

WHAT IS THE SOUL?

SCHOOLMAN

IN 1311 it was decreed at the Council of Vienne, in the south of France, that 'whoever obstinately presumes to assert, defend, or hold that the rational or intellective soul is not of itself and essentially the form of the human body, is to be classed as a heretic'.

The nature of the soul is properly speaking a matter of philosophical enquiry. But it is clearly a matter which touches Christian faith very closely. There have been and there are all sorts of philosophical opinions about the soul and human nature which would make the Christian gospel of salvation quite meaningless; which the Church therefore does not hesitate to condemn. Nowadays one would think immediately of any form of materialism which does not allow for the immortality of the soul.

But in this condemnation the Council of Vienne was concerned with the opposite kind of error, which could well be called spiritualist, and would in effect deny the body its proper place in the scheme of salvation. What is being condemned is any theory which regards the body as 'the prison of the soul', or the soul as the 'ghost in the machine'; which would make the union of body and soul something accidental or artificial, a casual *imbroglio* best taken as little notice of as possible; any such theory therefore as the transmigration of souls, which envisages the soul changing bodies as people change houses; or conversely any theory which would explain various psychological phenomena by supposing that a succession of distinct soul-entities can occupy the same body, like a succession of tenants in one house.

We should observe however that the condemnation is so phrased as to commit the believer to a positive position only in the most general terms. It obliges us to hold that 'the rational or intellective soul is of itself and essentially the form of the human body'. This definition is indeed couched in scholastic Aristotelian language; the Council was, after all, concerned with a matter that had been raised and was being disputed in such language. But it would be a mistake to suppose that it imposes on us the precise Aristotelian, Thomist, position in this matter. That position does

indeed fit neatly and comfortably into this definition of the Council's; it is one which the Church has ever since smiled on; and I propose now to amplify the definition in terms of it. But I do this only because I think it is philosophically the most respectable position, and without wishing to deny that there can be others which are well within the limits of the conciliar definition, and in complete accord with the requirements of Christian faith.

'The rational or intellective soul—.' The human soul is called rational or intellective to distinguish it from what the scholastics called the vegetative and the sensitive soul, the soul or life principle, that is, of plants and animals. Human beings as well as plants and animals have vegetative functions (nutrition, growth, reproduction) and sensitive functions (sensations, imagination, appetite). But in addition they have rational or intellective functions, the power of thought, reflection, choice, will. Some medieval philosophers were inclined to account for all these functions by supposing three souls in man, vegetative, sensitive, intellective. St Thomas, true to Aristotle and common sense, would allow us only one soul each, which is called intellective from its highest power or function to distinguish it from lesser varieties, but which also has these lower powers in common with them. It is one and the same soul in virtue of which (or rather, in the several virtues of which) I both think, and hear, and digest.

'—is the form of the human body.' The main point of this phrase is, I think, that the soul is not to be put directly and simply in the category of things or complete substances, like apples and pears, angels and men and polar bears. The complete thing or substance in this case is the human being, who consists of a certain sort of matter, namely the human body, in-formed, shaped, organized, made specifically *human* by a certain sort of form, the rational or intellective human soul. This analysis of the objects of the physical world in terms of matter and form is one of the cardinal features of Aristotle's natural philosophy. Its categories are taken from the world of art or manufacture. An earthenware jar is made of a certain *material*, clay; and it is made into what it is, a jar, by being given a certain *form* or shape. It is this form that distinguishes it either from a shapeless, formless, lump of clay, or from other artifacts like statuettes and saucers. Neither the shape nor the clay (from the artisan's point of view) is a complete thing in its own right; the thing is the jar-shaped clay. Take away the

clay, and the shape does not subsist by itself as a reality, like the Cheshire cat's grin when the cat disappeared. Break the shape, and while the clay is still there, it is no longer the same thing, the jar. It has become an unco-ordinated pile of new things, with new haphazard forms, no longer organized and integrated by its jar form.

Aristotle transposed these concepts from the world of art to the world of nature, with the necessary modifications which we shall be noticing shortly. Meanwhile it is enough to observe that on this analysis the forms of natural things, the inner organic 'shapes' which their nature gives them (form at a deeper level than the external shape which the potter gives his jar) do not subsist independently of the things they in-form. Cut down a tree, kill a cat, and what you are left with is the material remains of tree and cat, which because you have 'broken' the tree- or cat-form, called in the case of living organisms the life principle or soul, are no longer organized in a vital unity, and are as really fragmentary as the pieces of a broken jar, even though their disintegration proceeds more slowly. But the remains are no longer genuine tree-matter or cat-matter, no longer susceptible of tree- or cat-form; and these forms do not carry on a floating existence by themselves any more than the shape of the jar you knock off the mantelpiece continues to enjoy a ghostly existence. Why not? because they never were things by themselves, but only the forms of things which have now been destroyed.

But nature does have its unique case of the Cheshire cat's grin continuing to subsist after the cat has vanished, and that is the case of the human soul. Like the tree-soul or cat-soul, it is not primarily a complete, substantial thing, but the form of a complete thing, namely of the human being. But man is at the top of the scale of the physical world. His natural form is of a more potent quality, and has greater virtuosity than those of lesser creatures. Besides its 'psychosomatic' functions, which it exercises in and through the material organism it informs, the human soul has higher functions which transcend the body, and are not inherently dependent on any of its organs, the functions of mind and will. These are what we can call its spiritual functions, though it would be preferable, were it not for the equivocations of the word, to call them its psychic functions. This fundamental Aristotelian-Thomist position about the soul's intellectual functions is by no means

obvious, or easy to prove to everybody's satisfaction. But we are not concerned to prove it here. Taking it as given, it follows from it that the soul, which can *function* independently of the body, can also *exist* independently of the body. It survives the body's dissolution in death. But it survives as still the form of the human body, as an incomplete substance, something of a rather tenuous, shadowy substantiality, philosophically speaking; something still in need of its other half, the human body, to make the complete, solidly substantial thing, namely the human person, of which it is the form. So we see that this Aristotelian philosophy of the soul is very congenial to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, a doctrine absolutely central to the gospel of salvation.

Finally, 'the rational or intellective soul is *of itself and essentially* the form of the human body'. We have been comparing the soul of the human being to the shape of the earthenware jar. But there is a very important difference, not merely of degree but of kind. The shape of the jar is 'accidental' to the earthenware, something that happens to it from without, slapped onto it or put into it by the potter. A jar is precisely an artifact, a natural substance to which the artisan has given an artificial form for a particular purpose. But the human soul is the natural form of the human body, not something artificially worked into it. It is its essential or substantial form, what makes it radically a living human body at all. The human body has many accidental forms, more superficial modifications or qualifications such as size, colour, sex, constitution, temperament, character. All these are natural and not artificial, though some of them can be and ought to be cultivated. A human being cannot be without them. Still, they are not the human being's essential form, because they 'happen to' or inhere in a living human body already constituted in being as living and human by its essential form, the soul. Their accidental nature is shown both by their variety—every human individual is differently modified by them, without thereby being more or less or differently human; and by their variability—they develop and they decay, and we do not always remain the same size or in the same state of health, or display the same character. But underneath all this change the human person's identity remains unchanged, he remains the same person, because he is all the time being held together by the same basic life principle, the same essential form, the same soul.