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Aquinas on Separated Souls' Natural Cognition

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Abstract

The debate concerning whether Aquinas changed his view on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition, i.e., the cognition not elevated by God's supernatural grace, remains to be settled. Anton Pegis has argued that according to Aquinas's earlier view, a separated soul 'will function perfectly as a separate substance'. However, according to Aquinas's mature view, it 'does not have the intellectual power to function properly as a separate substance', so Aquinas changed his view. In contrast, John Wipfel has denied that Pegis showed any radical change in Aquinas's works on this issue. In this paper, I intend to advance this debate by arguing that, in his *Commentary on Sentences IV* (1252–56) d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1, Aquinas expounded a view on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition that is incompatible with his view in *Summa Theologiae I* (1265–68), q. 89, a. 1, co. I will also identify two markedly different views on the implication of the human soul-body union for the perfection of the separated soul's cognition in these two texts. I contend that the incompatibility between the views in these two texts suggests that Aquinas changed his view.

Keywords: Anton Pegis; human soul-body union; John Wipfel; natural cognition; separated soul

1. Introduction: Did Aquinas change his mind?¹

There seems to be no consensus among scholars about whether Aquinas changed his view on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition, i.e., the cognition

¹In this paper, I will abbreviate the references to Aquinas's works and presuppose their dating as follows:

<i>Scriptum super libros Sententiarum</i>	[<i>InSent</i> , 1252–56]
<i>Quaestiones disputatae De veritate</i>	[<i>DV</i> , 1256–59]
<i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i>	[<i>SCG</i> , 1259–65]
<i>Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima</i>	[<i>QDA</i> , 1265–66]
<i>Summa Theologiae</i>	[<i>ST</i> , 1265–73]
<i>Quaestiones Quodlibetales III</i>	[<i>Quod III</i> , 1270]
<i>Sententia super librum De Caelo et Mundo</i>	[<i>InDCM</i> , 1272–73]

Concerning issues about dating, I follow Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P.'s view in his *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and his Works*, trans. by Matthew K. Miner and Robert Royal, 3rd edn (Washington DC: The Catholic University Press, 2022).

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of the separated soul by its natural power alone.² Anton Pegis argues that Aquinas changed his view. According to Pegis, Aquinas in his earlier stage (*InSent* IV, d.50, q. 1, a. 3; *DV*, q. 19, most notably *SCG* II, c.81, and, for Pegis, *Quod*. III, q. 9) held the 'pre-Aristotelian' view,³ which says that a separated soul will 'function perfectly as a separate substance'.⁴ In Aquinas's later stage (*QDA* q. 15–20 and *ST* I, q. 89), however, he rejects this 'pre-Aristotelian' view,⁵ holding rather that a separated soul 'does not have the intellectual power to function properly as a separate substance'.⁶ Simply put, Pegis argues that the mature Aquinas downgraded the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition.

However, unimpressed by Pegis's argument, John Wippel insists that 'I do not find a radical break or downgrading of the knowledge Thomas attributes to the separated soul in *SCG* II, c.81 and his earlier treatments, on the one hand, and *ST* I, q. 89 and *QDA* q. 15–20, on the other, nor do I find his various treatments of this topic fundamentally inconsistent with one another'.⁷ Why not? Wippel's reasons can be briefly summarized as follows. First, *SCG* II, c. 81 states that a separated soul 'will be perfectly like separated substances as regards its mode of understanding'.⁸ This does not contradict Aquinas's position in *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1, since Aquinas affirms that separated souls will have a higher mode of understanding in both texts. Second, even Pegis himself notices that his reading of *SCG* II, c. 81 is in severe tension with Aquinas's claim in *SCG* IV, c. 79, that separation from the body is against the nature of the human soul.⁹ Third, Wippel detects no radical breaks or inconsistencies in his survey of a wide range of texts (*InSent* III, d. 31, q. 2, a. 4; *InSent* IV, d. 50, q. 1, a. 3; *DV* q. 19, a.1–2, and *SCG* II,

²Aquinas affirms that a separated soul has a natural cognition in this sense. *ST* I, q. 89, a. 2, co. 'I am speaking here of the natural cognition had by a separated soul; there is a different account of the cognition associated with [the light of] glory'. In this paper, the English translations of *ST* I are all Alfred Freddoso's, which can be found at www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm

³Anton Pegis, 'Between Immortality and Death: Some Further Reflections on the *Summa Contra Gentiles*', *Monist* 58 (1974), 1–15. See also his 'The Separated Soul and Its Nature in St Thomas', in *St Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies*, ed. by Armand A. Maurer et al. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), pp. 131–58; The label 'pre-Aristotelian' comes from 'Between Immortality and Death', p. 11.

⁴Pegis, 'The Separated Soul and Its Nature in St. Thomas', p. 137.

⁵*Ibid.* There, Pegis says that '[i]n *SCG* II, c. 81 St. Thomas held [...] that the separated soul, on the basis of its separated *esse*, will function perfectly as a separate substance. The soul will respond to its separated state by knowing as a separate substance. This is surely the view that St. Thomas denies in the *ST*, where his very way of stating the difficulty already transcends the perspective of *SCG* II, c. 81'.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷John Wippel, 'Thomas Aquinas on the Separated Soul's Natural Knowledge', in his *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas III* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 2021), pp. 211–43, p. 242.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁹*Ibid.* pp. 225–26. More on the first reason when I discuss what I call the 'reconciling strategy' at the end of section II.

Wippel's most explicit discussion of the *SCG* texts is on pp. 224–26. I have to admit that Wippel does not state the first two reasons in the way I do, so the first two reasons are mostly my reading of Wippel. As far as I can see, Wippel's most explicit statement addressing Pegis on pp. 224–26 is this: 'Thomas' purpose in introducing the issue of the separated soul's knowledge in *CG* II, c. 81 was not to present a full blown account of this, but to refute an argument against its possible survival after death'. (p. 226) This statement is addressing Pegis's claim about the alleged tension between two *SCG* texts. Thus, if I were not to attribute the first two reason to Wippel, I would have difficulty seeing how Wippel has addressed Pegis's claim regarding the inconsistency between Aquinas's position in *SCG* II, c. 81 and his position in *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1.

c.80–81, *ST I*, q. 89 and *QDA* q. 15–20) with respect to five questions.¹⁰ While more can be said on behalf of both Pegis and Wippel, the upshot is that they disagree on whether Aquinas downgraded the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition. Pegis says yes, but Wippel says no.

In this paper, my intention is not to evaluate the debate between Pegis and Wippel in further detail. Instead, I aim to advance the debate by considering Aquinas's position on the issue in *InSent IV* (1252–56) d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1. To my knowledge, this text has not been discussed in relation to this issue in any scholarly work. I contend that Aquinas's position in this *InSent* text is incompatible with his position in *ST* (1265–68) I, q. 89, a. 1.

I do not aim to conclusively establish that Aquinas changed his view, nor do I aim to generalize the two positions to other texts of Aquinas, both of which would require a detailed and comprehensive survey of many other texts, including but not limited to those Pegis and Wippel surveyed. In this paper, I will confine myself to interpreting the two texts, unpacking their positions, showing how these two positions are grounded on two markedly different views on how the human body perfects the human soul, and eventually identifying the incompatibility between the two positions. The incompatibility, I argue, enhances the plausibility that Aquinas changed his view on the issue.¹¹

I will proceed as follows: In section II, I will first clarify Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co. Then, based on Aquinas's position in the *ST* text, I will formulate a strategy for reconciling apparent inconsistencies between Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1 and in other texts. After that, in section III, I will discuss the *InSent IV* d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1 and explain why the position therein is incompatible with that of *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1.

2. *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co.

In *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co.,¹² Aquinas argues that a separated soul can understand. Yet, since the human soul-body union is not in vain, the body should somehow improve the soul's

¹⁰The five questions include:

- (1) 'Can the separated soul understand at all, and if so, how can it do this?'
- (2) 'Will the separated soul have a knowledge of itself and of other separated souls and intelligences?'
- (3) 'Will the separated soul be aware of individuals it knew in its embodied state, or of other individuals?'
- (4) 'Will the separated soul still retain the scientific and universal knowledge it possessed in this life?'
- (5) 'Will it be aware of what continues to happen here on earth?'

See *ibid.*, p. 228, p. 233, p. 235, p. 239, p. 241.

¹¹My claim presupposes that the only live options are (i) Aquinas radically changed his view and (ii) Aquinas constantly held a coherent view (which he might have slightly developed). In other words, I put aside the possibility that Aquinas constantly held an incoherent view on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition, which I see no reason to uphold.

¹²See also Pegis's reading of this text in his 'The separated Soul and Its Nature in St. Thomas', pp. 134–37; and Wippel's reading of this text in his 'Thomas Aquinas on the Separated Soul's Natural Knowledge', pp. 228–32. As far as I can see, my interpretation differs from theirs only with respect to my more explicit

understanding, so a separated soul's understanding should be less perfect than that of the embodied soul.

Aquinas begins by pointing out that the difficulty for holding that separated souls can naturally cognize lies in the centrality of phantasms to the human embodied mode of understanding, i.e., the human soul turns to phantasms to understand the essence of material things.¹³ Then, Aquinas mentions an alternative view he considers Platonic, according to which the embodied soul turns to the phantasms just because the soul at the embodied stage ties accidentally to and is impeded by the body. Once the soul is free from the body, it will cognize according to its nature like a separate substance, i.e., without needing phantasms to understand.¹⁴

Aquinas then immediately rejects this Platonic alternative by appealing to the soul-body union. He says,

[...] on this view, the soul would not be united to its body for the soul's own good, given that its intellectual understanding would be poorer when it is united with the body than when it is separated. Instead, the union would be solely for the sake of the betterment of the body. But this is ludicrous, since the matter exists for the sake of the form, and not vice versa.¹⁵

For Aquinas, the human body and the human soul are related as matter and form,¹⁶ and the soul-body union requires that the body is for the soul's betterment since 'matter exists for the sake of the form'. Aquinas argues that the Platonic view fails because it implies that the soul-body union makes the body better but the soul worse. Thus, given the Platonic view, the body (matter) does not exist for the sake of the soul (form).

Aquinas's rejection of the Platonic view based on the human soul-body union here is continuous with his discussion in *ST I*, q. 84, a. 4, co., where Aquinas rejects the Platonic and Avicennian view that when embodied, human intellect understands by directly receiving an infusion from separated forms without the mediation of senses. The detail of the Platonic and Avicennian view aside, Aquinas's most relevant point in q. 84, a. 4 for us is that since the body exists for the soul, the body should be for the being or proper operation of the soul. However, since the (human) soul's being does not need the body, the body should be for the soul's understanding.¹⁷ In *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co., Aquinas uses the same reason, i.e., the body is for the soul's understanding, to reject

emphasis on the continuity between Aquinas's discussion in this text and his discussion in *ST I*, q. 84, a. 4. See fn. 17 below.

¹³See *ST I*, q. 84, a. 7 for a standard textual reference of this view.

¹⁴The text just explained is as follows: 'This question [i.e., whether separated souls can understand] derives its difficulty from the fact that as long as a soul is conjoined with its body, it cannot have intellectual understanding of anything except by turning itself toward phantasms. This is clear from experience.'

Now if, as the Platonists held, this fact were not due to the nature of the soul, but instead belonged to the soul incidentally because it is tied to a body, then the question could easily be answered. For once the impediment of the body were removed, the soul would revert to its own nature, so that it would understand intelligible things directly and without turning itself to phantasms—just as happens in the case of other separated substances' (*ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co.).

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶See, for example, *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1.

¹⁷The relevant text from *ST I*, q. 84, a. 4, co. is as follows,

the Platonic view on the separated soul's cognition. In this text, Aquinas continues reflecting on the implication of the human soul-body union that he had already begun in *ST I*, q. 84, a. 4. co.

Now, let us continue reading *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co. Aquinas's rejection of the Platonic view actually constitutes part of the problem to be addressed, namely, the problem concerning how it is possible to reconcile the separated soul's natural cognition with the human soul-body union that is not in vain.¹⁸ Aquinas holds the following two claims: (i) the human soul, by nature, needs phantasms to understand when embodied and (ii) the human soul-body union is not in vain. As already mentioned, the Platonic view clashes with (ii). Thus, (ii) rules out the Platonic view. After dismissing the Platonic view, the only option left to Aquinas, apparently, is that the separated soul cannot understand. This is because, given that the soul's nature does not change when separated, it seems that, with the same nature, the soul will still need phantasms to understand when separated from the body. However, a separated soul has no body and no phantasms. Thus, it seems that (i) leaves Aquinas no choice but to deny that the separated soul can understand. Yet, Aquinas cannot deny it. As Aquinas says in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, sc., the possibility for a separated soul to exist implies that it has its proper operation: understanding.¹⁹ Thus, Aquinas has to look for logical room to affirm that the separated soul can understand in a way consistent with (i) and (ii).

The first step Aquinas takes to address this problem is to clarify that (i) is compatible with separated souls having natural cognition. This is because the soul's mode of operation follows from the soul's mode of being. The human soul should have different modes of operation corresponding to the soul's embodied and separated mode of being. Therefore, (i) does not rule out the possibility of a separated soul having a mode of understanding that does not need phantasms.²⁰

The problem, however, is not resolved here. Aquinas needs to consider how his account of the separated soul's natural cognition can take (ii), i.e., the human soul-body

'For one cannot claim that the intellective soul is united with a body for the sake of the body, since it is not the case that form exists for the sake of matter [...]; in fact, just the opposite is true. Now given that the soul does not depend on the body with respect to its *esse*, the body seems necessary to the intellective soul mainly for the soul's proper operation, i.e., intellective understanding'.

¹⁸ Here is the text immediately after Aquinas dismisses the Platonic view as 'ludicrous': 'if we hold that it is by its nature that the soul has to turn itself toward phantasms in order to have intellective understanding, then, since the soul's nature is not changed by the death of the body, it seems that a [separated] soul cannot have intellective understanding of anything. For there are no phantasms at hand toward which it might turn itself'.

¹⁹ Aquinas makes the same point also in *Quod. III*, q. 9, a. 1, co.

²⁰ *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co. '[...] since nothing operates except insofar as it actualized, *each thing's mode of operating follows upon its mode of being*. But even while a soul's nature remains the same, its mode of being when it is united with a body is different from its mode of being when it is separated from its body—not in such a way that the soul's being united to a body is incidental to it, but rather in such a way that it is by reason of its nature that the soul is united to a body. In the same way, the nature of something lightweight is not changed when it goes from being in its proper place, which is natural to it, to being outside its proper place, which lies beyond its nature. Therefore, corresponding to the mode of being by which a soul is united to a body, the soul has a mode of understanding that involves turning toward the phantasms of bodies that exist in the bodily organs. But when a soul is separated from its body, it has a mode of understanding that involves turning toward those things that are intelligible absolutely speaking—just like the mode of understanding had by the other separated substances' (My emphases).

union, into account. Before we see Aquinas's solution, we should first consider how Aquinas articulates the following 'doubt':

[...] this reply once again provokes a doubt. For since (P1) nature is always ordered toward what is better, and since (P2) the mode of understanding that involves turning toward intelligible things absolutely speaking is better than the mode of understanding that involves turning toward phantasms, (P3) God should have constituted the soul's nature in such a way that the more noble mode of understanding would be natural to it and (P4) that for this reason it would not need to be united to a body.²¹ (My labels)

'[T]his reply' refers to Aquinas's view that the separated soul can naturally cognize without phantasms. The 'doubt' can be formulated as the following argument:

- P1. Nature is always ordered toward the better.
- P2. The mode of understanding that involves turning toward intelligible things, absolutely speaking, is better than the mode of understanding that involves turning toward phantasms.
- P3. If P1 and P2, then God should have constituted the human soul's nature to understand naturally through turning toward intelligible things (i.e., angels and God).
- P4. If God should have constituted the human soul's nature to understand naturally through turning toward intelligible things, then the human soul would not need to be united to the body (i.e., the human soul-body union is in vain).

Therefore,

- C. The human soul-body union is in vain.

This 'doubt' can be understood as a restatement of the objection against the Platonic view based on the soul-body union: as long as separated souls can naturally cognize without senses, they cognize by turning to the intelligible things from whom they receive intelligible species, i.e., forms by which the intellect understand. This mode of understanding seems superior to the embodied mode, as P2 affirms. The reason for its seeming superiority is not hard to imagine. One plausible reason is that this mode of understanding makes separated souls understand in the way angels do.²² Furthermore, Aquinas holds that there is nothing in vain in nature;²³ so if his view implies that the human soul-body union is in vain because separated souls will understand in a superior way, it also implies that such union should not exist in nature. But then it seems

²¹Ibid.

²²As Aquinas says in *SCG* II, c. 81, which Pegis considers as his proof text for Aquinas's change of mind, a separated soul will be 'perfectly assimilated to separated substances with respect to the mode of understanding and will receive their influence abundantly' ('[...] *perfecte assimilabitur substantiis separatis quantum ad modum intelligendi, et abunde influentiam earum recipient*'. My translation.). See Pegis, 'The Separated Soul and Its Nature in St. Thomas', p. 147 for Pegis's claim and the Latin text.

²³See, for example, *InDCM* I, n.91, where Aquinas argues that there is nothing in vain in nature because everything in nature is ultimately directed by God, the first cause.

that Aquinas's 'reply' shares the same problem with the Platonic view: separated souls have a more perfect natural cognition, so the soul-body union is in vain.

Aquinas continues and responds to the doubt as follows,

[...] even if intellective understanding by turning toward higher things is more noble, absolutely speaking, than understanding by turning toward phantasms, nonetheless, the former mode of understanding was *less perfect* as a possibility for the soul.²⁴ (My emphasis)

This passage shows that Aquinas's response is to reject P3, i.e.,

P3. If P1 (i.e., nature is always ordered toward the better) and P2 (i.e., the mode of understanding that involves turning toward intelligible things, absolutely speaking, is better than the mode of understanding that involves turning toward phantasms), then God should have constituted the human soul's nature to understand naturally through turning toward intelligible things.

Aquinas denies that P3's consequent follows from P1 and P2. As Aquinas says in the quote, '[the angelic mode] of understanding was *less perfect* as a possibility for the soul'. Aquinas is saying that an absolutely speaking 'better' mode of understanding is not necessarily a better mode for the human soul. The better mode for the soul could be, absolutely speaking, the lesser mode. In that case, the body can still be for the betterment of the soul since the body makes available the mode of understanding better for the soul. Thus, the 'doubt' is not a sound argument for Aquinas.

Aquinas appeals to the weakness of the human soul to explain how an absolutely speaking better mode of understanding may not be a better mode for the human soul. He says,

[...] if the lower substances had forms with the same degree of universality that the higher substances do, then because they have weaker intellects, they would not receive through those forms a perfect cognition of things, but would instead have a cognition that was somewhat general and indistinct.²⁵

What Aquinas says here can be illustrated by his well-known principle that whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.²⁶ Given this principle, even if an angel and a separated soul receive the same intelligible form, their resultant cognition need not be equally perfect. For Aquinas, even in our ordinary experience, two intellects receiving the same form may attain cognition with different degrees of perfection: when the same knowledge is taught to two persons, the smarter one

²⁴ST I, q. 89, a. 1, co.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶See, for example, ST I, q. 84, a. 1, co. For some notable studies on this principle, see John Wippel, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Axiom "What is Received is Received according to the Mode of the Receiver"', in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 113–22; and John Tomarchio, 'Four Indices for the Thomistic Principle *Quod recipitur in aliquo est in eo per modum recipientis*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 60 (1998), 315–67.

understands better.²⁷ Thus, for Aquinas, the fact that a separated soul shares the same mode of understanding with angels does not entail that the perfection of the separated soul's understanding is comparable to that of the angels. Rather, the separated soul's understanding could be much worse than that of the angels due to the weakness of the separated soul's intellect. In that case, the possibility that an embodied intellect may have a more perfect natural cognition becomes less implausible. In fact, Aquinas says further that, unlike the embodied intellect's cognition, the separated soul's cognition of material things will be 'general and indistinct'.

Thus, Aquinas accounts for the soul-body union by pointing out that an absolutely speaking better mode of understanding may not be a more suitable mode for the human soul. Consequently, the separated soul's understanding with an absolutely speaking better mode may lead to an overall less perfect cognition of things. As Aquinas says,

[...] according to the order of nature, human souls are the lowest among intellectual substances. The perfection of the universe requires this, so that diverse grades might exist among things.

Therefore, if human souls had been constituted by God in such a way as to have intellectual understanding in the mode in which separated substances have it, then they would not have had perfect cognition, but would instead have had indistinct cognition in general.

For Aquinas, this is not a mere possibility but rather how things must be given that the human soul-body union cannot be in vain. The human soul needs to unite with the body to attain an overall more perfect cognition.

To sum up, for the sake of the subsequent discussion, I would summarize Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a.1, co. as follows:

(M) Separation from the body (a) grants the human soul a more perfect mode (absolutely speaking) of understanding, but (b) does not make available an overall more perfect understanding than the understanding an embodied human soul can attain.

Aquinas clearly says that separated souls will have a higher, angelic mode of understanding, so his position includes (M)(a). (M)(b) is not what Aquinas explicitly says, but what Aquinas says entails it since Aquinas says that only embodied souls can attain the 'perfect cognition', but separated souls' cognition will be 'general and indistinct' and hence overall less perfect. With Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1 stated as (M), what it takes for a doctrine to contradict it is also clear: it denies either (M)(a) or (M)(b).

Before moving on to *InSent IV* d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc. 1, I would point out that (M) makes a reconciling strategy available for Aquinas interpreters to deal with texts allegedly incompatible with (M). To see the strategy, consider the following claim,

²⁷*ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, co. 'In a certain way, this same thing is apparent among men; for those of weaker intellect do not receive perfect cognition through the universal conceptions had by more intelligent men, unless each individual case is specifically explained to them'.

(S) Separation from the body makes the soul's cognition more perfect.

With (M) in mind, we should see that the phrase 'more perfect' in (S) is ambiguous since the phrase could mean either (i) more perfect mode or (ii) more perfect overall. Thus, (S) could mean either

(Si) Separation from the body grants the soul a more perfect mode of understanding; or

(Sii) Separation from the body enables an overall more perfect cognition for the soul.

The strategy is precisely to appeal to the aforementioned ambiguity to avoid the alleged incompatibility when encountering an (S)-claim, i.e., a claim whose meaning is equivalent to (S). Since only (Sii) is incompatible with (M), an interpreter of Aquinas can utilize the aforementioned ambiguity to reconcile the alleged (S)-claims in Aquinas by arguing that the (S)-claim in question could be read to mean (Si), and hence the claim need not be read as incompatible with (M).²⁸

To illustrate how the strategy works, we may reconsider Pegis's argument as an example. Recall that, for Pegis, Aquinas affirms in *SCG* II, c. 81 that a separated soul will 'function perfectly as a separated substance'²⁹ but affirms in *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1 that a separated soul 'could be no more than an inadequate separated substance'.³⁰ Pegis argues that Aquinas makes an (S)-claim in *SCG* II, c. 81 that is incompatible with (M). To see whether Pegis's argument works, we should consider whether the claim in *SCG* II, c. 81 should be read as (Si) or (Sii). As we now know, what Aquinas clearly says in *SCG* II, c. 81 is that the separated soul will be perfectly assimilated to separated substances *with respect to the mode of understanding*.³¹ Thus, it should be read as (Si) and is perfectly compatible with (M). For this reason, *SCG* II, c. 81 does not show a radical break.

With this reconciling strategy in mind, we can now move on to the *InSent* text.

3. *InSent* IV (1252–56) d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1

My goal in this section is to argue that Aquinas's position in this *InSent* IV text is incompatible with (M). The relevant part of the text is as follows,

It can also be said that the beatitude of the soul itself will be increased as regards intensity. For man's body can be considered in two ways. In one way, as it is perfectible by the soul; in another way, as *there is in it something that resists the soul in the soul's activities, as long as the body is not perfectly perfected by the soul*. Now, according to the first way of considering the body, the union of body to soul adds a perfection to the soul, since a part, as such, is imperfect, and finds completion in its whole. Thus the whole stands to the parts as form to matter, and thus the

²⁸I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that one may use this strategy to argue that there is no incompatibility between the teachings in *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1 and *InSent* IV d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1.

²⁹Pegis, 'The Separated Soul and Its Nature in St. Thomas', p. 137.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 148.

³¹See the *SCG* text in fn. 22. Pegis might argue that it should be read as (Sii) because Aquinas also says that the separated soul will receive the influence abundantly. My point here is not to prove Pegis wrong but only to illustrate how the reconciling strategy works, so I will not consider how Pegis might defend any further.

soul is more perfect in its natural being when it is in the whole—namely in man compounded of soul and body—than when it is separate by itself. *But the union of the body according to the second way of considering it impedes the perfection of the soul*; and thus it is said in Wisdom 9:15 that *a perishable body weighs down the soul* [...] For just as *the soul separated from the corruptible body can act more perfectly than when it is united to it, so after it has been united to a glorified body, its activity will be more perfect than when it was separated.*³² (My emphases)

This text is not primarily about the separated soul's natural cognition. Rather, Aquinas's main point here is to argue that the saints will have a more intense beatific vision after their souls unite with the glorified body.³³ This point about the beatific vision need not detain us. Instead, I intend to highlight Aquinas's markedly different positions on the human soul-body (the perishable body specifically) union and the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition in this text. I will unpack this position before I argue for its incompatibility with Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1.

In this *InSent* text, Aquinas states that the human soul-body relation can be considered in two ways. I would start with the second way, which is more relevant to the perfection of the separated soul's cognition. As Aquinas says, the body 'impedes the perfection of the soul', because something in the body 'resists the soul in the soul's activities, as long as the body is not perfectly perfected by the soul'. For Aquinas, the perishable body is not 'perfectly perfected' like the glorified body and somehow resists the soul's activities.³⁴ What 'activities' are Aquinas talking about? Since this text is mainly about the beatific vision, which Aquinas argues is an act of the intellect,³⁵ the context should make it clear that the activities are, first and foremost, acts of understanding. Thus, the second way clearly means that the body is, somehow, detrimental to the soul's understanding, such that 'the soul separated from the corruptible body can act more perfectly than when it is united to it'.

I have not yet argued that this second way is incompatible with Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1. I will come back to that later. For now, I would like to consider a question related to the first way of the soul-body relation: would the Aquinas in this text hold that the human soul-body union is in vain? In *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, Aquinas argues that

³²Regarding the translation of *InSent IV*, I use Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences Book IV, Distinctions 43–50*, trans. by Beth Mortensen, Peter Kwasniewski and Dylan Schrader (Green Bay, Wisconsin: Aquinas Institute, Inc., 2018). The translation of the quoted passage is on p. 397. This translation can also be found at aquinas.cc. For a parallel text in which Aquinas offers a similar view on the separated soul's cognition, see *InSent IV* d. 50, q. 1, a. 1, ad5.

³³This view on how the glorified body leads to a more intense beatific vision will be rejected in *ST I-II* (1268–71), q. 4, a. 5 and a. 6. For a possible reason of this change, see Christopher Brown, *Eternal Life and Happiness in Heaven: Philosophical Problems, Thomistic Solutions* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), p. 233.

³⁴I do not think Aquinas intends to apply the point about the perishable body to Adam. Aquinas's point is best taken as an abstract discussion about how the body and soul relate to each other according to their nature alone. Adam's body and soul was also perfected by the grace of original justice and so his body would not impede the mind. See, for example, *InSent II*, d. 30, q. 1, a. 1, co. *A fortiori*, the point does not apply to Christ either.

³⁵See *InSent IV*, d. 49, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 3, where Aquinas argues that beatitude consists in an act of the speculative intellect; and d. 49, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 3, where Aquinas explicitly affirms that the beatific vision is the beatitude itself.

the human soul-body union requires that the body perfects the soul's understanding. Aquinas makes no such claim in the *InSent* text. Would Aquinas in the *InSent* text consider the human soul-body union in vain? In my view, not necessarily. In fact, Aquinas says in the text that 'the union of body to soul adds a perfection to the soul' because the soul is imperfect as a part and 'finds completion in its whole'. Therefore, as Aquinas says, 'the soul is more perfect in its natural being when it is in the whole'. Given his affirmation that the body perfects the soul, this Aquinas would probably deny that the union is in vain. Whatever its merit or demerit (more on this below), this view on the human soul-body union is recognizably different from the view in *ST I* q. 84, a. 4 and q. 89, a. 1: in this *InSent* text, the body perfects the soul's natural being but not its understanding; in *ST I*, the body perfects the soul's understanding but not its being.

Now, I would argue that Aquinas's position on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition in the *InSent* text is incompatible with his position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1. Recall that I summarized Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a.1, co. as follows:

(M) Separation from the body (a) grants the human soul a more perfect mode of understanding, but (b) does not make available an understanding overall more perfect than the understanding an embodied human soul can attain.

In the *InSent* text, Aquinas rejects (M)(b). This can be seen in the following quote,

[...] just as the soul separated from the corruptible body can act more perfectly than when it is united to it, so after it has been united to a glorified body, its activity will be more perfect than when it was separated.

This quote will be the focus of the rest of this section. In this quote, Aquinas states that 'the soul separated from the corruptible body can act more perfectly than when it is united to it'. This is clearly an (S)-claim. A question naturally arises: what does 'more perfectly' mean? Can we adopt the reconciling strategy to render this (S)-claim compatible with (M)?

My answer is no. To see why, we need to notice the words 'just as' in the quote. Aquinas says that the union with the glorified body helps the beatified soul act more perfectly, *just as* the separation from the perishable (or corruptible) body helps the soul act more perfectly. Suppose Aquinas only, or primarily, attributes a more perfect mode of understanding to the separated souls here. In that case, Aquinas should mean that the union with the glorified body will change the mode of understanding just as the separation from the body. The difficulty of adopting the strategy here is precisely this: for Aquinas, separation from the perishable body changes the soul's mode of understanding, but the union with the glorified body does *not* change the beatified soul's mode of understanding, so this reading does not take 'just as' into account. Recall that separation from the perishable body changes the soul's mode of understanding in that the mechanism of understanding changes: when embodied, phantasms are essential; when separated, the phantasms have no role. However, for both the embodied and disembodied saints, the mechanism of the beatific vision is exactly the same: receiving the light of glory and, thereby, God's essence.³⁶ Thus, the union with the glorified

³⁶See, for example, *InSent* IV, d. 49, q. 2, a. 1 and *ST I*, q. 12, a. 5 for Aquinas's explanation of how the beatific vision works.

body does not change the saints' mode of understanding. In sum, Aquinas's words 'just as' suggest that, by 'more perfectly', Aquinas should mean something other than understanding by a more perfect mode.

If 'more perfectly' does not mean understanding by a more perfect mode, then what does it mean? As I see it, it should mean having a more perfect understanding overall. In that case, we can naturally read the quote as follows: 'Separation from the corruptible body results in an overall more perfect cognition that is unattainable before the separation, and union with the glorified body similarly results in an overall more perfect beatific vision that is unattainable before the union'. This reading coheres better with the intended goal of Aquinas in this text, which is to argue that the saints will have a more intense beatific vision after uniting with the glorified body. Also, claiming that two things are analogous in one respect does not require the two things to be analogous in all respects. Thus, the fact that only one of the two cases involves a change in the mode of understanding does not count against my reading.

However, the immediate consequence of my reading is that the quote contradicts (M)(b), i.e., separation from the (perishable) body does not make available a cognition overall more perfect than the cognition an embodied human soul can attain, which is part of Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1. In other words, given my reading, Aquinas's position on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition in *InSent IV* d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1 is incompatible with his position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1.

In fact, given my reading of the *InSent* text, it is plausible that the Aquinas in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1 would completely repudiate the view on the human soul-body union in *InSent IV* d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1, according to which the body perfects the soul's natural being but impedes its understanding in a way incompatible with (M)(b). In his 'doubt' in *ST I*, a. 89, a. 1, Aquinas argues that if separation from the body leads to an overall more perfect understanding, God should not have united the human body and soul since the union would be in vain. In other words, for the Aquinas in the *ST* text, the union is not in vain only if the separation does not lead to an overall more perfect understanding. Thus, for the Aquinas in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1, the human soul-body union would be in vain given the position in the *InSent IV* text. The alleged contribution of the body to the soul's natural being is not a reason for God to create human beings.³⁷

To sum up, Aquinas's position on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition in *InSent IV* d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1 is incompatible with his position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1. The incompatibility lies both in the perfection attributed to the understanding and in the two markedly different views on the implication of the human soul-body union for the perfection of the soul's understanding.

4. Conclusion

Before I end this paper, I would add two remarks, one to clarify what (I think) I have achieved in this paper more precisely and the other to identify the most important takeaway from this paper.

First, if my reading of the texts holds, then Aquinas expounded two incompatible positions on the perfection of the separated soul's natural cognition at two different

³⁷Aquinas's position in *ST I*, q. 89, a. 1 is more coherent with his view that things exist for their activities, which can be found, for example, in *DV*, q. 19, a. 1, co.

places and two different times. This strongly suggests that he changed his view on the issue.³⁸ However, given the number of relevant texts I have not dealt with in this paper, I am aware that I have not established my reading of *InSent* IV d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1 conclusively, nor have I ruled out the possibility of reconciling two teachings in the texts by other means. I believe I have established, for now, nothing more than the *prima facie* plausibility of Aquinas's change of view. Yet, this *prima facie* plausibility should suffice to shift the burden of proof to those who affirm that Aquinas's view underwent no radical change. To meet the burden of proof, providing a plausible alternative reading of *InSent* IV d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qc1 compatible with Aquinas's position in *ST* I, q. 89, a. 1 is minimum.

Second, while this paper has primarily focused on the separated soul's cognition, I believe what is at stake is Aquinas's evolving reflection on the human soul-body union. As I see it, Aquinas once struggled to identify the true nature of the human soul-body union and its implications. His reflection on the human soul-body union evolved, and he adjusted his views on other issues accordingly. I believe the separated soul is only one of those issues, which means that there is more for us to learn and explore about this evolving reflection of a mastermind.³⁹

³⁸To my knowledge, Aquinas only says that separated soul will only attain a cognition that is 'general and indistinct' in his later writings such as *ST* I, q. 89 and *QDA*, q. 15–20. If such claims were found in earlier texts such as *InSent* (1252–56) or *DV* (1256–59), I would consider the possibility that Aquinas's view was constantly incoherent.

³⁹I would like to thank Prof. Russell Friedman for reading the early drafts of this paper and giving valuable comments, and also to Sr. Anne Frances Ai Le, OP, as well as participants in the Thomistic Summer Conference 2023 at Thomas Aquinas College, for helpful remarks and discussions.