**

Chapter Two of this dissertation demanded that I place Aquinas's argument that the intellectual soul is form of the body within the metaphysical context of his philosophical system. For Aquinas the human being is best understood alongside the other beings of the universe, in light of the creation of the whole universe by God, and in light of the teleological orientation of the universe to return to God. It was only in the latter half of Chapter Two that I specifically addressed Aquinas's arguments regarding the integral nature of the human being.

This chapter likewise demanded that I contextualize Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the integral nature of the human being. Here I did not so much explore a metaphysical context for his philosophical anthropology, but an epistemological one. His focus, both in *The Structure of Behavior* and in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, is upon the depth and richness of perception. He wants to "restore the world of perception" to a modern philosophical scene largely divided into empiricist and intellectualist approaches. Merleau-Ponty believes both approaches fail to understand adequately the meaning of perception.

As we saw in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is inherently embodied and that our knowing relationship to other beings in the universe is always and already mediated by a consciousness that cannot be conceived of as purely *for itself* but also as having an *in-itself* nature. We did encounter a strong ontological dimension to this first book in Merleau-Ponty's idea that every being is an ordered whole and that organisms do not function according to external causality but as purposive wholes. But this vision of the world is not separate from the human being's perception of

it and we saw that form is not exactly a real dimension of a thing but, in part, a formulation of a knowing mind; form is not a discrete unchanging reality, but emerges from a dialogue between consciousness and nature. Thus, there is a dimension of idealism in Merleau-Ponty's thought, in that he believes that we know objects of the world according to our subjective filters and believes that objects take on certain meanings through their engagement with the conscious human being. But his idealism is not of a Hegelian sort in which consciousness ultimately is the world. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, the human being participates in the world and shapes this world via his/her engagement and is, in turn, shaped by it.

It is in epistemological terms that Merleau-Ponty approaches the body-soul unity. We see that our bodies are purposive and motivated and cannot be conceived of according to scientific empiricism. Unlike our relationship to objects of nature, in which the form emerges from the dialectic between consciousness and the natural thing, in our relation to ourselves consciousness becomes the form or soul of the body. Rather than detecting an ordering principle that it calls a thing's form, consciousness itself becomes the ordering principle of the body. And because it can order the body in various ways, the soul of the body has a variety of meanings, as we saw in Merleau-Ponty's difficult explanation of the body-soul unity.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception* we looked specifically at various ways that our experience reveals consciousness functioning as form of the body. We first examined experiences of being affected by external stimuli and how the body is not simply a passive receptor but actively involved, according to its own conscious purposes, in reacting to this stimuli. We take in the world according to the form consciousness gives

the body and as we go out into the world we are able to ignore certain stimuli depending upon the orientation of our consciousnesses. We next explored how tactile experiences show that the body is permeated with the intentions of pre-reflective consciousness (or operative intentionality) even as it “runs ahead” of reflective consciousness (or intentionality of act). Finally, we looked at Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insight that thinking takes place in the context of speaking and writing which indicates that consciousness not only orders the body around its intentions but realizes itself through physical acts.

I am hopeful that the phenomenological insights we have encountered from Merleau-Ponty will illustrate how his work can serve to enrich Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology. But to do this it will be important to address each of the objections to such a project that I offered in Chapter One of the dissertation. To those objections I now turn.

## **Chapter Four – Merleau-Pontian Enrichment of Aquinas’s Philosophical Anthropology**

After surveying Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty’s respective understandings of the integral human being in Chapters Two and Three, I turn again to the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology that I raised in Chapter One. There I wrote that this enrichment could only emerge if there is enough compatibility between our two thinkers to make it feasible and I presented several objections to this possibility. In Part I of this chapter I hope to overcome these objections. In Part II I lay out areas of compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty which should serve as a basis for a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology: 1) common grounding in perception as the source of knowledge, 2) common appeal to interior experience for understanding body/soul unity, and 3) the syncretic nature of Aquinas’s methodology as an indicator of openness to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights. Finally, in Part III I argue that there are at least three ways a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology can take place: 1) Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights richly illustrate Aquinas’s position that the intellectual soul is form of the body, 2) Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions can offer better examples for Aquinas’s arguments than he himself provides, 3), I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions can be used to extend Aquinas’s claims regarding the intellect’s knowledge of itself.



## **Part I – Response to Objections that Fruitful Compatibility Between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty is Hindered by Fundamental Philosophical Differences**

There is no doubt that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty have very different conceptions of philosophy and methods of practicing it. For example, although Aquinas certainly practices philosophy legitimately—i.e. arguing on the basis of principles established by human reason—he mainly uses philosophy in the context of his theology. His whole vision of the universe is God-centered in that he sees it as created, sustained, and in a process of return back to God. For Aquinas, the human being, along with every other creature, participates in God’s very existence, albeit in limited ways according to the constraints of each one’s individual essence. The human being is an *imago dei* in part because he or she is able to help sub-rational creatures return to the fount of their existence by knowing and bestowing goodness upon them. In contrast to Aquinas’s systematic metaphysics of creation grounded in God, Merleau-Ponty insists that philosophy is detached from religious faith, that the world has no absolute source which contains and orders it or which holds out the promise of a final destiny. Further, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology or metaphysics is not systematic and he does not seek to uncover the ultimate causes of beings; rather he makes ontological claims on the basis of phenomenological investigations. For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy should concentrate on what we can know and how we can know it through a close examination of human experience and he is unwilling to speculate, through an examination of efficient causality, about the nature of beings outside of our direct experience. These are but some of the fundamental differences between our two thinkers with regard to the meaning of philosophy. Significant differences do not necessarily translate into lack of compatibility

but, as Robert Harvanek argues, there are some differences which do preclude it, especially when they center on the very nature of the philosophical enterprise.<sup>349</sup>

### **A) Response to Claims that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's Conceptions of Philosophy and Philosophical Methods are Opposed to One Another**

In Objection # 1, Part II, Chapter One, I presented Robert Harvanek's argument that "there is a basic difference in methodology" between Aquinas and phenomenology (among other contemporary philosophical movements of his day) and "ultimately a basic difference in the conception of philosophy."<sup>350</sup> I turn first to a summary of his comments regarding their differing notions of experience. Harvanek believes that phenomenology is restricted to a dependence upon immediate and subjective experience because of its insistence on beginning without presuppositions: "this passion for the immediate in

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<sup>349</sup> There is also a possible point of contrast between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty with regard to the priority of sensual knowledge and intellectual knowledge. Roughly speaking, Merleau-Ponty's operative intentionality aligns with Aquinas's sense perception and his intentionality of act aligns with Aquinas's intellectual knowledge. For Merleau-Ponty, operative intentionality is the founding term in the act of knowing and naturally unfolds into intentionality of act; what is implicit in the former becomes explicit in the later. But, according to Merleau-Ponty, once we make an intellectual judgment regarding objects brought to us through operative intentionality, such objects become part of the sediment of consciousness at the operative level or, in other words, they become part of our "horizon." Then, the cycle of intentionality begins again with consciousness never resting in an ultimate truth; rather, our horizon perpetually develops on the foundation of operative intentionality which then unfolds into intentionality of act. Some would say (e.g. Dr. Fred Evans of Duquesne University) that for Aquinas the founding term in the act of knowing is intellectual consciousness insofar as gaining truth is the final cause in this act. This would mean that Merleau-Ponty has a sort of "bottom-to-top" epistemology, while Aquinas's is more "top-to-bottom" with the founding term in the act of knowing being intellectual consciousness and the founded term sense perception. I am not sure I agree with Evans because Aquinas is clear that all knowledge begins in the senses. And yet when we consider the possible contrast from an existential point of view, Evans may be right. For Merleau-Ponty we experience ourselves fundamentally as lived bodies whose basic sense perception naturally emerges into intellectual knowledge; Aquinas emphasizes, in contrast, that the intellect directs the body as it seeks to know.

<sup>350</sup> Harvanek, 537.

Husserl is rooted in his search for a presuppositionless science.”<sup>351</sup> In contrast, Thomists and scholastic thinkers depend upon “the experience of Western man, or of the human race, [or of] the developed interpretation of that experience as found in the philosophy, theology, and literature, of the West and the East.”<sup>352</sup> This is a mediate notion of experience not in the sense that one’s personal self-awareness is filtered through historical and cultural filters but in the sense that it involves traditions and movements of thought outside of direct personal experience; it is, therefore, a communal and historical notion of experience. The philosopher who depends upon the experience of Western philosophical thinkers is oriented around truth as it has been articulated and developed within the philosophical tradition.

While I agree with Harvanek that, generally speaking, phenomenology and Thomism have divergent notions of experience, there are several reasons why his comments do not fully apply to Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas. I will initially justify this claim with regard to the former thinker, then the latter. First, phenomenology is a broad philosophical movement, rather than a technical discipline with specific parameters. Husserl may have wanted to establish rigid techniques of phenomenological analysis, but what he launched with his *Logical Investigations* was a diverse array of thinkers all taking the basic premise of phenomenology—rigorous study of experience to identify structures of consciousness and the essences of things to which we are intentionally related—in a number of different directions. Husserl’s supposed desire to make of phenomenology a presuppositionless science was not shared by all of his followers,

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<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 539.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 540.

among them Merleau-Ponty.<sup>353</sup> Husserl sought to discover the pure structures of consciousness which would be at the root of any theoretical exercise, but Merleau-Ponty emphasized how consciousness is grounded in our bodies and through our bodies in the world. As I showed in Chapter Three, Merleau-Ponty was primarily interested in exploring human perception and he keenly recognized that the world itself makes the first mark upon consciousness as we receive basic unreflective knowledge of objects through our senses. All of this means that consciousness is never in full possession of itself and that the very beginning point of our knowing is laden with presuppositions that we have no way of justifying. For Merleau-Ponty, we do not lay down the conditions of our knowing, rather we find that the world with all its splendor and ambiguity is given to us and that our task is to understand as best we can the relationship between consciousness and this world. Merleau-Ponty is certainly not guilty of the charge that he sought to base philosophy on a grounding without presuppositions; this for him would be impossible.

It is true that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the close exploration of subjective experiences. His main argumentative strategy, as with other phenomenologists, is to carefully study and describe his experiences in an effort to make them resonate with the experiences of others. The phenomenologist might explore, for example, the feeling of empathy as Edith Stein did so well and say to his or her reader: “Is it not also thus with you?” But for Merleau-Ponty, experience is never, strictly speaking, one’s own. He strongly resists the Cartesian binary of the pure knowing subject and the object “out

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<sup>353</sup> The claim by Harvanek about Husserl’s drive for a presuppositionless science is arguable. It certainly does apply to the transcendental stage of Husserl’s career, which began with *Ideas I*, but it does not apply to the early Husserl of *Logical Investigations*, in which he had not yet introduced the transcendental ego, and perhaps not to the latter Husserl, who explored so called “genetic phenomenology.”

there.” Rather, perceptual consciousness reveals that we exist in a continuous subject-object dialogue with the world. As we gaze upon some object or situation we might be so consumed with it that we have no sense of interiority at all. In Part I, Chapter Three, we examined Merleau-Ponty’s depiction of the soccer player for whom “consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action.”<sup>354</sup> In this player’s consciousness the field itself and his or her action upon it is present; his or her perception is a result of the field imposing itself upon his or her mind, his or her actions altering that field, and so on in dialectical form. Moreover, each of us develops layers and layers of “sedimentation” in consciousness which are partly the result of the world’s action upon us. We are inescapably influenced by the culture, historical place, society, etc. in which we are placed so that they and not simply “I” are in my own experiences. For example, if I steep myself in a study of Aquinas’s writings I can actually change the way that I see and experience the world; his language and argumentation and insistence upon the good of creation can all profoundly affect my mind so that Aquinas, through his writings, is in some sense present in my experiences. My “subjective” experiences are not simply my own.

Harvanek might grant this latter point but insist that it is irrelevant, that the Thomist can quickly grant that one’s experiences reference self *and* others but that Merleau-Ponty (and other phenomenologists) still concentrate on exploring their own consciousnesses as immediately felt rather than on experience in a broader more mediate sense—e.g. the philosophical tradition or the experience of “Western Man.” It is true of course that the phenomenologist does explore his or her experiences and that this

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<sup>354</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 169.

approach is different than the historical approach of Aquinas, but it is important to note that I can find established interpretations, traditional responses to perennial questions, schools of thought, etc. *within* my immediate experience. This fact should soften, at least to some extent, Harvanek's claim that the phenomenologist does not access experience in a broader sense, in the sense that experience is laden with traditions, the influence of others, etc.

But even if there was a gulf between philosophical methods based upon historical notions of experience, as explained by Harvanek, and those grounded in explorations of the philosopher's own consciousness, this would not necessarily mean that a gulf lies between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's respective methodologies. Aquinas himself draws upon experience in its immediate sense for his own philosophizing. In Part III, Section C of this chapter I will further explore how Aquinas utilizes the human being's interior (and obviously immediate) experiences and so here I only offer one passage from his work to prove my point. I recall from Section C, Part II of Chapter Two, Aquinas's argument that the intellect's knowledge of itself is best attained *not through* an examination of the nature of the human mind as understood in the scholastic philosophical tradition but by the mind perceiving itself in its own action: "the mind itself being the principle of action whereby it perceives itself and hence it is said to know itself by its own presence."<sup>355</sup> There is not then an unbridgeable gulf between Aquinas's notion of experience and that employed by Merleau-Ponty. In order to understand at least one object, the intellect itself, Aquinas argues that it is important for the philosopher to appeal to his or her own immediate subjective experience.

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<sup>355</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1.

I now turn to a second claim made by Harvanek that there are strong methodological differences with regard to argumentation between phenomenology and Thomism. The “proof” for the phenomenologist is to describe adequately subjective experience so that it resounds with others and finds confirmation in the sphere of their own interior life. But for the scholastic or Thomist this is not philosophical proof, not a demonstration of the causes of things. As Harvanek reports, “the middle term or the cause is the instinctive and natural quest of the Aristotelian and the Scholastic. For every statement a ‘because’ is looked for.”<sup>356</sup> The Thomist might grant that perceptual consciousness is relied upon to bring accurately individual objects in the world to the intellect but perceptual consciousness provides just a first step in making a philosophically valid proposition. Insofar as phenomenologists fail to identify causes or demonstrate their claims their work is not philosophical in the sense acceptable to Thomists.

There is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty sees phenomenology as a descriptive method: “it is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing.”<sup>357</sup> However, as I addressed in Part I, Section B of Chapter Three, Merleau-Ponty definitely practices philosophical argumentation and takes phenomenology beyond mere description. Merleau-Ponty either boldly contradicts the phrase I have just quoted or he means by it that phenomenology practices argumentation and explains certain things (e.g. selfhood) primarily through the unveiling of conscious experiences. Merleau-Ponty was deeply interested in overturning empiricist and intellectualist notions of the human being and, although his arguments against them do not appear in neat syllogisms, he does employ

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<sup>356</sup> Harvanek, 539.

<sup>357</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

deductively valid forms. For example, in his chapter entitled “Other Selves and the Human World,” Merleau-Ponty provides an inferential argument for the existence of others in the form of *modus ponens*. I will first provide his text and then show its argumentative structure:

If, for myself who am reflecting on perception, the perceiving subject appears provided with a primordial setting in relation to the world, drawing in its train that bodily thing in the absence of which there would be no other things for it, then why should other bodies which I perceive not be similarly inhabited by consciousnesses?...Through phenomenological reflection I discover vision, not as a ‘thinking about seeing,’ to use Descartes’ expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world, and that is why for me there can be another’s gaze; that expressive instrument called a face can carry an existence, as my own existence is carried by my body, that knowledge-acquiring apparatus.<sup>358</sup>

If I as a perceiving subject find myself within a body and through it in primordial relation to other things (p), then there might be other perceiving subjects who are similarly grounded in their own bodies and through them in relation to other things (q). But through phenomenological reflection I do find that I am such an embodied subject (p). Therefore, (q). There can be others like me as well. Merleau-Ponty’s style might be undisciplined from the perspective of a logician, but there is no doubt that his philosophical method is beyond mere description of conscious experiences. Indeed, the whole chapter from which I have just quoted is dedicated to showing how phenomenology can lead to a legitimate proof for the existence of other human selves each of whom have their own experiences. It is true that he does not explain the ultimate causes of human existence, but he does provide clear reasons for believing in the existence of others. And he does so in a deductively valid way. Harvanek overgeneralizes

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<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.



in his claim that phenomenologists aim not for demonstrable propositions but simply for descriptions of immediately experienced consciousness.

Harvanek claims that there is “a kind of opposition between the contemporary philosophical trends [including phenomenology] and Scholasticism and Thomism.”<sup>359</sup> To substantiate this claim he argues that phenomenology depends upon immediate subjective experience because of its insistence on beginning without presuppositions and that it fails to offer demonstrable propositions. I have argued that these claims, which would have been an obstacle to a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas’s philosophical anthropology, are insubstantial. Merleau-Ponty does not follow Husserl in seeking for a presuppositionless basis for science in “pure consciousness.” Further, he holds that subjective experiences are not simply one’s own but are also expressions of others who have influenced one’s thinking. This latter point does not mean that the phenomenological method can be equated with the Thomist’s use of tradition. But in any case, Harvanek’s claim of a disparity in method is overcome when we see how Aquinas himself draws upon immediate subjective experience; Aquinas does not simply employ experience in a mediate sense but also in an immediate subjective sense. Finally, we see that despite Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on phenomenological description, he does use deductively valid argumentative forms and looks, at least in certain cases, for the causes of experiences.

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<sup>359</sup> Harvanek, 543.

## **B) Response to Claims that Merleau-Ponty is Committed to a Purely Materialistic Anthropology Incompatible with Aquinas's Hylo-morphism**

In Objection #2, Part II of Chapter One I presented the separate positions of Stephan Priest and Fred Evans that Merleau-Ponty holds to a strictly physicalist anthropology. Priest, for example, claims that Merleau-Ponty “thinks subjectivity is physical, or, to put it another way: I am my body.”<sup>360</sup> Merleau-Ponty does not hold with reductive materialists that consciousness is merely an epiphenomenal reality but neither does he hold with intellectualists that the mind is a separate substance. “Like the Cartesian dualist,” Priest says, he accepts the reality of consciousness and subjectivity [but]...like the materialist he accepts that we are essentially physical beings.”<sup>361</sup> Evans also argues that Merleau-Ponty holds to a fundamentally materialistic anthropology, but he addresses not so much how Merleau-Ponty's anthropology is a hybrid of empirical and dualistic notions of the human being but that the body itself is the source both of our ‘spiritual’ transcendence and our grounding in the world. For example, Evans writes that, according to Merleau-Ponty:

The body subject is not a mind and a body: *mind* is merely a capsule phrase for indicating the body's ability to break with its immediate activities and initiate (for example, to ‘imagine’) others at the ‘periphery’ of the immediate horizon of its activities; and *body* is merely a capsule term for our inability to ever break completely with our immediate situation in the world.<sup>362</sup>

Thus, the body is ultimately the explanatory principle for both our “mental” ability to break with our surrounding environment and for our continual groundedness in the concrete situations in which we find ourselves. Thus, consciousness finds its first

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<sup>360</sup> Priest, 6.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> Evans, 129.

principle in the body to which it belongs. Or, in other words, “our ‘spirituality’ is..rooted in our bodily existence despite the tradition that attempts to divorce spirit or mind from all traces of ‘carnality.’”<sup>363</sup>

If Priest and Evans are correct that Merleau-Ponty is committed to a purely materialistic anthropology and believes that the “soul” or “spirit” of the human being expresses only a bodily capacity for self-organization and self-initiation, then it might be difficult for us to find the kind of compatibility that would enable Merleau-Ponty’s ideas to enrich Aquinas’s. In Aquinas’s notion of the body/soul unity the soul is an immaterial principle that forms for its purposes the human body. For Aquinas it would be impossible for the body to exercise the kind of initiative and self-organization that Merleau-Ponty (according to Priest and Evans) attribute to it. How could an anthropology grounded in an essential materialism (though not reductivistic) positively contribute to a philosophical system which rejects the first principles of these ideas?

I begin my response with the admission that Merleau-Ponty clearly declares that we are our bodies—e.g. “I am a body which rises toward the world”<sup>364</sup>—and that we cannot consider consciousness a separate substance from the body that can be introduced from outside it. Our experience indicates that consciousness is embodied; how then could we possibly consider it as ontologically separate or separable from the body? However, there is an important distinction Merleau-Ponty makes between what he calls the “phenomenal body” and the “objective body” that I want to draw upon to respond to the idea that Merleau-Ponty holds to a materialistic anthropology (at least through the resources of phenomenology). From a chapter of *The Phenomenology of Perception*

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>364</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 87.

entitled “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility,” Merleau-Ponty writes the following:

It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them.<sup>365</sup>

This passage applies to our discussion for at least two reasons. First, it helps us to see that Merleau-Ponty’s explorations of the body are of that body as experienced, as lived out, as accessed through the phenomena we have of it in consciousness. The “objective body” is that which can be laid out on the scientist’s table for empirical investigation; it is the body that takes up space, which can be measured and weighed, etc. In short, it is the body as an object. When Merleau-Ponty refers to “the body” in his phenomenological investigations it is the phenomenal body that is already infused with consciousness. It is the physical body integrated with and experienced by consciousness. So, Merleau-Ponty might say that the body “surges toward objects and perceives them” but this does not mean that the body, understood in a materialistic sense, is the grounding principle for consciousness. The passage aids our discussion in a second way because Merleau-Ponty refers to our acting upon our phenomenal bodies and, in a footnote to this text, says that “it is not a question of how the soul acts on the objective body, since it is not on the latter that it acts, but on the phenomenal body.”<sup>366</sup> So, we cannot say that the phenomenal body is the grounding principle for consciousness because that body is already infused with consciousness (e.g. it perceives). But *a fortiori* we cannot claim this because Merleau-

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<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 122 fn.

Ponty believes that there is a guiding principle in the human being which directs this “phenomenal body;” the soul acts upon it.

Is the body (understood in its phenomenal sense) then integrated with two forms of consciousness? Yes. I touched on this already in Section C, Part III, Chapter Three with Merleau-Ponty’s argument that the lived body can be a subject of perception in a pre-reflective sense as it “runs ahead” of reflective consciousness. Merleau-Ponty also describes this twofold aspect of consciousness as ‘sensible’ and ‘intellectual.’ The former kind of consciousness is that in which raw perception occurs; in other words, we receive objects from the world basically undifferentiated from one another. The latter kind of consciousness is that in which the mind is self-aware and in which we deliberately take a stance toward the world and act upon it.<sup>367</sup> We can also understand these two modes of consciousness according to the subject-object dialogue discussed in Part I of Chapter Three. Sensible consciousness is operative intentionality by which we receive through bodily awareness the concrete situation in which we are imbedded—the trees on my periphery, the snaking road before me, the din of crickets, the vague smell of something cooking in the air, all of the aspects of my situation which I am aware of in a pre-reflective sense and to which I do not pay explicit attention. Through sensible pre-reflective consciousness I receive the world. This is the first step of the subject-object dialogue. It gives me the world that I can then take a stance toward through intentionality of act which occurs in intellectual or reflective consciousness. When Merleau-Ponty speaks above about the soul acting on the phenomenal body he is referring to how

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<sup>367</sup> See his discussion about the distinction between sensible and intellectual consciousness in pages 250-52 of *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

intellectual consciousness acts upon, guides, and directs the lived body or the body as we experience it in sensible consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty does say that ‘I am my body’ and he does argue that the body can break with its immediate surroundings. But it is able to do so through the resources of consciousness with which the body is *already infused*. Merleau-Ponty might personally believe in a kind of emergent materialism (as I allowed he does in Part II of Chapter Three) but he neither describes nor proves this through his phenomenology. On the contrary, the very beginning point of his investigations is perceptual consciousness, in which body and consciousness are already seamlessly woven together. He does not argue that the body, in a materialistic sense, gives rise to consciousness. As I argued in my Part II, Chapter Three discussion with Douglas Low, this would be impossible because any consideration of how the body gives rise to consciousness would already have to be done on the basis of an embodied conscious awareness, a primordial givenness that we can explore but not justify through the resources of phenomenology.

### **C) Response to Claims that Merleau-Ponty Has an Idealist Notion of Body/Soul Integration Incompatible with Aquinas’s Philosophical Realism**

The next major objection to compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty emerged from the claim that the latter’s philosophical anthropology is based upon an idealist foundation. Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty may both hold that the human being is an integral union of body and soul but if Merleau-Ponty believes that this union is only achieved as a mental construction and may not be *really* so then we have here a striking difference between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty which would likely preclude compatibility between them. Why so? Because the Thomist believes that he or she is

drawing conclusions about the actually existing human being while Merleau-Ponty, if the objection holds, addresses himself to the human as an idea. If our respective philosophers are not even discussing the same object how could we find compatibility leading to enrichment?

I first turn to David Braine's claim, grounded in his analysis of *The Structure of Behavior*, that Merleau-Ponty's anthropology is an idealism. Braine believes that Merleau-Ponty resists giving any metaphysically grounded concept of the human being and instead rests his conceptions of nature (including the human being) upon a meaning-giving power of consciousness:

[Merleau-Ponty] quotes with agreement the saying of Goldstein that what we are looking for in the idea of life 'is not the terminal stone of a building, but the building itself in which the partial phenomena, at first insignificant, appear as belonging to a unitary, ordered and relatively constant formation of specific structure...; we are not looking for a real foundation (*Seinsgrund*) which constitutes being, but for an idea, a reason in knowledge (*Erkenntnisgrund*) in virtue of which all the particular facts become intelligible.'<sup>368</sup>

By "building" Goldstein and Merleau-Ponty mean a general conception of life. They both allow that there are apparent natural structures but that identifying these should not be equated with establishing a philosophy of being. Instead, they are looking for ideas, mental constructions, which make sense out of the various facts of life established by science. If Braine is right, Merleau-Ponty does not hold that we can have a metaphysically grounded concept of the human being as an integral union of body and soul. Whatever unity we discover among human beings is a construction of consciousness, not something we can really attribute to them.

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<sup>368</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 283-84.

But Braine's position is faulty. First, the passage from which he argues that Merleau-Ponty is an idealist is actually from a section of *The Structure of Behavior* where Merleau-Ponty is giving an intellectualist account of the behavior of organisms. Merleau-Ponty's writing style is difficult in that he often presents his opponent's positions without clearly indicating a distinction between them and his own position. The passage from Goldstein is from a section where Merleau-Ponty is not presenting his own position. Second, Merleau-Ponty is not primarily interested in *ideas* of behavior but in the *forms* of behavior. "Behavior is not a thing," he says, "but neither is it an idea."<sup>369</sup> Third, he is very clear, as we saw in the discussion on forms in Part II of Chapter Three, that forms exist in an interplay between consciousness and the perceived object, but they are not simply ideas. Merleau-Ponty does not hold that the source of the intelligibility of objects is simply in the mind of the knower, but that objects have their own meaning which they hold out to the knower to explore. Merleau-Ponty is not a metaphysical thinker (at least during the phenomenological phase of his career) in the sense that he does not establish a theory for the ultimate causes of the being of the world. However, *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception* do present metaphysical claims. For example, Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of immanent signification means that forms must have a real foundation in objects, that objects are laden with their own meaning and are a critical truth standard for consciousness which nonetheless draws out that meaning through signifying concepts. I have already discussed this doctrine in Part II of Chapter Three in the discussion on forms. What I add here as a quick aside is that there is an ontological aspect of this doctrine because, although Merleau-Ponty does not speculate

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<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



about the first principles of objects, he does say that that the being of objects is such that “meaning gushes forth in them.”<sup>370</sup>

I turn now to the objection raised by Mary Rose Barral, which directly contradicts the claim I just made about the meaning-giving nature of objects in the world. Barral comes to the same conclusion Braine does—that Merleau-Ponty’s anthropology is rooted in idealism—but she draws mainly draws from *The Phenomenology of Perception* and, in particular, the preface to phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty provides at the beginning of this work. As I did in Chapter One while presenting Barral’s position, I will first quote in full a passage from Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception* employed by Barral to justify her position that he is an idealist. While describing the beginning point of philosophical reflection Merleau-Ponty declares:

I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead, it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the tradition which I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose distance from me would be abolished—since that distance is not one of its properties—if I were not there to scan it with my gaze.<sup>371</sup>

Barral comments on this passage in the context of a comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas. She allows that both thinkers are interested in discovering essences through an examination of things in their concrete particularity. However, Aquinas wants to nail down the “ultimate explanatory principles and causes of the world of our experience, causes and principles which phenomenology does not investigate.”<sup>372</sup> Barral believes that, for Aquinas, the position of the philosopher is irrelevant to the metaphysical causes of the

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<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>371</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

<sup>372</sup> Mary Rose Barral, 208.

universe in the sense that his knowing or lack of knowing makes no difference to these causes because the whole universe is subject to them, is formed according to them. But, Barral writes, according to Merleau-Ponty, the presence of the subject is essential for philosophical knowledge:

In a sense, it is as if he were saying: I am the cause of things and events, but things and events do not cause me. He looks at the world from the point of view of the subject, who can never be a pure spectator, as Husserl's *epoché* would require, or as could be said of Thomas's speculation. He is saying, in fact, that he is the one who gives meaning to the world and to things in the world.<sup>373</sup>

For Barral's Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of all things, including the human being, is not something that can be established apart from the subject's involvement with them. While it may be true that there are definite structures, basically stable modes of being, typical states of affairs, etc. in the world, I only know of them because they appear in my consciousness according to the meaning which I bestow upon them. We could say, then, that the human being for Aquinas exists on a totally different plane of reality than it does for Merleau-Ponty. The integral unity that Aquinas sees between body and soul is a real one, existing apart from the meaning giving power of my consciousness. But the plane of reality in which Merleau-Ponty sees the human being as an integral unity is only within our conscious life.

I begin my response by noting a distinction that Barral fails to make between one's personal being and the being of the world. By personal being I do not mean my basic structure as an embodied consciousness or union of body and soul, but the particular ways that I *consciously live* my life and the relationships, hobbies, habits etc. that I have chosen to fill up my time. Yes, Merleau-Ponty says that "I am the absolute

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<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

source,” but of what? If we look carefully at the passage from which Barral claims that Merleau-Ponty believes “I am the cause of things and events,” we see that he actually does not reference the being of objects in the world as such but realities that *can be only upheld by the person who lives them*. He speaks of “the tradition that I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose distance from me would be abolished..if I were not there to scan it with my gaze.” For example, if I live as a Protestant Christian and choose to immerse myself in the writings of Calvin and to articulate his notions of predestination I am the source of this ongoing tradition *in my ongoing conscious life*. I can eliminate the being of the Reformed tradition *in me* as I read the Church Fathers, grow in a love of liturgical worship and consciously live according to Roman Catholic teaching. If I stand gazing at Mt. Rainier and experience a certain distance between it and my perspective from Pike Street Market in downtown Seattle I am the source of this experience of distance in the sense that without me it would not be. The distance that I experience is not a property of Mt. Rainier, but can only exist because of my “consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me.”<sup>374</sup>

Barral and others might allow this distinction between the being of the world and one’s personal being as it is consciously lived, but still point out that Merleau-Ponty claims that consciousness is the “absolute source” which seems to declare that one’s consciousness is prior to the objects of the world in our knowing them. Yes, it might be true that my religious tradition or gaze upon the natural world as lived out depends upon my particular consciousness, but St. Ignatius’s writings and Mt. Rainier exist outside of me and obviously contribute in themselves to my experience of them. How can

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<sup>374</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

consciousness be the “absolute source” if realities in the world are a *sine qua non* of my experiences along with consciousness itself?

It may be that Merleau-Ponty simply overstates himself in this passage from which Barral quotes. In the broader context of the text Merleau-Ponty is attempting to show that the human being is not part of the world as a physical object studied by science, “not the outcome or the meeting point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up.”<sup>375</sup> Rather, the human being is an embodied consciousness whose experiences are prior to any scientific conclusion about the world and whose consciousness is a necessary source for scientific knowledge itself:

All that I grasp (*saisir*) of the world, even through science, I understand (*saisir*) from my own point of view or from an experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.<sup>376</sup>

Merleau-Ponty then goes on to say that “I am the absolute source..I alone bring into being for myself..the tradition which I elect to carry on.” The emphasis here is that nothing we know or experience is attained outside of our conscious perspective. Our consciousness is truly a *sine qua non* for our personal lives. To call it the “absolute source” does fail to acknowledge the central function of the world in providing for our experiences, but my interpretation is that this is simply an error of hyperbole in Merleau-Ponty’s strenuous resistance to scientific presuppositions that consciousness is ultimately an object, just like any other object in the world.

It should be clear from Part I of Chapter Three, where I gave an overall introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of consciousness, his understanding of perception, as well as the subject-object dialogue that consciousness is not the “absolute

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<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.* My translation.

source” in a radically idealistic sense. It is not in full possession of itself precisely because it is open to a world that is ambiguous for us. It only comes to itself through operative intentionality in which the objects of the world press upon us and offer their meaning to us. Further, shortly after the passage from which Barral makes the claim that Merleau-Ponty is saying “that [the human being] is the one who gives meaning to the world and to things in the world,” Merleau-Ponty argues to the contrary:

When I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience; moreover my reflection cannot be unaware of itself as an event, and so it appears to itself in the light of a truly creative act, of a changed structure in consciousness, and yet it has to recognize, *as having priority over its own operations, the world* [emphasis mine] which is given to the subject because the subject is given to himself..<sup>377</sup>

Here we see allowance that consciousness is creative or constituting, at least to a degree.

As I reflect upon an unreflective experience I recognize that I am acting and in some sense causing an experience to happen insofar as I take an active stance toward the world as it comes to me. But beneath this intentionality of act is the operative intentionality that is foundational to it, the world as given to me through pre-reflective consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty is saying that the world itself is given to me and that I know this because when I begin to reflect I recognize that my reflection depends upon an unreflective experience (or perception) of the world that is given to me. Gaining knowledge and therefore meaning is, prior to the actions of consciousness, a result of the givenness of the world and its actions upon us.

Merleau-Ponty is not an idealist in any radical sense of the world, although there are certainly themes of idealism in his work. He does not believe that the world and the human being within it are fundamentally ideas constituted by consciousness. However,

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<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

there is a meaning-giving aspect to consciousness according to Merleau-Ponty that I addressed in Section D, Part I of Chapter Three in the discussion on the subject-object dialogue. Objects are what they are in part because of their relationship with a human knower. We have just discussed that objects are *for me* because of my conscious relationship to them, a relationship that I can elect to carry on or not. I am able to draw out their latent meaning and thus in a sense bestow meaning. This is the “creative act” of consciousness, the intentional decision to attend to objects that first arise in pre-reflective consciousness.<sup>378</sup> We could also say that this is the subjective side of the meaning-bestowing nature of consciousness. But while discussing the subject-object dialogue we saw that the human being can also bestow meaning upon objects so that this meaning becomes part of their objective reality, not perhaps part of their substantial reality (to use a Thomistic category), but certainly a part of what they mean to other humans in the world. We looked, for example, at New Hampshire’s “Man on the Mountain.” The Native Americans or Colonial settlers who first saw an “old man” in the rocky face of this “Man on the Mountain” shared their experience with others. From a geological

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<sup>378</sup> How does pre-reflective consciousness know to attend to objects when they are only latently present at the pre-reflective level of consciousness? First, there is not a strict division between pre-reflective and reflective levels of consciousness. Some things in pre-reflective consciousness are closer to the surface of direct awareness. For example, we can easily imagine a sound that is so soft and weak that it never becomes a part of reflective consciousness. But the sound on the horizon of my attention can get louder and demand my attention. There comes a point where I can pause and attend to the sound or chose to ignore it unless, of course, the sound becomes distractingly loud. On the other hand, I can also decide to go searching for objects that are right now present to pre-reflective consciousness but to which I am not directing my attention. For example, I can push aside thoughts and try to identify the various noises present in my surroundings: the hum of my computer, the crackling of paper in a heat vent, etc. Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to address Merleau-Ponty’s notion of horizon. My horizon consists of objects that I attend to directly but which are set in a background where other objects exist in varying degrees of clarity to me. At times objects on my horizon force their way into my awareness, but at other times I deliberately draw out these objects.

perspective the rocky face was not changed by humans seeing it as a “man,” but nonetheless the rocky object became imbued with meaning from the subjects who gazed upon it. The object became a symbol and in one sense was enriched by Native Americans or Colonial settlers imbuing the rock with the meaning of “old man.” Further, each generation of viewers develops the symbol so that it now means more than simply “old man in the rock” but also “historical landmark,” emblem of “New Hampshire,” and so on. Thus, there is a sense in which consciousness literally bestows meaning upon the objects of the world.

And, of course, these objects, altered by consciousness, in turn shape those who partake of them. The subject-object dialogue is a continuous “give and take,” an ongoing dialectical relationship. In Merleau-Ponty’s vision of the world human subjects and the objects to which they relate exist in a state of mutual developmental flux. Human consciousness continues to be altered by our engagement with the world and the meaning of objects in the world continues to change due to our engagement with it.

At this point we are at the threshold of the ontological dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s work which is strongly intimated in his notion of the subject-object dialogue, a primary interpretive key for understanding his phenomenological writings and which connects these writings with his explicitly ontological work. What is this metaphysical dimension? In a word, that being is twofold. It has an invisible aspect in the consciousness of the knower and a visible aspect in the world that is known. The knowing subject is infused by the meaning of particular beings in the world but also infuses meaning into them. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty develops these themes as he concentrates more and more on the unity of Being itself and criticizes

what he sees as an unnecessary division between subject and object in his earlier phenomenology. Being becomes an intertwining, a chiasm, not so much between subject and object, but between its visible and invisible dimensions. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological works intimate his metaphysics in part because they indicate that the being of the world is in perpetual developmental flux or an ongoing mutual relationship between what he calls the subject and object.<sup>379</sup>

But it is enough for this section of the dissertation to show that the world itself is laden with meaning, according to Merleau-Ponty, and that he does not hold that the world and its objects (in particular the human being) are simply ideas in consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not directed toward the structures and corridors of consciousness but upon perception in which the world declares its meaning to consciousness. Merleau-Ponty believes that I cannot know the world unless I have consciousness of it and so gives priority to consciousness over any scientific knowledge of the world, but he also holds that the world has priority to consciousness, that without the world consciousness could not even be itself. Further, our knowing, *arising as it does from receptive perception of real objects in the world*, is fundamentally a gift of the world.

I argued in my response to the first objection that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology presents deductively valid arguments and a notion of experience that put

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<sup>379</sup> Time is foundational to subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty. See Part III, Section II of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, devoted to a discussion of temporality. The human being and all beings of the world are contingent, abiding in a constant developmental flux. But at the root of all contingency is temporality. See Atherton Lowry's helpful discussion of Merleau-Ponty's temporal understanding of being in "Merleau-Ponty and the Absence of God," *Philosophy Today* 22 (1978): 119-26. This discussion is particularly interesting for our purposes because Lowry contrasts Merleau-Ponty's notion of being with Aquinas's.



him and Aquinas on comparable philosophical playing fields. I argued in my response to the second objection that, at a phenomenological level, Merleau-Ponty has no way of holding that the human is simply a physical being. We experience ourselves (and others by inference) as embodied consciousnesses and we have no way getting beneath this raw datum of perception to a “proof” that we are thoroughly material creatures. Rather, experience indicates that there are two dimensions to the integral human being—a principle of consciousness as well as a physical mode of existence--and this experience accords with that articulated by Aquinas. In the third objection I dealt with the possibility that Merleau-Ponty’s approach might be a form of radical idealism, in which case Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty would not even be directing their arguments to the same thing.

We have found that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty direct themselves to the same object, the concretely existing human being, and that both believe the human is a composite of an intellectual ordering principle of the body and the body itself. It is possible that the kind of “graft” I hoped for at the beginning of Chapter One might be realized.

However, there is one more potential hurdle that remains to be addressed and this is the terminological difference between our two thinkers concerning the basic parts of the human being, specifically the meaning of soul and consciousness, their functions as form of the body, and the meaning of the body itself. I did not include this as a distinct objection in Part III of Chapter One because I raised and partly answered these questions in Part I of the first chapter as well as in Part II of Chapter Three. I now revisit these discussions.

In the first chapter I had said that there were potentially significant differences between Merleau-Ponty's notion of form as presented by Ellis and Aquinas's notion of form as presented by LaRock. For example, Aquinas believes that the form of the whole body is the intellectual soul (a term not even mentioned by Ellis), that this soul is both immaterial and incorruptible and that it acts as form both when the human being is conscious and when he or she is not conscious. Ellis's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is that consciousness is a physical form and he implies that considering it to be a non-physical entity would lead to Cartesian dualism. It turns out that Ellis's interpretation is incorrect, at least from the standpoint of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology; we come to consciousness in its embodied state and have no phenomenological means of holding that it is a purely physical entity. For Ellis's Merleau-Ponty, consciousness as a formal power seems confined to conscious states which would mean that Merleau-Ponty's notion of form is much more restricted than Aquinas's view in which the soul is the act of the body during conscious and unconscious states.

I had argued in response to these differences about the basic parts of the human being that there are enough similarities in how LaRock and Ellis draw, respectively, on Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty to suggest at least the possibility that these latter thinkers have enough philosophical commonality for Merleau-Ponty to enrich Aquinas's thought. First, both thinkers recognize that a living material being is self-organizing because of its form and that it is not a simple by-product of causal forces outside it. Both hold that via its form an organism acts into its environment to achieve certain objectives and orders all of its body parts toward these ends. In both cases the matter of the living being is for the sake of the form and receives its direction from the form. Secondly, I had said that (if

LaRock and Ellis are correct) both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty do not consider form and body separate substances but inseparable parts of one integrated whole. For Aquinas the inseparability of soul or form and body extends to both conscious and unconscious states. Merleau-Ponty also argues that form and body are inseparable but Ellis restricted his explanations of this inseparability to conscious states of living.

But the response I gave in Chapter One to differences in Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's use of soul, consciousness, and form may have been inadequate in light of our discussion in Part II, Chapter Three of Merleau-Ponty's difficult understanding of form from *The Structure of Behavior*. In this text Merleau-Ponty is hesitant to say that forms are in objects: "form is not a physical reality, but an object of perception."<sup>380</sup> He later says that "the form of this or that thing..presents itself to me here and now."<sup>381</sup> It is clear that he believes that objects in the world (including human beings) are ordered wholes which express this meaning to humans who perceive them. We saw that he does not believe forms are natures in an "in-itself" empirically objectivist fashion because objects are always part of a changing milieu. For this reason (and perhaps for others) Merleau-Ponty holds that we cannot say forms are in objects. If forms are not in human beings according to Merleau-Ponty, but for Aquinas they are the substantial principle of human unity then we have a significant difference of meaning in a core anthropological term.

The second place I took up the question of significant terminological differences concerning the core aspects of the human being was in Part II of Chapter Three towards the end of the discussion about Merleau-Ponty's understanding of soul and body unity. There I had dealt with the problem of Merleau-Ponty's imprecision about the distinction

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<sup>380</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 143.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

between soul and consciousness. I proposed that consciousness and soul periodically overlap within the human being. For Merleau-Ponty, as for most philosophers, soul is an animating principle. There are times when consciousness functions as an animating principle. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty will say that when human persons are most themselves—i.e. when their actions are permeated with intellectual intentions—consciousness functions as form of the whole body. But of course there are times when consciousness is not overtly present within the human being. For example, during times of sleep consciousness does not function as a soul. We are still, however, maintained in our existence by a vital ordering principle because even in sleep all of our organs are structured around the human being's need to get rest. Here a vital soul or animating principle must be at play which functions apart from the direction of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty also seems to hold that the human being has a psychic soul that can be distinguished from consciousness when it is functioning according to intentionality of act. This would be consciousness in its pre-reflective state. For example, there are times when we become aware through recollection of perceptions that we had some time before but when they occurred we were not directly conscious of them. But these perceptions must have occurred through a holistic ordering process that we can call a soul because the various sensitive powers of the body were coordinated in them.

I need to take up the issue again of what precisely Merleau-Ponty means by the basic parts of the human being and how they relate to Aquinas's understanding of these basic parts. This would be minimally necessary as a summary before heading into an argument that Merleau-Ponty's integral anthropology can enrich Aquinas's anthropology. But the issue has not been adequately resolved, especially in light of the metaphysical

aspects of the subject-object dialogue most recently discussed at the end of Part I of this chapter. For Merleau-Ponty, the whole world is a changing flux whereby subject and object affect one another and continually develop in light of their dialectical relationship. We saw his reluctance to say that forms inhere in things because each thing is ultimately inseparable from other objects so that changes in the whole milieu of the world lead to changes in the parts. This suggests that Merleau-Ponty believes the human being cannot be demarcated from his or her world as a substantial whole as he or she can be so identified within Aquinas's metaphysical vision of the universe. It implies also that the human being does not have a given universal essence that applies across times and cultures. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty holds that "man is an historical idea and not a natural species" and that "all that we are, we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of *escape* which is never an unconditioned freedom."<sup>382</sup> And in the very last sentence of *The Phenomenology*

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<sup>382</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 198. Aquinas also holds that the human being, in a universal sense, is an idea. Human nature, as such, does not concretely exist. Human nature, as individuated in this or that particular human being does of course exist. But Aquinas still differs from Merleau-Ponty regarding the human being as a universal essence because he holds that the substantial form of each human is essentially human and that this essence is the same from generation to generation. Merleau-Ponty allows that there are common features of human existence which he will call an 'essence' in the phenomenological sense, otherwise anthropological study would not be possible, but that there is no abiding human essence. Humans from 2,000 years ago might be capable of symbolic thought just like humans today, but given evolutionary processes contemporary humans add to this common denominator and are literally different as a result. This notion of evolutionary development expresses a Marxist orientation in Merleau-Ponty's thought. He holds to a kind of historical materialism; he does not believe that historical materialism is completely deterministic in nature. The human being is part of a necessary unfolding of history, but is also able to reconfigure aspects of his or her particular situation. See Merleau-Ponty's extensive footnote #18 in Part I, Chapter Five, of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, "The Body in its Sexual Being," 198-201.

of *Perception*, he declares, quoting Saint-Exupéry, that ““man is but a network of relationships.””<sup>383</sup>

Merleau-Ponty presents us with a metaphysics of contingency and radical interconnectedness such that he defines the human being not as a substantial whole, but as a network of relations. For Aquinas, the human being exists because an immaterial and universal human form created by God is made commensurate with what he calls dimensive quantity or designate matter and so individuated as this or that particular human.<sup>384</sup> Each one has an eternal individual essence, therefore, by which he or she is both human *and* this particular human being. Each one is, by virtue of his or her particular substantial form, an independent and contingent existent, a concrete whole within the whole of the world. The accidental features of the human being describe those aspects of his or her human existence which are integrated with the substance and are capable of change—e.g. skin color, virtues or vices. This is not to imply that substance is, for Aquinas, a static or inert principle. Accidents can literally come and go and thus express changes in the human being. But, as Aquinas tersely says “every substance exists for the sake of its operations.”<sup>385</sup> The human being as substance is in a state of self-communicative act seeking to engage the world to fulfill its potentialities. As its potentialities are fulfilled it necessarily develops and therefore changes while retaining its

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<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>384</sup> In *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.80.8 Aquinas writes: “The substance of this soul is other than the substance of that soul. This diversity, nevertheless, does not result from a diversity in the essential principles of the soul itself, nor from otherness in respect of the intelligible essence of the soul, but from diversity in the commensuration of souls to bodies, since this soul is adapted to this and not that body, and that soul to another body.”

<sup>385</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.105.5.

essential identity.<sup>386</sup> Merleau-Ponty never describes the human being as a substantial whole and he denies that each one has any permanent essence. For Merleau-Ponty the human is more like a part of the whole world which changes as the world develops but which also has an effect upon this world. It appears that our two thinkers have radically different notions of form both as a general term and insofar as this word applies to the human being. For Aquinas the form is a necessary dimension of the human, what makes the human be who he or she is and as such does not essentially change. For Merleau-Ponty the form of the human is an organizing principle but not an existential actualizing principle. Merleau-Ponty is reluctant to say that any object has its own form because every object exists in developmental flux and because the form exists in a dialectical relationship between consciousness and the object that consciousness seeks to know.

It may be, however, that Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty are closer together than the aforementioned difficulties seem to indicate. One of the problems we have encountered is Merleau-Ponty's difficult notion of form. He says that the form is not in an object in a physical sense, but dwells in a dialectic between consciousness and objects. The "form is not a physical reality, but an object of perception."<sup>387</sup> We also saw that later in *The Structure of Behavior* he confusingly states that "the form of this or that thing presents itself to me"<sup>388</sup> which implies that the form is a literal dimension of the object. But what is not unclear and what should help us to align Merleau-Ponty closer with Aquinas is that Merleau-Ponty does hold that forms can be present in the human being because he or she

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<sup>386</sup> Norris Clarke does an excellent job explaining how substance is not, for Aquinas, inert but dynamic. See Chapter Eight, "Self Identity in Change: Substance and Accident," of *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>387</sup> *The Structure of Behavior*, 143.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

is a conscious being. If form emerges in a dialectical relationship between consciousness and the object and the object is one's own self then form is obviously an integral part of the human being.

But what kind of a part is it? To respond we must step into Merleau-Ponty's mode of phenomenological description and recognize that he concentrates more on shedding light on the depth and richness of our perception than he does on clearly defining the ontological implications of this perception. As soon as we are capable of self-reflection we recognize that we are, to some degree, ordered toward biological survival, that we are drawn to eat and drink and find shelter. Thus we discover a vital ordering principle in us. This, Merleau-Ponty says in the difficult definition of body/soul relations from *The Structure of Behavior*, can be understood as a soul, as an ordering principle that declares the meaning of form. I perceive this principle in myself and identify a form. Insofar as consciousness perceives a vital principle (or psychic principle as it may be) within the being of the human the form is not strictly consciousness itself but a "perceived whole." But it is critical to note that consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, is the driver of integration between the various ways its body can be formed and its body. When consciousness accedes to the vital drives of the body and wills to pursue them strictly for their own sake, then consciousness becomes the vital form of its own body.<sup>389</sup> But the form is not "in" the body as a physical object; it could not be found if scientists were to dissect the body. The form is consciousness as it experiences its own vital drives and orients its body toward fulfilling them. Now, consciousness can also subsume its vital drives under a new

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<sup>389</sup> Normally we do not think of consciousness as "willing." But Merleau-Ponty has an expanded notion of consciousness as explained in Section A, Part I of Chapter Three; he holds that consciousness is the principle both of thinking and of willing.



ordering principle—e.g. toward cultural or intellectual pursuits. When this happens, the form of the human being changes. Merleau-Ponty does not say that the human being can have multiple forms present in itself at any one time because the form by its very nature describes the whole ordering of a being around a unified purpose. When consciousness subsumes the vital drives of its body around a cultural pursuit it orients the body in a new direction and thus gives the body a new soul or form. It can steer itself toward, for example, a celebration banquet for the completion of the Ph.D., and thus alter the meaning of its body. In this context he or she does not consume food for biological survival but rather to express joy and experience communion with friends and family. So, consciousness is able to order its body in a variety of different ways and therefore be itself in a variety of different ways. Consciousness is the changing form of the human which means that we cannot speak of the form of the human as if it were a permanent principle of ontological identity. Rather, it is a changing ordering principle through the changing actions of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty also allows that consciousness can be itself as it preserves its own identity and seeks to maintain a consistent course of life. He allows that through the sedimentation of consciousness developed through our life histories that we can have a stable sense of self. And yet he insists that, even if we wanted to, we could not maintain ourselves in the same exact way given the fact that we are caught up in a changing world that necessarily impacts us.

Now, Merleau-Ponty moves from this phenomenological description to ontological claims, in particular that there is no abiding essence of the human being—e.g. “man is an historical idea and not a natural species” and “all that we are, we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly

transform.”<sup>390</sup> Or “man is but a network of relationships.”<sup>391</sup> He says this because he finds no perduring human form within his experience. As we engage objects of the world they declare their meaning to us which we absorb; we act into the world thereby altering it; we receive the world changed by our action and the action of others upon it and thus experience new change and so on *ad infinitum*.

Aquinas would go along with Merleau-Ponty that consciousness, insofar as it is the intellectual principle of the human, is the form of the body and that it does change and order its body in countless different ways. He would affirm also the phenomenological descriptions Merleau-Ponty offers as an experiential basis for these ontological claims. There is no lack of compatibility between them on the meaning of consciousness as form so long as we understand that consciousness is, for Merleau-Ponty, the principle of intellect and agency in the human being and understand that this aligns with Aquinas’s intellectual soul which can be aware of itself and thus also be a principle of consciousness.

Of course Aquinas does not follow all of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological claims regarding the nature of the human being. The form of the human being for Aquinas, as discussed above, is a substantial form and an immaterial essence that retains its own identity despite the contingencies of history. It functions when the human being is conscious and when he or she is not. It literally makes the body be what it is. As we discussed above in Chapter One when introducing Ralph Ellis’s use of Merleau-Ponty, the latter thinker holds that consciousness (understood in its reflective sense) functions as form when it is directly present in the human being but, for example, during periods of

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<sup>390</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 198.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

sleep it does not. As far as I know, Merleau-Ponty does not address how the human being is ordered and purposive when he or she is not conscious. Perhaps, he holds that a pre-reflective consciousness is at play in such cases functioning as form of the body. In any case, because it is an immaterial subsisting entity that gives its act to the body, Aquinas's intellectual soul is more of an ongoing formal principle than Merleau-Ponty's consciousness. Indeed, when the intellectual principle of the human is separated from its body at death, it remains ordered to its specific body. Despite this Aquinas would hold with Merleau-Ponty that the intellectual principle can be likened to consciousness (both are self aware, intellectual principles of agency) and he would certainly hold with Merleau-Ponty that this consciousness serves as an integral form of the body. Thus, at one level their positions are compatible.

But at this point Aquinas might press Merleau-Ponty and argue that even though the latter thinker says that the human being is a network of relationships existing in continuous flux his phenomenological insights actually belie his ontological claims. Yes, we have experiences of constantly developing, but we also experience ourselves as a locus of these changes. We have memories of ourselves in a variety of developmental stages and such memories indicate a singular being who has them. We act ethically or unethically and recognize that each is an "I" and morally responsible for our actions whether we did them 10 minutes or 10 years ago. To be sure, each one recognizes that he or she has layers of sedimentation in his or her consciousness but these occur in *a* consciousness. There is something about each person which retains its identity throughout all of the change which characterizes our lives. We experience ourselves as having independent, singular, and concrete existence; thus, we experience ourselves in

some measure as a substance. The human being cannot be a mere network of relationships for the simple reason that relationships cannot occur unless there are things that are related. There must be some permanent dimension of the human being that enables him or her to enter into relationships. And Merleau-Ponty is clear that the human being does actively enter into relationships, that he or she is a free source of his or her own action even though this source undergoes regular change. Thus, Aquinas would say that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions lead to an ontology of substance. We do experience in ourselves our own concrete independent existence even as we interact and receive from the world and we must have language to describe this abiding dimension of ourselves. Insofar as Merleau-Ponty fails to provide such language he fails to justice to his own phenomenological insights.<sup>392</sup>

I have addressed a critical point of terminological compatibility between our two thinkers on the nature of the form of the human being, at least from the perspective of the Thomist seeking a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's thought. Insofar as the form is an ordering principle of the body our two thinkers are together and Aquinas can confirm the phenomenological descriptions Merleau-Ponty uses to claim that

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<sup>392</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty does not employ substance ontology, he does have a concept of "style," which is relatively undeveloped in his work but does imply that he accepts some enduring ontological core in the human being. He writes: "I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in a relationship to this structure, and even a philosopher's thought is merely a way of making explicit his hold on the world, and what he is. The fact remains that I am free, not in spite of, or on the hither side of, these motivations, but by means of them" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 529). Thus, Merleau-Ponty does seem to recognize that each person has an enduring manner of existing which provides the basis for engaging the world while remaining open to change. One's style necessarily changes because the human fundamentally exists as a temporal being; the action of each moment leaves "sedimentation" in consciousness as time and the human move on to future moments and the "sedimentation" that they will bring.

consciousness is form of the body. Aquinas further believes that “consciousness” understood as the self-aware intellectual soul is also a substance and the principle of the human being’s abiding identity. Merleau-Ponty does not use the language of substance and although he describes the human being as an independent concrete existence, which is the free source of its own personal acts, he does not have adequate ontological terminology to make sense of these descriptions. His claim that the human being is but a network of relationships would not be acceptable to Aquinas, but Aquinas need not follow him in these claims to make use of one critical aspect of his anthropology, that consciousness as form or soul is united to and orders its body according to its purposes.

Thus far I have not specifically addressed whether or not Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty have compatible notions of the body and so I must treat this topic before launching into the next section. As I mentioned a moment ago the body, for Aquinas, cannot even be unless it is informed by the intellectual soul. There is no such thing as a body unless it is informed by the act or *esse* of the soul as substantial form. The corpse is not a body but has become something essentially different at the parting of the soul. The body is that by which the intellectual soul has access to the world. It has independent concrete existence by virtue of the soul.

There are points of critical commonality between Aquinas’s notion of body and Merleau-Ponty’s. For both thinkers the self-aware intellectual principle is able to order the body around its intentions and to be seamlessly integrated into it. For both thinkers the body can be imbued with conscious or spiritual intentions as well as enable the human intellect to be itself. Merleau-Ponty will not say that consciousness is substantial form of the body and thus there is likely a stronger sense of the unity between soul and

body in Aquinas than in Merleau-Ponty. For the later thinker when consciousness awakens to itself it is embodied and the body is always experienced as an integral part of being human, but he does not say that the body is always what it is because of the intellect functioning as its substantial form. Merleau-Ponty also holds with Aquinas that it is through bodily perception that intellect or consciousness dwells in the world. Further, both hold that perception is foundational for any knowledge. Thus, both affirm the necessity of the body for philosophy.

This section began with addressing each of the three objections to the possibility of compatibility between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty which could lead to a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's thought. But after treating these objections it was necessary to address another difficulty that had emerged at several points, that of terminological differences in fundamental anthropological terms. I am content that these differences are resolved and I now turn to areas of commonality between our two thinkers which should lay the groundwork for a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's philosophical anthropology.

## **Part II –Compatibility Leading to Enrichment**

After responding to foregoing objections, I now turn to two areas of strong compatibility between our two thinkers which should lead to a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's philosophical anthropology. To use the example from horticulture with which I began, a successful graft demands that a scion have enough genetic similarity to the woodstock in which it inheres. They must have a comparable nature, otherwise the scion will not "take" to the woodstock onto which it is grafted. With Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty my attempt is to bring together their respective teachings

about the integral human being; do Merleau-Ponty's insights regarding the human accord enough with Aquinas's anthropology to have a fruitful place in the latter's teaching?

There are two major questions that need to be addressed in order to answer whether or not Merleau-Ponty's work can fruitfully enrich Aquinas's. First, do they address themselves to the same object? On the basis of responding to the objections of Chapter One in the foregoing section I am convinced that our two thinkers do address themselves to the same object. Second, are their means of making philosophical conclusions about the human being compatible? I note here that I am not concerned in this dissertation with whether or not Aquinas's methodology is acceptable to Merleau-Ponty, but whether the latter's methodology would accord with Aquinas's own. In this section I argue that indeed Merleau-Ponty's philosophical approach would be acceptable to Aquinas because they actually share the same approach at fundamental levels. First, for both of them perception is foundational to any philosophical knowledge whatsoever. Secondly, with regard to the knowledge of human beings, both thinkers agree that the philosopher appeals to his/her own subjective experience to draw conclusions about human nature.

#### **A) For Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty Perception is the Basis for Knowledge and the Source of Their Conviction that the Human Being is an Integral Union of Body and Soul**

At several points in Chapter Two, especially in Part I, Section C on Aquinas's epistemology, I addressed how Aquinas's philosophy depends upon his basic trust in sense perception. In Chapter Three, especially in Part I, Section C, I addressed the foundational importance of perception for Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project. I now revisit these points to show how our two thinkers stand at the same philosophical

beginning point, that both *trust* this common grounding in perception, and that both believe it strongly indicates the composite nature of the human being.<sup>393</sup>

Before launching into this I note that both thinkers make a distinction between sense and intellectual perception and that both hold that each form of perception involves the whole human being. Sense perception is our basic awareness of the world through our senses; intellectual perception depends upon sense perception (whereas the reverse is not the case) but it involves abstraction from or judgment regarding objects that are sensed. The two forms of perception should not be understood, for both thinkers, as disconnected from one another in any radical way. Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty would say, for example, that the sense mode of perception naturally leads to the intellectual mode. For example, we walk down the path and feel various elements of the natural world in a variety of ways (sense perception). We are drawn by a particular sound, recognize it, and judge that it comes from a woodpecker at work (intellectual perception).

How does Aquinas ground his philosophy in sense perception? He frequently quotes Aristotle's dictum that "the beginning of our knowledge is in the senses (*principium nostrae cognitionis est a sensu*)."<sup>394</sup> Our knowing, contra Plato, never takes place without the foundational involvement of our bodily comportment toward the world.

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<sup>393</sup> One major difference between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's use of perception is that the former thinker draws on it to infer the existence of God, a necessary being who exists outside the range of direct personal experience (at least at a philosophical level), whereas the latter thinker denies the possibility of such a philosophical proof of God's existence. For Merleau-Ponty, we can only access contingent realities. Aquinas is willing to put a lot of speculative weight on efficient causality and thus argues in his "five ways" for the necessary existence of an ultimate first cause or first mover. Merleau-Ponty seems to suffer from a Humean and basically modern reluctance to believe that one can infer the existence of efficient causes outside of our direct personal experience.

<sup>394</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.6. My translation. Aquinas takes this passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, i.1 and his *Posterior Analytics*, ii.15.



We have no other alternative (naturally speaking) than to draw upon our senses. The philosopher can only move forward to explain and draw out the implications of our sense knowledge, but he or she cannot justify it. The human intellect is a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate, and, according to Aquinas, does not have any innate knowledge of the intelligible species, the forms of things and their common matter—e.g. knowledge of the form of a horse and its orientation to a horse body. Because it is embodied, the intellect can operate only through the limitations and advantages of the body. It can know nothing by itself without access to material singulars that are presented to it through phantasms formed by the imagination from the senses. According to Aquinas, the intellect cannot even know itself apart from an act of understanding directed toward a material being and made possible through the senses. This is so because we can understand only what is in act and the intellect starts out in a state of pure potentiality. We therefore have knowledge of our own intellects only after they have been actualized through understanding. Thus, Aquinas would agree with Merleau-Ponty that Descartes’s project of confirming the existence of his mind by doubting sense perception and everything else but his own doubt is an impossible task because the mind could not even understand itself unless it first performed an act of understanding that depended upon the senses.

Merleau-Ponty’s position regarding the foundational importance of sense perception is essentially the same as Aquinas’s. A fundamental epistemological fact revealed by examining perception phenomenologically is that all knowledge begins with it. “All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception.”<sup>395</sup> The first premise of any argument about the nature of anything, of any statement about the

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<sup>395</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 241.

world, of any declaration of truth is first of all grounded in perception. If phenomenology is about the study of essences for the sake of knowing the world, as Merleau-Ponty argues, and we gain such essences only on the seedbed of living concrete experience, then this experience is the *sine qua non* of phenomenology. Further, perception is the result of the world acting upon us through our bodily senses. Through perception we are open to the world and able to gain, as Merleau-Ponty says, “knowledge of existing things.”<sup>396</sup> The experience of perception is a phenomenon immediately tied to the real world. For Merleau-Ponty, we can have no doubt that the world we perceive is “out there” in concrete form. In fact, the only way to understand, for example, the phenomenon of hallucination or perceptual vagueness is against the backdrop of our faith in perception’s ability actually to grasp things. If perception did not have this faith, then the very question—“what is a hallucination or not?”—would not even arise. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty believes that discerning the difference between an authentic vision and a hallucination does not necessarily occur through appeal to a separate faculty of judgment. Merleau-Ponty certainly allows that consciousness can retreat from its perceptual immersion in the world and think about what is gained from this immersion. But he holds that human perception is not simply animal sensation. He believes that a mistaken [human] perception, like a hallucination, does not offer the same phenomenal meaning as a true perception and that if we attend closely to the perception itself we normally discern correctly whether it is authentic or not.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> *Structure of Behavior*, 211.

<sup>397</sup> For more on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of judgment-laden perception see Chapter Three of his Introduction in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. On page 40 of this chapter he writes: “Now if we see what we judge, how can we distinguish between true and false perception? How will it then be possible to say that the sufferer from hallucinations or the

Another critical aspect of sense (as well as intellectual) perception is that for both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty it involves the whole human being, not just his or her bodily parts. This is perhaps easier to grasp from the standpoint of Aquinas's anthropology in which the body can be a body only through the informing *esse* of its substantial form. The sensitive powers of the soul orient the body to feel; thus one senses through his or her whole being not simply through his or her body. Merleau-Ponty discovers through phenomenology that perception can be pre-reflective and occur without our immediate reflexive awareness of it, but when we awaken to basic perception we recognize it as our own. We are able to take it up within the full light of reflective consciousness and live in the perception so that it obviously involves the whole human being. Merleau-Ponty, like Aquinas, trusts our sense of being perceptual actors, of being directly faced with the world that comes to us through sight, sound, motility, etc.<sup>398</sup>

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madman 'think they see what they do not see'? Where will be the difference between 'seeing' and 'thinking one sees'? If the reply is made that the sane man judges only by adequate signs and completely coherent material, it is then, because there is a difference between the motivated judgment of veridical perception and the empty judgement of false perception. And as the difference is not in the form of the judgement but in the sensible text to which it gives form, to perceive in the full sense of the word (as the antithesis of imagining) is not to judge, it is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins. The phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, and of which judgement is merely the optional expression." See also: Robert Doud, "Sensibility in Rahner and Merleau-Ponty," *The Thomist* 44 (July 1980): 372-89. Doud argues that the nature of perception is an integration of bodily and intellectual powers. If perception is such then the human being who is the subject of perception must be a composite of a body and an intellectual principle.

<sup>398</sup> David Braine explores how both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty believe that the sense perception of humans is essentially different than that of primates or higher animals. Both understand that for humans perceived objects have symbolic meaning which is not grasped by primates or higher animals. Thus, sense perception is already not simply sense perception but reflects an intellectual capacity for abstract thought. See his *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit*, pp 305-06.

So, for both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty perception is the doorway through which human beings come to knowledge. A corollary point is that human beings are naturally ordered toward the knowledge of sensible things, which does not preclude the possibility that some things might have immaterial (or “invisible”) aspects to their sensible natures. This is perhaps superfluous to add while speaking of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy which is so focused on the exploration of contingent and material things. But given Aquinas’s Christian philosophy and insistence that the end of human life is the beatific vision, one might wonder whether for him the human being is naturally ordered toward a knowledge of sensible realities. However, Aquinas does insist that the human being is most naturally ordered to know beings of a sensible nature because it is a being of a composite nature: “The power of knowledge is proportioned to the thing known...[and thus] the proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter.”<sup>399</sup>

The human being is a sensible thing and thus naturally ordered to know himself or herself as such. But when humans seek to understand what it means to be human (i.e. what is our nature?) we are in a unique position because our inquiry turns inward as well as outward. Both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty argue that perception reveals that the human being is an integral union of a body and an intellectual principle that is self-aware (for Aquinas, the intellectual soul, for Merleau-Ponty, consciousness) through two different modes of perception.

The first way is object-directed. We look upon our friends, family members, fellow citizens, etc. and recognize that they are not simply physical beings but also

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<sup>399</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.84.7.

rational ones and that their bodies manifest their minds. A human being can consider himself or herself as an object (for example, in examinations of conscience) but in this mode of perception I consider how, for both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty, perception of others indicates their composite nature. For example, in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57, “The Position of Plato Concerning the Union of the Intellectual Soul with the Body,” Aquinas’s primary response to Plato is that “animal and man are sensible and natural realities.”<sup>400</sup> If the soul is the entire essence of the human being, as Plato claims, and simply uses the body as a man uses his clothes, then we could not say that we sensibly encounter a human being “for the soul is neither a sensible nor a material thing.”<sup>401</sup> But this is impossible, Aquinas declares, because it completely contradicts our perception that the human we encounter is a thinking creature of flesh and blood. Thus, we see in Aquinas a willingness to ground philosophical claims in basic sensible awareness of objects outside the human being. Merleau-Ponty makes the same presumption and argues in various ways that perception reveals humans as incarnate beings, visible objects who express spiritual or invisible aspects in their physical nature. Merleau-Ponty describes this incarnation in a description of our experience of another’s gestures:

Faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I have no need, in order to understand it, to recall the feelings which I myself experienced when I used these gestures on my own account. I know very little, from inside, of the mime of anger so that a decisive factor is missing for any association by resemblance or reasoning by analogy, and what is more, I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.5.

<sup>401</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.57.6.

<sup>402</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 214.

This example of perceiving the emotional gesticulations of another shows us the thoroughly composite nature of the human being. Of course sub-intellectual animals can also appear angry, but what Merleau-Ponty has in mind here are how specifically human emotions are not behind the parts of the body but are what they are in bodily gestures. To continue with the example of anger, we also experience how controlling our bodies is control of the anger itself. Rage grows when it is physically expressed, but can often be tempered and pass away if we keep our limbs at peace. The point here is that in Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenological way he holds with Aquinas that perception indicates for us that human beings we encounter in objective fashion are revealed as an integral unions of body and soul.

Both of our thinkers also hold that perception can be inwardly focused and that we can perceive how the human being, namely oneself, is experienced as an integral union of body and soul. Here, to use language from John Crosby, we are able to have a subject-subject relation with ourselves; we know ourselves in the very act of being subjects or we perceive ourselves reflexively. Another term for getting at this kind of inward perception is what, in Western Christian traditions of prayer, is called recollection. The recollected person gathers himself or herself together, dwells with himself or herself not in a solipsistic gaze but in an awareness of oneself as an acting person. I addressed the significance of this reflexive perception for Aquinas in Chapter Two, Part I, Section C when we addressed the intellectual soul's knowledge of itself. There, I showed that Aquinas holds that the presence of the mind to itself is a simple and sufficient path to self-knowledge. Such self-knowledge does not, however, indicate that one's own being is composite. But in another place, the conclusion of Chapter Two,

Aquinas does say that the human being can perceive himself or herself as having a composite nature:

If anyone however wishes to say that the intellectual soul is not the form of the body he must explain how it is that this action which is understanding may be the action of this man for everyone knows by experience that it is himself who understands.<sup>403</sup>

Here Aquinas indicates that each one can perceive himself or herself to be an integral union of body and soul because each can recognize that the flesh he or she carries is the flesh of a thinking being who orients it toward his or her own intellectual purposes. It would perhaps be superfluous to show how Merleau-Ponty holds with Aquinas that humans perceive themselves as composite beings since the phenomenological method itself is devoted to the exploration of consciousness. But then again noting the distinction Merleau-Ponty makes between perception of others and perception of oneself can reinforce the fact that his phenomenology is not a solipsistic exercise, not strictly devoted to examining the structures of consciousness, but to our lived body experience through which we both experience ourselves and the objects of the world.

We see then that both Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty stand together in beginning their philosophical investigations on the basis of initial sense perception of objects in the world. A significant corollary point is that for both thinkers it is the world which philosophy seeks to understand. The world comprises all that is for Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty. The later thinker does not believe that we can infer on the basis of contingent things the existence of a necessary being, God, and in this he differs markedly from Aquinas. Nonetheless, our two thinkers share a conviction that the philosopher seeks to know the world and that perception is the basis for any knowledge of it. For most objects

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<sup>403</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.76.1.

of the world perception enables us to gain knowledge by being object-directed. But when humans seek to understand themselves perception is both object and subject-directed. Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty share a critical point of commonality in their embrace of perception in both forms and it is through perception, in large part, that a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's anthropological thought is possible.

### **B.) Common Appeal to Interior Experience for Understanding Body/Soul Unity**

At the end of Chapter Two and directly above in the section on perception in its inwardly directed or subject-subject sense I explored a latent phenomenological aspect of Aquinas's anthropology. At this point in the dissertation I had initially hoped to explore more fully this dimension of Aquinas's thought. But if the central question I have been addressing all along is whether or not Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights can enrich Aquinas's philosophical anthropology, then it is enough for me to show that there is room for the former thinker's methodology within the latter thinker's philosophical *modus operandi*. I do not at this point intend to explore the extent to which Aquinas's thought may be phenomenological. My claim is that Aquinas is open to it because he himself makes a subjective turn in his philosophy as discussed above.<sup>404</sup> By "subjective

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<sup>404</sup> The subjective aspects of Aquinas's thought are wonderfully brought out and developed in the following three studies. The first came to my attention thanks to Thérèse Bonin: Charles de Koninck, "Introduction à l'étude de l'ame," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 3 (1947): 9-65. Here de Koninck shows that, for Aquinas, one must first come to an understanding of his or her own soul through reflexivity and interior experience before understanding the souls of others—i.e. that others have souls. A second study is by Joseph de Finance, *Being and Subjectivity*, trans. Norris W. Clarke, *Cross Currents* 6 (1946): 163-78. De Finance argues against those who would regard Thomism as strictly a philosophy of the object, that Aquinas recognizes the deep significance of subjectivity for understanding Being as act: "I know being only because I myself am a sharer in being. Identity in the intentional order presupposes connaturality in the real order...the idea of being includes at once being as present to the mind in its role as object



turn” I mean simply that he draws philosophical meaning about the nature of the world through exploring interior experiences. Broadly speaking, this is what phenomenology is.

Now, it is possible to draw philosophical conclusions about the non-human objects of the world through phenomenology. For example, Merleau-Ponty helps us to see the splendor and inexhaustible nature of objects by exploring how we know them in perspective. He concludes through phenomenology both that we are ordered to know objects and that they cannot be adequately grasped by the human mind given our embodied condition. But when the object under consideration is the human being himself or herself the resources of phenomenology become all the more useful because the very nature of the topic aligns so well with the nature of the methodology. I can certainly gain a great deal about things in the world (including humans) by considering them objectively, but I can significantly deepen my understanding if I consult my own lived experience of being human. And this is exactly why we see Aquinas appealing to internal experience in his discussion of the intellect’s knowledge of itself as intellect and as substantial form of the body. Just as he refers to our experience of other objects as he discusses their truth, so in the case of the body/soul union he refers to experience of the object, but in this case it is the very self of the human being.

Even if Aquinas were simply a philosopher of the object and considered the nature of human beings as if from arm’s length, it may be possible to show a Merleau-

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and being grasped immediately as constituting the very reality of the ego (p. 168).” A third book-length study is entitled *Subjectivity and Knowledge in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* by Mariasusai Dhavamony S.J., (Roma: Gregorian University Press, 1965). Dhavamony takes issue with those, among them Merleau-Ponty, who assume that subjectivity is a modern discovery. On the contrary Aquinas’s entire metaphysical project depends, at least in part, on subjective reflection.

Pontian enrichment of his thought. However, I have shown, albeit to a limited degree, that Aquinas himself appeals to interior experience and thus demonstrates openness to the rich phenomenological insights of Merleau-Ponty's thought. But when we consider the bulk of the arguments from Chapter Two, mostly taken from the discussions on the body/soul unity in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, we also see that Aquinas does not frequently make the "subjective turn." So, the fact that he makes limited appeal to interior experience in his philosophical anthropology while remaining open to it suggests that his thought could be bountifully enriched through a grafting of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights onto it.

### **C.) The Syncretic and Nature of Aquinas's Methodology Indicates Openness to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Insights**

In Chapter Two, Part II, Section D, I addressed the open-ended nature of Aquinas's philosophical system. Yes, he believes that it is possible to make eternally valid statements about the nature of reality. But, as I showed from Josef Pieper's essay, "The Timeliness of Thomism," Aquinas does not believe that his own propositions are fully adequate and that we can gradually grow in our knowledge of things. Although we can never know the essences of things insofar as they emerge from the mind of God, there is, as Pieper says, a "hope structure" in Aquinas's thought. We are in "a condition [of hope] that by its very nature cannot be fixed: it is neither comprehension and possession nor simply non-possession, but 'not-yet-possession.'"<sup>405</sup> Now, in his own developing understanding of the truth of the world, Aquinas was a thoroughgoing syncretist. Perhaps no other thinker in the history of Western philosophy has presented

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<sup>405</sup> *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 69.

such a blending of diverse strands of philosophical thought. Although the cornerstone of Aquinas's philosophical thought comes from Aristotle, his philosophy is so much more than simply baptized Aristotelianism. For example, the master concept of his *Summa Theologica*, that of the universe participating in its creative source and existing in a movement of return to God, comes directly from Neo-Platonic sources. To be coherent such a synthesis must present shared agreement between various perspectives but also indicate areas of disagreement; effective synthesis can be achieved only by discarding ideas which contradict the whole of a thinker's position and by utilizing others which are able to cohere with it. Thus, Aquinas disagrees with Neo-Platonic thinkers regarding the nature of the human being—the human is not essentially his or her soul, as Plotinus held, but a composite—while drawing upon their metaphysics of participation. He disagrees with Augustine about the relationship between faith and reason, for example, but constantly draws upon him in his *Treatise on Man* to establish his own positions. There is in Aquinas a philosophical stance of openness to growing in the truth and a syncretic approach to this growth. For example in Chapter One of *De Veritate* Aquinas provides his own theory of truth and then shows how this theory is suggested in a variety of interpretations of truth that have come down through history. As Pieper says:

Not one of the traditional formulae is rejected entirely or accepted as exclusively valid. Though they are in no way fully concordant, he can appreciate the particular validity of each. What actually is happening here? It happens that St. Thomas is, in effect, placing himself within the stream of traditional truth nourished by the past; without claiming to give a final solution, he leaves the way open for future quest and discovery as that stream flows onward toward the yet unknown.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

Given this generous syncretic approach to philosophy is there any doubt that Aquinas would not welcome insights from Merleau-Ponty that accord with his own anthropology while also enriching it? I turn now to specific examples of how this can be achieved.

### **Part III – A Merleau-Pontian Enrichment of Aquinas’s Philosophical Anthropology**

In this section I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions to show how they can enrich Aquinas’s argument that the intellectual soul is the substantial form of the body in three different ways. First, I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights richly illustrate Aquinas’s position that the intellectual soul is form of the body. Second, I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions can offer a better experiential base for Aquinas’s arguments than he himself provides. Third, I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions can be used to extend Aquinas’s claims regarding the intellect’s knowledge of itself.

#### **A) Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Insights Richly Illustrate Aquinas’s Position that the Intellectual Soul is Form of the Body**

The first way that Merleau-Ponty can be of service to Aquinas is simply through the provision of examples and illustrations of the lived body informed by its soul. We can begin to see this by reflecting upon the different styles of argumentation employed by both of our thinkers. Aquinas’s approach, as I described at the beginning of Chapter Three, is cosmological and largely object-directed. By cosmological I mean that he considers the ontological makeup of the human being as part of a vast description of all the beings in the universe. When Aquinas begins his argument in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II regarding the composite makeup of the human being he does not start with an examination of the human soul, but rather with the nature of intellectual substances as

such. He argues that intellectual substances are endowed with will, that they are immaterial, that in them there is act and potentiality, and so on. Thus, he begins by showing how the human intellect, not the composite human being, is like the angelic intellect. We are like the angels insofar as we are rational beings. He then examines the possibility that intellectual substances can be united to bodies. He argues that humans are like the sub-intellectual animals insofar as we have bodies. This cosmological approach is also object-directed in the sense that Aquinas generally appeals not to the subjective experience of being human but, for example, to logical conclusions which follow from the nature of intellects as such, to the nature of forms as they are observed in all living things, to our basic experience of humans as sensible wholes. In brief, his argument proceeds on the basis of looking upon human beings and their place in the hierarchy of the universe, rather than through looking at the human from within. This is certainly not always the case, as we saw with his appeal to interior experience in the *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.1, but as we saw in our lengthy exposition of his arguments from *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, it is largely the case. Perhaps because of this cosmological or object-directed approach, Aquinas seldom draws upon examples of experiencing ourselves as composite beings. Nor does he often illustrate his conclusions with such examples.

In contrast to Aquinas's methodology, we have Merleau-Ponty's almost exclusive appeal to subjective experience for his argument that consciousness is form of the body. I noted three distinct phenomenological descriptions for this position in Part III of Chapter III. I note here that these illustrations are just a minor sampling of the insights Merleau-Ponty provides through close attention to lived body experience. He comprehensively

explores, for example, how our experiences of space, time, motility, sexual expression, and language express how our bodily comportment is what it is because of the informing power of consciousness. Now, if we accept the conclusions of Part I of this Chapter that Merleau-Ponty's depiction of consciousness as form coheres with Aquinas's argument that the intellectual soul is form of the body, then all of Merleau-Ponty's subjectively oriented descriptions of the integral human being can be used to illustrate Aquinas's more cosmologically oriented teaching. We could say that Merleau-Ponty "fleshes out" Aquinas's arguments or that he adds a subjective dimension to it or that he shows the myriad implications in our practical lives of having composite natures through the informing power of the intellect.

### **B) Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Descriptions Can Offer a Better Experiential Base for Aquinas's Arguments than He Himself Provides**

As I mentioned at the outset of the dissertation my purpose is to show that Aquinas's philosophical anthropology can be enriched by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, not to exhaustively demonstrate all of the ways that such an enrichment could take place. In this section I point to just one critical place in the *Summa Theologia* Ia.76.1 where Aquinas begins an argument on a subjectively experiential basis. I have argued in Chapter One and in Part II above that this appeal to interiority indicates openness to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions. I now argue that by drawing upon Merleau-Ponty, the Thomist can have an even stronger basis for the kind of argument Aquinas provides in the *Summa Theologia* Ia.76.1.

First let us revisit the argument. In this article Aquinas asks "Whether the Intellectual Principle is United to the Body as Its Form?" Aquinas answers in the

affirmative and in the first part of his response he gives Aristotle's demonstration that the intellectual principle is the form of the body. It is in the second stage of Aquinas's response where he makes a latently phenomenological appeal. After giving Aristotle's demonstration he states that:

If anyone however wishes to say the intellectual soul is not the form of the body he must explain how it is that this action which is understanding may be the action of this man for every one knows by experience (*experitur*) that it is himself who understands.<sup>407</sup>

I, as a particular being made up of flesh and blood and existing at a given time and place, recognize that I myself understand, that understanding somehow emerges from this concrete, manifestly embodied creature. I am conscious of being the same one who both senses and thinks. Aquinas believes that this basic experience suggests that the intellect is the form of the body, but it is not a complete argument for there may be other explanations to account for it.

Now, it is certainly the case that the kind of experiences Aquinas appeals to indicates a profound connection between body and soul. I also agree with Aquinas that the only possible explanation for it is that the soul is form of the body. And yet the experience itself does not as directly show the composite nature of the body as other experiences could demonstrate. The experience does not shed immediate light on the forming power of the intellect; it only directly shows that I understand and my action of understanding is the action of this particular creature of flesh and blood.

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<sup>407</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.1, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 371: Si quis autem velit dicere animam intellectivam non esse corporis formam, oportet quod inveniatur modum quo ista actio quae est intelligere, sit huius hominis actio: experitur enim unusquisque seipsum esse qui intelligit. In this case I have slightly modified the Benzinger translation.

I submit that we can draw out of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations better examples for the experiential base of Aquinas's argument in *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.1 than the one provided by Aquinas. Let us look again at a passage quoted in Section C, Part III of Chapter Three from Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the lived body as expression and speech. He writes that:

If speech presupposed thought, if talking were primarily a matter of meeting the object through a cognitive intention or through a representation, we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them.<sup>408</sup>

Later on in the same chapter Merleau-Ponty makes a similar argument, but this time he references a position that seems to be taken by Aquinas himself and then shows its inadequacy:

It has always been observed that speech or gesture transfigure the body, but no more was said on the subject than that they develop or disclose another power, that of thought or soul. The fact was overlooked that, in order to express it (thought or soul), the body must in the last analysis become the thought or intention that it signifies for us.<sup>409</sup>

In both of these passages Merleau-Ponty points to a phenomenon that we all readily experience, that *thinking requires speaking*, that unless an idea is articulated it really never exists, that the very formulation of an idea occurs in the context of expressing it. Often, of course, this expression is inaudible but even in the silent sanctuary of our own minds we say words in order to think concepts which means that the body is never simply the instrument of consciousness but seamlessly interwoven with it. The intellect actualizes itself through the body. To admit this is not, of course, to deny Aquinas's

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<sup>408</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 229-30.



position that intellectual operations themselves are not bodily in nature. This cannot be because we grasp universals in our understanding and the body is inherently unable, because of its singularity, to grasp universals. But the point here is that our experience of thinking requiring the body to be complete provides a better experiential basis for *Summa Theologica* Ia.76.1 because it shows that our thinking does not simply take place in a bodily being but that it actually becomes itself in bodily acts of expressing. This simply could not be unless the intellect was form of the body.

### **C) Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Descriptions Can Be Used to Extend Aquinas's Claims Regarding the Intellect's Knowledge of Itself**

For this section I turn to Aquinas's position on the intellect's knowledge of itself. I introduced his argument in Section C, Part I of Chapter Two in a discussion about intellectual perception and I now briefly revisit this argument. Aquinas explains that once the intellect engages sensible beings outside of itself it becomes actualized and is then in a position to know itself. Aquinas explains that this can happen in two ways:

In the first place, singularly, as when Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands. In the second place, universally, as when we consider the nature of the human mind from knowledge of the intellectual act.<sup>410</sup>

The first way that the intellect knows itself is reflexive and takes place within the subjective experience of the individual human person. I can perceive that I have an intellectual soul in the very act of understanding something. While figuring out a geometry problem and reaching a solution I can recognize in myself my own intellect at

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<sup>410</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1: "Uno quidem modo, particulariter, secundum quod Socrates vel Plato percipit se habere animam intellectivam, ex hoc quod percipit se intelligere. Alio modo, in universali, secundum quod naturam humanae mentis ex actu intellectus consideramus."

work. The second way that the intellect can understand itself in its own act is a more abstract and objectively oriented route. In this case I consider the human intellect in its universal sense and draw out the logical implications of the intellectual act. Aquinas notes a difference between the two different paths to intellectual self-knowledge and stresses that the first way, attained through immediate subjective experience, is superior to the second:

There is a difference between these two kinds of knowledge, and it consists in this, that the mere presence of the mind suffices for the first; the mind itself being the principle of action whereby it perceives itself, and hence it is said to know itself by its own presence. But as regards the second kind of knowledge, the mere presence of the mind does not suffice, and there is further required a careful and subtle inquiry. Hence many are ignorant of the soul's nature, and many have erred about it.<sup>411</sup>

The superiority of the first route to the intellect's knowledge of itself is found in its simplicity. I need only perceive my own action of understanding to know my intellect. The errors to intellectual self-knowledge which can arise through the various steps of "subtle inquiry" are precluded by the immediacy of "the mere presence of the mind" to itself.

I turn now to Merleau-Ponty and the possibility of applying Aquinas's insights about the two separate forms of intellectual self-knowledge to two different forms of the intellect's knowledge of itself *as form of the body*. Aquinas says that the intellect as a substance can understand itself either through an objectively oriented "careful and subtle

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<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*: "Est autem differentia inter has duas cognitiones. Nam ad primam cognitionem de mente habendam, sufficit ipsa mentis praesentia, quae est principium actus ex quo mens percipit seipsam. Et ideo dicitur se cognoscere per suam praesentiam. Sed ad secundam cognitionem de mente habendam, non sufficit eius praesentia, sed requiritur diligens et subtilis inquisitio. Unde et multi naturam animae ignorant, et multi etiam circa naturam animae erraverunt."

inquiry” or through its mere presence to itself. What is to prevent the intellect as substantial form from knowing itself in these two ways?

I submit that the main arguments I outlined from Aquinas in Part II of Chapter Two regarding our knowledge of the composite nature of the human being fall into the “careful and subtle inquiry” category of argumentation. Clearly, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Aquinas is not appealing to the intellect’s direct presence to itself as form. But in *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1 Aquinas quotes an admonition from Augustine regarding self-knowledge: “*Let the mind strive not to see itself as if it were absent, but to discern itself as present—i.e., to know how it differs from other things; which is to know its essence and nature.*”<sup>412</sup> Now, part of the nature of the human intellect is to be a subsisting thing, but another part of its nature is to be the substantial form of the body. We can apply Augustine’s admonition to Aquinas and his investigations of the intellect as substantial form. We ought to strive to see the intellect present to itself as substantial form of its body so that it can immediately grasp the meaning of itself as substantial form.

Merleau-Ponty argues that when we dig down into perception we find that consciousness can be directly aware of itself as form of the body. In Part III of Chapter Three we looked at various descriptions Merleau-Ponty makes in *The Phenomenology of Perception* of how we immediately experience consciousness functioning as form of the body. We first examined experiences of being affected by external stimuli and how the body is not simply a passive receptor but actively involved, according to its own conscious purposes, in reacting to this stimuli. We take in the world according to the

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<sup>412</sup> *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1.

form consciousness gives the body and as we go out into the world we are able to ignore certain stimuli depending upon the orientation of our consciousness. At times, of course, we are subject to sense experiences that we cannot control. But even in these situations we are able to turn away and partly shut ourselves off from the offending stimuli. We also explored how tactile experiences show that the body is permeated with the intentions of pre-reflective consciousness (or operative intentionality) even as it “runs ahead” of reflective consciousness (or intentionality of act). We also looked at Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insight that thinking takes place in the context of speaking and writing which indicates that consciousness not only orders the body around its intentions but realizes itself through physical acts.

I submit that when we attend to the sort of experiences to which Merleau-Ponty draws our attention, the intellect can be directly present to itself as form of the body and therefore understand itself as form of the body. Aquinas insists that a thing cannot be known unless it is in act. But the lived body is the intellect as substantial form providing the body with the intellect’s own act. Perhaps the soul separated at death cannot immediately understand itself as substantial form of the body, although it would certainly recognize its inclination to be form of the body. But when the soul exists in its natural state the intellect can be, Merleau-Ponty shows, directly present to itself as form of the body. Through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology we are able to enrich Aquinas’s argument from the *Summa Theologica* Ia.87.1. Not only can the intellect be immediately aware of itself as a substance, but it can also be aware of itself as substantial form of the body.

## **Conclusion to the Dissertation**

In Chapter Two, Part I, Section D “On Aquinas’s Open Philosophical System,” I argued that Aquinas’s philosophy is profoundly open not only to insights from other thinkers with whom he otherwise disagrees, but that he understands that philosophy is an ongoing growth in the truth. Moreover, Aquinas does not assume that his own propositions are completely adequate to express the truth of the objects under his consideration and at times he offers several definitions of the same thing—e.g. the meaning of truth—cognizant that each proposition expresses something slightly different about this meaning. He also sees great value in showing agreement among thinkers and in revealing that his own positions are in harmony with philosophers who have preceded him.

Contemporary Thomists, who wish to follow Aquinas’s lead, should look for areas of compatibility between Aquinas and contemporary thinkers, especially when it leads to an enrichment of his thought. In this dissertation I have attempted to do that by arguing that certain of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights into the lived body experience—in particular that consciousness is form of the body—can be engrafted into Aquinas’s teaching that the intellectual soul is form of the body. I have not attempted to create some sort of hybrid anthropology on the basis of their respective insights into the nature of the human being as an integral unity. Rather, I have argued that Aquinas can draw upon Merleau-Ponty to exemplify and to extend his own positions. My intention has certainly not been to show all the ways that such an enrichment could take place, but to argue that it is possible, as well as desirable, and to indicate a few ways it can occur.

I began in Chapter One with an exposition of how two contemporary mind-body theorists, Eric LaRock and Ralph Ellis draw on our two thinkers in strikingly similar ways. LaRock, an analytical Thomist, argues that Aquinas's notion of form enables us to understand the human being as an integral union of body and intellectual soul while avoiding certain objections brought against Cartesian dualism: 1) the dualistic interaction objection (how can the mind cause brain functioning if its properties are so radically different?); 2) the neural dependence objection (how can mind and brain be separate if consciousness depends upon neurochemistry in the brain?) Ellis holds that Merleau-Ponty is a useful resource to shed light on the nature of the unity between mind and body. He argues, on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations of the lived body, that consciousness must be understood as form of the body and he holds also that consciousness as form avoids the same objections leveled against Cartesian dualism regarding dualistic interaction and neural dependence with which LaRock dealt. LaRock and Ellis, therefore, introduce us to some ostensibly close similarities between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty regarding the nature of the human being. Certainly, many questions arise in light of such apparent similarity. For example: would contemporary neuroscientists who draw on Merleau-Ponty also be open to Thomistic insights into the mind-body problem? Or, is it possible that their two accounts could work together to continue the happy demise of computational models of mind? The question I have addressed also naturally rises: if Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty stand together on critical points of anthropology, perhaps insights from the latter thinker, unknown to Aquinas, might be fruitfully integrated into Aquinas's own philosophical anthropology?

Now, one of the impetuses for my work is the call made by John Paul II for philosophers in the Catholic intellectual tradition to show continuity (where possible) between traditional Catholic philosophy and contemporary thought while avoiding eclecticism and in fact overturning it by pointing to common truths which transcend their historical frameworks. Thus, it was necessary to deal with objections to the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's thought, rather than naively put their ideas together regardless of philosophical differences between them. I presented the work of Robert Harvanek, who argues that drawing Aquinas together with phenomenology at a philosophical level is highly problematic. Harvanek claims that philosophy, for Aquinas, is a matter of syllogistic demonstration, while the phenomenologist merely describes experience, and that Aquinas depends upon a notion of historical experience that is quite different from the phenomenologist's insistence on immediate personal experience as the right ground for philosophy. I argued, to the contrary, that although Aquinas certainly draws on a more mediate sense of experience—i.e. that of “Western Man”—he also, at times, appeals to the human being's own immediate personal experience. Thus, Aquinas appears to be open to phenomenological insights. I further argued that Merleau-Ponty does not simply describe experience, but draws on it to make deductively valid claims about the nature of the human being.

Now, it is at this point that I need to make an admission. After arguing in Part I of Chapter Four that Merleau-Ponty goes beyond phenomenological description to deductively valid arguments about the nature of the human being and that such a mode of argumentation places him on the same philosophical playing field as Aquinas (with regard to deductively valid demonstrations), I did not then draw on any Merleau-Pontian

arguments in Part III of Chapter Four while arguing that Merleau-Ponty could enrich Aquinas's anthropology. In defense of this, let me simply state that part of my purpose for the dissertation is to show philosophical compatibility between Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas leading not only to the examples of enrichment I gave in Part III of Chapter Four but possibly to other ones as well. In my own examples of Merleau-Pontian enrichment I did not draw on complete arguments from Merleau-Ponty, but chose rather to show how his phenomenological descriptions of intellectual principle as form could supplement Aquinas's own modes of argument as well as better illustrate his conclusions. It turns out then that it was not strictly necessary to show that Merleau-Ponty makes deductively valid arguments in order to show how his phenomenology can enrich Aquinas's philosophical argument. But I suspect this tangent may be forgiven if it vindicates Merleau-Ponty of at least one charge Harvanek and other Thomists have leveled against phenomenologists. Unburdening others from ignorance was one of the duties of philosophy, Aquinas thought; he would applaud efforts to correct mistakes made by those who call themselves "Thomists."

I raised and answered two other objections to the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's philosophical anthropology. Some have claimed that, although Merleau-Ponty is not a reductive materialist, he believes nonetheless that the human is essentially a physical being, that consciousness directs the body but is not immaterial in nature. If Merleau-Ponty's anthropological ideas are grounded in an essential materialism (though not reductivistic), how could they positively contribute to a philosophical system that rejects the first principles of these ideas? In response to the physicalist interpretation of Merleau-Ponty I had argued that the nature of his phenomenological enterprise



precludes any assertion that the human is a wholly physical being. I argued that it would be impossible to show this on phenomenological grounds because any consideration of how the body gives rise to consciousness would have to be done on the basis of an embodied conscious awareness, a primordial givenness that we can explore but not justify through the resources of phenomenology. The phenomenologist would have to take himself or herself outside of phenomenology to claim that the human being is essentially physical. Thus, the Thomist seeking to draw on Merleau-Ponty does not have to pit himself or herself against a supposed materialistic doctrine of the human being in his work. It is true that Merleau-Ponty uses phenomenology to establish deductively valid arguments about the human being, but none of these (to my knowledge) are directed toward the ultimate metaphysical principles which make up the human being. He argues that the human being cannot be an assemblage of parts in a reductively materialistic sense and that the human being cannot be a parallel structure of mind essentially detached from body because our experience belies these claims. But he never argues that the embodied consciousness I find myself to be is at core a physical process and he never closes the door to the possibility that the human being is partly made up of an immaterial dimension, although he would certainly oppose any claim that the intellect can subsist apart from its body or that the lived body is what it is through the infusion of a spiritual principle.

Another obstacle I raised was the claim that Merleau-Ponty is an idealist who does not direct himself to the human being as a concrete existent, but as an idea. Thus, Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas, if the objection held, would direct themselves to different objects. Merleau-Ponty would concentrate on the appearance of the human in

consciousness, the human as constituted by his mind. Aquinas would concentrate on defining the nature of the really existing human. The one would be directed towards a nature as created in his own mind; the other toward nature as given. If our respective philosophers do not even address themselves to the same object how could we find compatibility leading to enrichment?

While working through this objection it was necessary to allow that there is a degree of idealism in Merleau-Ponty's work, but not of a radical sort. He does not cut off the world through a Husserlian *époché*, but instead holds that phenomenology ought to draw out the meaning of the world as it is given. Further, Merleau-Ponty is clear that the world acts first upon the human being through the receptivity of pre-reflective consciousness. Thus, our knowing is directed towards the world and depends upon the world. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that every human knower necessarily approaches the world through his or her own subjective perspective (which normally does not preclude a grasp of shared universal meaning) and also imputes meaning onto the objects of the world (as we saw in the "Man on the Mountain" example). Merleau-Ponty holds that the meaning of objects in the world does not simply emerge isolated from the context of their involvement with humans. But this kind of idealism, if it can even be called such, is not the sort of radical idealism that would put Merleau-Ponty's "human being" on a different plane of reality than the one to whom Aquinas directs himself. Both of our thinkers find themselves grounded in this concretely existing world and both come to the conclusion that actually existing human beings are composite in nature, integral unions of an intellectual principle and a body.

Finally, it was necessary to address to what extent Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty's understanding of core anthropological terms are compatible. I argued that there is no lack of compatibility between them on the meaning of consciousness as form so long as we understand that consciousness is, for Merleau-Ponty, the principle of intellect and agency in the human being and understand that this aligns with Aquinas's intellectual soul which can be aware of itself and thus also be a principle of consciousness. I also argued that there are points of critical commonality between Aquinas's notion of body and Merleau-Ponty's. For both thinkers the self-aware intellectual principle is able to form (not merely direct!) the body around its intentions and to be seamlessly integrated into it. For both thinkers, the body is therefore essentially different than the body of a sub-rational animal; the human body indicates that it is formed by an intellectual principle. For Aquinas this intellectual principle is the substantial form of the body. Merleau-Ponty will not say that consciousness is substantial form of the body and thus there is a stronger sense of the unity between soul and body in Aquinas than in Merleau-Ponty. For the later thinker when consciousness awakens to itself it is embodied and the body is always experienced as an integral part of being human, but he does not say that the body is always what it is because of the intellect functioning as its substantial form. There are certainly many areas of critical overlap between Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty in the meaning they assign to key anthropological terms. This bodes well for the Thomist as he or she seeks to draw on Merleau-Ponty.

In the context of addressing the various objections to the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's anthropological thought in Part I of Chapter Four I necessarily indicated areas of compatibility between our two thinkers—e.g. that each

thinker draws conclusions about the nature of the human being on the basis of immediate personal experience. But because my purpose in Part I was simply to overcome objections to the possibility of my overall project, I did not adequately dwell on these areas of compatibility. In Part II of Chapter Four I did shed more light on areas of common ground between our two thinkers which pave the way for a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's thought. I argued that our two thinkers share a conviction that the philosopher seeks to know the world and that perception is the basis for any knowledge of it. For most objects of the world perception enables us to gain knowledge by being object directed. But when humans seek to understand themselves perception is both object and subject directed. Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty share a critical point of commonality in their embrace of perception in both forms and it is through perception, in large part, that a Merleau-Pontian enrichment of Aquinas's anthropological thought is possible.

Finally, in Part III of Chapter Four I offered three ways that such an enrichment can take place. First, I argued that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights richly illustrate Aquinas's position that the intellectual soul is form of the body. Second, I argued that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions can offer a better experiential base for Aquinas's arguments than he himself provides. Third, I argued that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions can be used to extend Aquinas's claims regarding the intellect's knowledge of itself.

Now, Aquinas is one of the most succinct writers in the history of Western philosophy and does not usually dwell on practical examples for introducing the problems he addresses or for illustrating his solutions to these problems. Some might

respond that Aquinas is so terse because the examples are merely a way of helpfully describing the philosophical issues but do not have much to bear on the content of the argumentation itself. In this same vein some may question the usefulness of phenomenological descriptions to enrich Thomistic arguments when they already have, so it is assumed, adequate experiential bases or practical illustrations.

One brief response to those who might doubt the usefulness of the kind of Merleau-Pontian enrichment I have proposed here is that integrating Merleau-Ponty's rich phenomenological insights of the lived body experience with Aquinas's arguments serve to show agreement between our two philosophers and Aquinas was always wont to show agreement where it existed. When two separate lights come together and shine in the same direction the beam they produce is greater than it would have been had they remained separate. When philosophers from two very different traditions and methodologies come to the same conclusions about core aspects of the human being, it advances the truth, at least from a Thomistic perspective, to show agreement between them. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of lived unity between body and soul corroborates Aquinas's own position and serves to demonstrate this agreement.

A second response emerges as we consider the purpose of the philosopher. Aquinas himself is clear that a primary objective of the philosopher is to teach truth and oppose falsehood.<sup>413</sup> Effective education demands that the teacher make himself or herself as understandable as possible to his or her audience. Students must be able to clearly grasp the concepts being introduced to them in order to grow in the truth being

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<sup>413</sup> See his *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.1.3., "The Office of the Wise Man."

presented. I am not suggesting here that the contemporary person is unable to fruitfully study Aquinas's medieval style of argumentation or to recognize the contemporary relevance of the issues he addresses. However, there is a strong contemporary preoccupation both with the subject and with the body. Human beings today often emphasize validating philosophical claims with subjective experiences and often have great difficulty thinking of themselves as anything more than complex arrangements of matter. I suggest, therefore, that an effective approach the Thomist can take to teaching the contemporary person is to show how Aquinas's arguments (in this case his position on the integral union of body and soul) are verified in subjective experiences, especially those that emphasize the lived body. So, if Merleau-Ponty provides a rich account of how we actually experience ourselves as a union of soul and body by virtue of the intellect's informing power over the body this could be useful to Thomists as they teach Aquinas's philosophical anthropology. There is of course a difference between the Thomist using Merleau-Ponty to more effectively present Aquinas's positions and using him to enrich Aquinas's actual arguments. I have not suggested in the final Part of this dissertation that Merleau-Ponty simply does the former; I have argued that he can actually extend Aquinas's arguments. But the pedagogical point is significant when we consider that one of the chief purposes of the philosopher, according to Aquinas, is persuading others to abandon false positions and accept true ones.

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