



Souls: sensitive & separated

Introduction

Aristotle was usually thought to have given two definitions of the soul in the second book of *De Anima*. The second of these calls it “that by which we live, feel, and think”.¹ Of the soul’s three parts, the vegetative is that by which we live, the sensitive that by which we feel, the rational that by which we think. Human souls have all three parts; animals the vegetative and sensitive; plants only the vegetative.

Among corporeal forms, none but the human soul has a rational part; this it shares with angels. The sensitive and vegetative parts, on the other hand, it shares with animals and plants. The sensitive part is pivotal. The union of the rational part of the soul with the body is mediated by the sensitive, not the vegetative part. The sensitive part supplies to the phantasia the sensible species whose conversion by the intellect yields intelligible species which, unlike sensible species, inhere in the intellect itself. Moreover, because the senses reside, as quasi- or partial forms, in the sense organs, the sensitive part, in communicating with the intellect, unites it with the body by way of relations internal to the soul. Similarly, the locomotive powers, which also belong to the sensitive part of the soul, are the sole means by which the will affects the body. Those powers too were thought to reside in parts of the body. For Suárez in particular, according to whom the essential feature that distinguishes

1. “Anima est quo vivimus, et quo sentimus, ac intelligimus primo” (*De An.* 2c1, text. 24; Suárez *De An.* 1c3no1, 3:485).

the human soul from other spiritual substances is its aptitude for union with the body, the sensitive part of the soul, which is primarily responsible for the union, would seem to be part of its essence. A human soul without a sensitive part would be incapable of union, hence no longer human.

At the moment of death the soul is separated from its body, which very quickly ceases to exist as a single thing. In particular the organs of sense and of locomotion are corrupted. If the senses must reside in those organs, then a separated soul has no sensitive part. That outcome raises a number of questions.

- (i) If the separated soul has no senses, what sort of knowledge can it acquire in the after-life? Barring miracles, all the knowledge we acquire in this life comes to us through the senses, immediately or by intellectual operations. How then can the soul learn anything between death and resurrection? There was good reason to believe that it must. The good in heaven are rewarded with new knowledge; the evil in hell endure torments; and Scripture tells us that on several occasions the dead have communicated with the living. But if the intellect acquires new intelligible species only by way of the senses, new knowledge is impossible.
- (ii) More specifically: most philosophers agree that disembodied souls have, like angels, the power to change their location. But if the motive power belongs entirely to the sensitive part of the soul, it does not survive separation. Separated souls ought not to be able to move themselves.
- (iii) Finally: a separated human soul retains its specific difference from angels. Yet if all its organic powers have vanished, sensitive and vegetative alike, nothing would remain to distinguish the human soul except perhaps the strength and scope of its remaining powers. It doesn't seem as if that was a popular option; moreover, a Thomist would be compelled to hold that as with angels, no two separated souls can be of the same species. Yet upon the resurrection of the body, presumably all those who are saved become human again.

The existence of separated souls, like that of angels, was part of the religious doctrine that a philosopher like Suárez was obliged to uphold. But apart from that, they yielded handy test cases, or what we would call thought-experiments by which to test claims about the nature of the human soul. The possibility of separated souls, for example, is much eas-

ier to believe if you are persuaded that purely spiritual substances actually exist. But angels are purely spiritual substances. Unlike some of the thought-experiments conducted by philosophers now, these had the advantage of being based in traditions that helped to stabilize what we now call “intuitions” about them. Although theories of spiritual substances, like theories of transubstantiation, tend to be neglected now in favor of topics less flagrantly obsolete, they were an integral part of the work of many early modern philosophers.

In what follows I first describe in a general way the relation of the soul to its powers according to Suárez. I then take up the issues mentioned above: the acquisition of new species, the power of locomotion, the definition of the soul. My text will be the disquisition on separated souls that concludes Suárez’s *De anima*. The general aim is to understand just how the sensitive part of the human soul is essential to it, given that a separated but still human soul lacks that part. I conclude with a look ahead to Descartes and an admonition to people who want to backdate our current fixation on qualia to the early modern.

§1 The soul & its powers

The soul is first of all a substance. In animals it is an incomplete substance requiring matter to exist. In humans it is a complete substance endowed with a natural appetite for union with matter.

In agreement with Thomas, Suárez holds that the powers proper to a living thing are distinct from its soul and from its essence. They differ from the soul by their definition: the soul, for example, is essentially ordered to the body, its powers to their operations. Moreover, since the powers of the soul are distinct from one another, they must (or all but one of one) be distinct from the soul. Indeed they are, as Suárez argues against Scotus, really and not just formally distinct. Rather surprisingly it follows that they can exist apart from the soul—there can be a power of thought, and therefore thoughts, without a thinker—but for our purposes it suffices to note that the soul can exist without them. There can be, for example, a human soul that not only is not actually thinking but lacks even the power to think. What must remain is the possibility that the power of thought should be produced from it.

That point is reinforced when Suárez considers the efficient cause of the powers of the soul (2c3no2). The spiritual powers, intellect and will, and whatever motive power the soul possesses post mortem inhere in the soul itself as their subject. The other powers do not: one argument for this is the diversity of organs supporting the diverse senses. To the obvious argument that if the senses inhere in the organs, and not in the soul itself, Suárez replies that sensing, as a vital operation, “depends intrinsically on the first principle of life”, namely the soul, and cannot occur without it. Since a power exists for the sake of its operations, there is no reason to believe it will exist where it is necessarily prevented from operating.

Following Thomas (or so he thinks), but in disagreement with certain Thomistæ, Suárez holds that the intrinsic powers of the soul, like the intrinsic virtues of any form, are produced from it by an action distinct from the act that creates the form itself. In this respect, the powers of the soul differ greatly from the “dispositions” that must be introduced into the body in order that it may receive the soul. Those are caused not by the soul but by its progenitor. The efficient causality of substantial forms in relation to their intrinsic powers is called *emanatio*; since English has not borrowed that term, I will call it “emanation”.

Emanation is an action of the soul. Like any action of created things, it can be prevented by God.

For suppose that God creates the substance of the soul while impeding the emanation of powers from it [...]: there would remain then the substance of the soul without intellect or will; but if God later removed the impediment, and gave back to the soul its nature, certainly the intellect and will would emanate from it, just as it the first instant of generation or creation (2c3no10, 3:582).

It follows that a soul need not even be capable of thinking or willing, but only of producing those powers, which it will naturally inevitably do. What is essential to the soul, then, is that it is the kind of thing that could have intellect, will, senses, and so forth; it need not be a thing that actually has them. The human soul can therefore lack not only sensations after death, but the senses themselves, without ceasing to be human. Suárez is here motivated, it seems to me, by a general inclination to make the essence of substances as independent as possible from their actuality. God can impede the actualization of any of the soul’s operations, or the emanation of any of its powers; but in so doing, he does not alter its essence at

all. The scope of divine action is enlarged as much as it can be; the stability of the essences contained objectively in the divine ideas is untouched.

§2 Postmortem instruction

Citing Thomas, Suárez observes that the powers of the soul do not originate from it confusedly, in a rush, but only in a certain order. That order is from the less perfect to the more perfect. Though under normal circumstances all the powers of the soul proceed from it in the same instant—the instant of generation or creation—, the less perfect powers, because they serve the more perfect and are therefore presupposed by them, precede them by nature if not temporally in generation. The operation of nutrition is prior to that of sensation, because the organ must be nourished in order to sense, and sensation is prior to the operations of the intellect. The same order therefore obtains among the respective powers (1c3no15; 3:584; cf. Thomas ST pt1q77a4 ad 2 & 3). The inferior powers can be called, following Thomas, the “matter” of the powers they serve.

Now the sensitive powers can never occur without the vegetative powers that serve them. They require organs, organs require nourishment. The intellect, on the other hand, not only can but must survive in separated souls even though, for lack of organs, they have no senses. Are we then to say, like the author of Ecclesiastes, that “the dead know nothing”, or that in the afterlife “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge nor wisdom” (Eccl. 9:5, 9:9; De anima 6c3no5, 3:787)?

First of all the soul does retain the intellectual species and habits of will it acquired in this life. The body is necessary to them neither as matter nor as efficient cause, and Suárez can think of no other manner of dependence.

The acquisition of new species is another matter. Most authors held that the soul can indeed acquire them. Thomas holds, moreover, that it can do so naturally, without miracle (6c4no1). There are many reasons to believe this. For example, those who die young would remain in their state of ignorance until the Resurrection. Or again: it is absurd that the souls of the beatified in heaven should be less capable than they were on earth, absurd too that souls in hell should not experience their torments. Suárez cannot entertain seriously,

though apparently others did, the thought that the soul simply remains dormant between death and Resurrection.

The difficulty is not whether souls acquire new species after death but how that happens. Rejecting Scotus's account, which rests, according to Suárez, on a false view of the operations of the agent intellect, Suárez, siding with Thomas, holds that the soul, when joined with the body, acquires species by conversion to sensible phantasmata (see ST pt1q89art1). The phantasia in which those phantasmata reside is one of the powers of the sensitive soul, and does not survive death (see 4c2no11–13; 3:719). The separated soul, on the other hand, acquires them by “conversion to those which are intelligible simpliciter”, just as purely spiritual substances do (6c4no3–4, 3:788). The “infusion” of intelligible species into a human soul is for separated souls “contained within the order of nature” (6c4no5)² even though in this world it would require a supernatural intervention and is reserved for saints and other privileged individuals. What makes it natural for separated souls is that a separated soul has no other means to acquire species; a soul joined with a body does. The natural order followed by God after the creation thus not only permits but also somehow requires us to gather species by way of the senses, even though it is possible for an embodied soul to acquire them by infusion. For embodied souls, conversion to sensible species is natural, infusion un- or supernatural: it is not yet clear why.

The senses, as we have seen, inhere in organs that would cease to exist if the vegetative powers no longer sustained them. The service of the senses to the intellect, on the other hand, is not required in order for the intellect or intelligible species to exist. They are an efficient cause of intelligible species but not a sustaining cause.

It is therefore possible for intelligible species, and the intellect itself, to remain in a soul deprived of its sensitive part. Infusion might seem like an ad hoc manoeuvre, an otherwise unmotivated adjunct to the naturalistic account of intellection derived from Aristotle. But something like it is needed to account for the instruction of angels. So it is not entirely ad hoc. Moreover it can be justified on the grounds that, since the purpose of the intellect is to know, God will provide with the means to do so in whatever circumstance it finds itself. What remains puzzling is that the natural order should require that an embodied soul acquire intelligible species not by infusion, but by way of the senses.

2. Species a Deo, ab Angelis: 6c4; Disp. 9§3no9; De angelis 1c5.

§3 Moving dead souls

An analogous puzzle arises from Suárez's discussion of locomotion among separated souls. Earlier in *De Anima* Suárez has argued that the power of locomotion—meaning change of place of the body, and therefore change of location or *præsentia* for the soul—resides in the muscles and in the heart.

One must first explain how separated souls can be said to change their location. Only bodies have places in Aristotle's sense. Suárez here draws on discussions of the category *Ubi* and on similar questions concerning angels and the omnipresence of God. The technical term *præsentia* or “presence” denotes the mode a thing has by virtue not of being bounded by other things of the same sort—souls have no boundaries—, but by virtue simply of being here and not there. Only God is everywhere; angels and separated souls are in some locations but not others. That is why it makes sense to say that souls in Limbo are “distant” from souls here on Earth, and that they are closer to each other than to any soul here or in heaven. Presences can change: that is to say, things once distant can be near one another, a soul on earth can find itself in hell, and so forth. Presence, I should note, is distinct from being “at” a place by virtue of exerting power there; the exertion of power presupposes presence, but not conversely.

Souls, therefore, can move. The question is whether they do so by their own power or only by being acted upon by another. Suárez holds that the soul can move itself. Part of the argument is parallel to that concerning species. The soul has, when embodied, the power to move bodies, and to change its location in that way. When separated, it has—naturally, in Suárez's view—the power to move itself, as angels do, since then it has no other means of changing its location. This apparently new power requires no organ; like the intellect, it inheres in the soul itself. Suárez writes:

[When it is] in the body [the soul] possesses a motive power, and communicates it to the body: and so it also has that [power] when separated—for why should it give it up? (6c2no8, 3:785).

The implication, however, that the motive power in embodied souls is identical to the motive power in separated souls cannot be correct. In embodied souls it inheres in an organ; in a separated soul, it cannot; an accident cannot migrate from one subject to

another. The power of self-movement (whose object, I should note, is the soul, not the body) must either be a new power acquired at the moment of death, or else a power we have all along but somehow never exercise.

Aside from the empirical evidence in favor of our having the power of self-locomotion after death, Suárez offers an argument from ends:

Our souls, when separated, can live in society with one another naturally, since this is proper to rational creatures: therefore they can change location; if, on the other hand, they remained perpetually in the same place, they would be like oysters and other creatures having the most imperfect degree of life: but the life of separated souls is most perfect: therefore, etc. (6c2no8, 3:785).

Again the argument parallels the argument about species. One of our ends as rational creatures is to live in society. On Earth we gather by moving our bodies; in the afterlife we cannot change location in that way, so God then provides us—naturally, not supernaturally—with another.

You might wonder why, if we possess this power even while embodied, we never exercise it. The body can be a unpleasant place; why not leave it for a little while, as Father Daniel has Descartes leave his to go exploring the universe? The answer is that

even if the soul has a proper and spiritual power to move itself, nevertheless when it is in the body the dispositions necessary to its informing the body are present, and so it is as if bound by the natural union, and cannot move itself otherwise than by being moved by a corporeal power (6c2no9, 3:785),

namely, the locomotive power belonging to the sensitive part of the soul. That power is adequate to our earthly purposes, and so (it seems) we must use it, and we must not (or are prevented from) using the power used by separated souls. Union with the body, Suárez concludes, is “in no way free”.

§4 On the essence of the human soul

I have indicated that in the natural order the human soul is united with a body. There are, as Suárez notes, many disadvantages to being in that condition. The intellectual powers operate more perfectly in separated souls, and by that we are enabled to pursue more fully

our “vehement inclination” to know God and the angels (6c9no1, 3:797). Union with the body hinders not only our powers but our highest cognitive aims. We might be inclined, then, to agree with Plato that embodiment is not a natural condition of any spiritual substance, or at least with Avicenna (Meta. 9c1) that embodiment is a kind of larval state from which we naturally depart to one more suited to our nature.

Suárez agrees with Thomas that the “whole essence of the soul is to inform the body” (ST pt1q81art4). Its aptitude for doing so is inseparable from it; it is not something we shed like an old skin. The crucial point then is to explain how it is natural for the soul to be in a condition that is in certain important ways worse than separation.

Part of the answer is this. Our imperfections can no more be separated from our being than our perfections. The miseries of this world are as natural to us as its joys, especially those that result from union with corruptible matter. It is not violent, for example, but natural that we, even though it would be better for us to be able to use our reason always, to be deprived of it in childhood. The generation of the body, and the period of immaturity following it, serve the end of strengthening the body and readying it for procreation; since what follows from the pursuit of a natural end is itself natural—it is, in effect, a necessary consequence of our perfection, just as being on the ground is a necessary consequence of perfectness in feet (6c9no4, 3:799).

Admittedly the condition of separation is more natural to us if one considers what we have in common with other spiritual substances. But (Suárez says) “those things are more natural absolutely that agree with a thing according to its essence [that is, to its proper essential features] than those that agree with it according to what it has in common [with others]” (6c9no6). What distinguishes the human soul among spiritual substances is being capable of, and inclined toward, union with matter. Embodiment, therefore, and what follows from it, including illness and death are more natural to us than separation and what follows from that, even if it includes a clearer vision of God.

In case that answer leaves you still unhappy amid your infirmities, Suárez offers one last reason. The best, and in the sense above the most natural, condition of all for a human soul would be union with an incorruptible body. That condition is, according to faith, just what we enter into when the body is resurrected. Salvation and resurrection require, of course, the supernatural gift of grace. But even that, though it exceeds our natural powers to acquire, lies within the frame of divine providence. The human soul is in the unique posi-

tion of being able to fulfill all its capacities (*tota ejus capacitas repleri*) only by being elevated above itself (6c9no6. 3:800). Souls in heaven desire, by a natural appetite, reunion with the body.

To conclude with Suárez: the human soul is a spiritual substance. That is its genus. What makes it human, its proper essence, is its aptitude for union with a body. That places it unambiguously in the order of perfection of created things. Suárez's intention, here and elsewhere in *De Anima*, is on the one hand to support that claim, and on the other to derive as much as he can concerning the powers, operations, and condition of the human being from it. A posteriori sensation is evidence for the genuine union of body and soul; a priori the sensitive powers can be explained as consequences of that union, which is the defining purpose of the human soul.

§5 Descartes the conservative

I will fulfill now the promise made earlier to issue an admonition against anachronism. In the light of what I have brought forward here, together considerations drawn from the Aristotelian theory of the senses generally, Descartes' philosophy of mind and body begins to look less radical than it is usually thought to be. Like Suárez, he holds that sensation, imagination, and the other powers attributed to the sensitive soul (except locomotion, for which he has no use) are not essential to the mind. It is not easy to determine from the texts whether a separated Cartesian soul merely lacks sensations or the power of sensing altogether; what is clear is that a soul could be deprived of its senses without ceasing to be human. Descartes does not use the language of *dimanatio* or *emanatio*. But it does seem that what distinguishes the human soul from other spiritual substances is that it is capable, at first or second hand, of sensation.

Unlike Suárez, however, he holds that sensations inhere not in the organs of sense but in the soul alone. That would seem to open the way, as Rorty and others have suggested, to a new theory of the mental according to which awareness or consciousness is the defining feature of mental events or properties. There is some textual support for that claim. Yet to define modes of thought in that way would be to define them by way of the means by which they are known—an epistemological style of definition. I don't think Descartes can be

brought that near to the twentieth century. Modes of thought are, by definition, things that cannot exist without a mind as their subject. Mind, or spiritual substance generally, is thinking substance. The human mind is a spiritual substance that has a natural relation to matter, just as it is for Suárez. (This is one place where neglecting nonhuman spiritual substances invites anachronism.) Our evidence for that relation consists in the relation we find between sensations, passions, and actions: we see, from the tendency of sensation to give rise by way of exciting passions to that action which will best serve to preserve the union, that God has made the mind so as to be joined with a body. In his psychology, unlike his physics, Descartes can admit divine purposes, since here we have evidence of them.

What remains is to understand why sensations are put on the side of mind rather than on the side of body. Part of the answer is given by Descartes' commitment, from the earliest years of his scientific career, to mechanism, which for him entailed the reduction of material qualities to the modes of extension. Descartes thinks he knows what those modes are, and they do not include sensory qualities. Those were the radical moves.

On the other hand, it can be argued, on the basis of the Sixth Replies, that those modes of thought which represent extended things are not immediately caused or occasioned by the senses, but arise only from modes of thought whose content is sensory qualities. Though he denies that concepts like that of extension arise by abstraction from sensible species or anything of that sort, still he seems to treat occurrent thoughts of extended things qua extended as being produced by the mind under the influence of sensations: we think of extended things as the causes of those other thoughts we call sensations.

Sensation, therefore, does mediate between the body and the intellect. Sensations are therefore not nothing; if they are something, they must either be substances or modes; if modes, then modes of some substance; they are not modes of extension; hence they are modes of thought. Awareness or consciousness has no role in that argument. It is rather what you would expect someone trained as an Aristotelian and then converted to mechanism to say, provided that like Descartes they are quite certain they know what extension is.

It is not surprising, then, Descartes should hold with the Aristotelians that the paradigms of thought are the operations of the intellect and will, and not sensations or qualia. Like Suárez he could even say that the confusion and obscurity of sensory ideas, or the sometimes malign influence of the passions on the will, unfortunate though they may seem, and

detrimental though they may be to the operation of the higher faculties, is an imperfection inseparable from our perfection.