

BRIAN WELTER

*Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity*  
by **Antonia Fitzpatrick**

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 203  
ISBN 978-0-19-879085-3

Antonia Fitzpatrick argues clearly throughout *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity* that the Dominican saint never consistently achieves a coherent, unified understanding of the nature of the continuity of bodily matter across the human lifespan, death, and future resurrection. This inconsistency stems largely from Aquinas relying partly on Aristotle and partly on Averroes' commentary on the ancient philosopher without ever committing to either, the author comes to conclude.

Divided into four large chapters, *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity*, provides a detailed foundation in Aristotle's thinking on matter, body, and soul before turning to Aquinas. This division of these two philosophers, as well as the inclusion of Averroes' influence on St. Thomas, enables the reader to see the interplay of these thinkers as well as the theological demands of the thirteenth century that drove St. Thomas to attempt a completely new anthropology in the first place. In the *Introduction*, Fitzpatrick sums things up:

Scholastic theologians took the doctrine of the resurrection to imply that material identity was crucial to personal identity, and, by extension, that human nature was composite, comprising a

---

BRIAN WELTER — Taipei, Taiwan

e-mail: brianteachertaiwan@gmail.com • ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6796-6561>

body as well as an immortal soul. Aquinas argued that a new theory of human nature that he had developed was the only available theory that could preserve the body, in addition to the soul, as an essential component of the human being.<sup>1</sup>

Aquinas defines his task, according to Fitzpatrick, as “reconcil[ing] Aristotle’s metaphysics with Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*”<sup>2</sup> which the Dominican deemed to be in need of Averroes’ commentaries on the ancient Greek.

How these authors envision the soul-body relationship features prominently in Fitzpatrick’s discussion. Matter and form, or potency and act, form the heart of human nature, being as they are in fact body and soul. Aristotle bases his composite view of the human on the idea that each soul “requires a particular kind of complex material subject: its ‘proper matter’.”<sup>3</sup> This concept runs throughout *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity*, with the author emphasizing related metaphysical issues. Thus, “Aristotle’s teleological approach to analysing the composition of natural things entails a particular emphasis on their final causes . . . rather than on their material causes.”<sup>4</sup> The author also examines explanations for the causes of human generation, as found in the father and mother, revisiting these issues for each of the relevant authors. Starting from Aristotle, the thinking evolved through Averroes, the scholastics, and on to Aquinas. Readers can easily follow these different strands.

The author carefully defines important terms (including *form*, *essence*, *substance*, and *accidents*) according to each writer’s uses and definitions. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas “holds that the essence of a material substance is composite. It signifies not only the form that places the

---

<sup>1</sup> Antonia Fitzpatrick, *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

---

substance in its species, but also the distinctive material pattern exhibited by all members of that species.”<sup>5</sup> Though deeply influenced by the ancient Greek author, Fitzpatrick portrays Aquinas retaining his perspective on these issues. Thus,

using Aristotle’s embryology as a starting point, Aquinas would construct his own picture of the material part of the individual human body. Capable of being understood only in relation to soul, the soul’s material subject was nonetheless really distinct from it.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the body-soul relationship is essential both to the body and the soul. This latter, Fitzpatrick notes repeatedly, is only fully itself when acting as the form to a living body whose material substance matches only that particular soul. Between the person’s death and physical resurrection, the soul is less than its fullest self, existing in a kind of shadow world. Fitzpatrick never gets into this area more deeply, e.g. regarding the beatific vision offered to souls before the resurrection, probably saving readers some confusion at the expense of a wider discussion.

Recurrent themes covered by the author seem to reveal more consistency to Aquinas’s thought than the author is willing to admit. These themes follow the notion that the soul is only its fullest when united to the body. Fitzpatrick notes, for instance, that “material sameness was crucial to bodily, and personal, identity.”<sup>7</sup> The author is fairly clear on the role of prime matter in the consideration of material continuity, defining it as

the matter they understood to be found at the most primitive level in Aristotle’s physical universe: prime matter had no features of

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

its own but was capable of bearing all forms; it was imperishable and persisted across all cases of substantial change.<sup>8</sup>

“Dimensive quantity,” in contrast, denotes the structural form of the body which plays a role “in configuring . . . matter” and providing for “the body’s autonomy relative to the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

Fitzpatrick relates this discussion of the nature of matter with Aquinas’s teaching on the necessity for some element of material continuity between the dead and resurrected bodies of the same person, which share the same core matter. The nature of this core matter or collection of particles, sometimes called “the ‘truth of human nature,’” was one of the most challenging aspects of the debate for these thinkers, something that Fitzpatrick traces throughout the chapters. For example, she notes that

Averroes’ analysis of substantial change suggested a way out of this difficulty . . . [as he] developed a theory proposing that prime matter itself must be invested with some of the formal features that Aristotle had ascribed to a mathematical body, in virtue of which it was spread out and possessed distinguishable parts.<sup>10</sup>

Key to understanding this is Aquinas’s partial but not full adoption of some of Averroes’ teachings on material continuity. Fitzpatrick pinpoints where Aquinas sometimes closely follows Aristotle and sometimes Averroes.

Aquinas sharply differs from Peter Lombard and many other scholastic theologians by defining the soul as the body’s only substantial form. Any other perspective, St. Thomas warns, invites a loose, even meaningless body-soul connection. “This would necessarily mean that soul and body were united only accidentally, or incidentally, and

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

---

not as essential parts of a unified individual person,”<sup>11</sup> Fitzpatrick observes. The following remark on Aquinas’s conception reflects the consistency of Fitzpatrick’s thesis, as it revives concepts covered in the chapters on Aristotle while addressing the theological and metaphysical issues encountered by Aquinas:

Like matter and substantial form, essence and *esse* are related as potency and act respectively. Substantial form is the principle that gives or communicates *esse*, or the composite’s act of existence, to matter . . . *esse* flows into the whole composite through substantial form.<sup>12</sup>

Due to such focus and consistency, the author covers a lot of ground while highlighting much of the nuance involved in these deliberations.

Readers thus come to the end of the book having a fairly clear idea of the positions of Aristotle, Averroes, and Aquinas. This includes how the latter’s contemporaries influenced him to take up this issue in the first place and how he responded to their questions and doubts. The author’s *Epilogue* outlines the continuing questions and doubts after Aquinas’s death. Some of these focuses on Christ’s body. Much of this pitted Dominicans against Franciscans, suggesting, as the author notes, that the back-and-forth may have been tied in with other differences. The continuing unsettled nature of this controversy reflects Aquinas’s great contribution to this theological and metaphysical issue yet how he failed—as Fitzpatrick claims—to provide a definitive analysis.



---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

## REFERENCES

Fitzpatrick, Antonia. *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.