

Zbigniew Pańpuch

Against Unconscious Motivations, Urges, and Instincts in Human Beings

The main purpose of this article is to explain why unconscious motivations, urges, and instincts do not take place in human beings. This is accomplished in two stages: 1) by discussing the problem of the relation between human soul and human body as to whether the latter is wholly influenced by the former, or there is something instinctive or unconscious in the body that effectively determines human conscious activity, and 2) by explaining the status of organic factors in the human body and their role in the human being's activity through the case study of sensual appetitive powers.



St. Thomas Aquinas thoroughly rethought and reformulated the Aristotelian concept of the human being. Aristotle clearly understood man as a substantial unity by way of applying the theory of being as a composite of form and matter: form (the soul) organizes matter to be a body and makes it both human and alive. Yet one can notice the lack of

Zbigniew Pańpuch — John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: zbig@kul.lublin.pl • ORCID: 0000-0003-0531-1820

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a powerful unifying factor which is the act of (*personal*) *existence* (within man), being discovered and appreciated only by St. Thomas. Aristotle proposed and elaborated upon the definition of the soul as the primary act of the body that has life in potentiality. Understood as *entelecheia*, the soul occurs at the end of the generative processes, led and steered by the generative faculty in every living being. Thus the image of man was built on the understanding of the human being as a *zoon* (a living being) with its specificity resulting from rationality that makes it distinct from all other living beings.¹

On account of his generally naturalistic understanding of man, Aristotle had difficulties with including his specific rational element (the intellect) in the ontic structure of the human being. The intellect, according to his own declaration, was separated from any matter and thus was immaterial.² According to such a view of man, after identifying internal and external senses as well as appetitive forces and other faculties (nutritive and generative) of the soul, it was (and still is) difficult to find their functional and ontological harmony. This remained after Aristotle's great teacher, Plato, who in a similar way presented the view that in the tripartite soul it is possible to achieve a certain state of harmony,³ provided the irrational part of the soul and its forces are or can be subordinated by the rational forces of the soul. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, Aristotle differentiated another part of the irrational soul, a part which one is not able to control. In all likelihood,

¹ For more about Aristotle's understanding of the human being, see Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, "Man in *The Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy*," *Studia Gilsoniana* 7, no. 4 (October–December 2018): 603–625.

² Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 429 a 13–22, trans. R. D. Hick (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008).

³ In Plato's case this was achieved by the rule of the rational factor over the one responsible for courage and action, as also over the other factor which is responsible for carnal appetites and the desire for money and wealth.

Aristotle had in mind metabolic processes, for which the soul is also responsible.⁴

Of course, the whole metabolism of the organism is rational because it serves, in general, the three main goals of all living organisms: self-nutrition, growth (development), and reproduction in the environment. These three main activities are based on more fundamental activities such as self-repairing, self-sustainment in life, internal self-regulation, and the coordination of all biological sub-processes, self-defense against detrimental environmental factors, self-accommodation to changing external conditions, and other factors of a similar sort. The successful existence of the life of so many species in the flow of time shows the internal rationality of the structure and functions of all living organisms. With this said, these metabolic processes are beyond the reach of the conscious (and in this understanding—rational) part of the human soul and it seems impossible for this internal metabolic “rationality” to be directly influenced by the rational forces of the soul, which are generally able to cooperate with the intellect.

With such a naturalistic (let us call it even “zoological”) image of man, it has contributed to various speculations (with these most famous being those of Sigmund Freud) on the possibility of having something instinctive or unconscious in the structure of the human being which could exert a determinative influence on human actions and behavior. With this fundamental lack of a demonstration and justification in Aristotle’s writings, the ultimate ontological unity between the intellect and the material (natural, zoological) organism creates a situation where the

⁴ Aristotle’s argumentation for the unity of the human being is generally known. According to it, one soul performs three kinds of activities: metabolic, sensual, and rational. These functions are performed by using powers, which are themselves active potentialities. These powers are associated with particular organs which are necessary for the performing of those functions. Various subsequent commentators analyzed the nature of the relations between the soul, its powers, and corresponding organs, as was done in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

human being, in practical life, is compelled to fight against this *zoon* and its characteristic organic and instinctive determinations “in itself.” In short, there is a conflict between “animal” and “human” factors within the human being.

In Thomas Aquinas’s conception of man, we have obtained a re-interpretation of Aristotle’s understanding of the human being. The human soul is not a sub-ontic element in the same sense as it was in Aristotle’s philosophy—its primacy is based on the specific act of existence which transforms the soul into a kind of spiritual substance which is in no way an effect of the organization of matter. It is the act of existence that must then be given by the Absolute (the Pure Act of Infinite Existence) during the process (or event) of *creatio ex nihilo*.⁵

The specificity of the human soul in comparison to the pure spiritual being of angels lies in the human soul’s necessary relation or attribution to matter, which the human soul organizes into the human body. Without this relation, the human soul would be a *substantia incompleta*, an incomplete substance which is not able to perform its characteristic actions. As a spiritual principle, the human soul dominates and organizes matter in the human body and, so to say, compels it to cooperate with the main faculties of the soul, namely the intellect and the will. In this way, everything which occurs in the structure of the human being has this fundamental attribution to the faculties of the spiritual soul. The matter of the body is then, in a way, spiritualized.

Another fundamental function of a thus organized human body is to maintain the human being in “this world,” to enable interactions with other material beings, including other humans who are also partially material due to their possessing a body. In this way, for Thomists, the soul stops being only a form in the Aristotelian sense: it fulfills the func-

⁵ For more about *creatio ex nihilo*, see Andrzej Maryniarczyk, “Philosophical Creationism: Thomas Aquinas’ Metaphysics of *Creatio ex Nihilo*,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 5, no. 1 (January–March 2016): 217–268.

tions of the “old form,” but in itself it is a very different kind of “form”—a kind of spiritual substance, completed by its necessary relation to (organized) matter, i.e., the human body.

This new concept of a human being’s unity should compel thinkers oriented in a Thomistic way to rethink and reformulate the ways in which they think about all “sub-human” factors as well as their range and force in determining the free and rational actions of human beings. Let us look at one of the propositions of such a reinterpretation.

A classic problem of both the philosophy of morality and theology is to a certain degree the autonomous character of the sensual powers which have their “own life” and which constitute a difficulty in the moral life of the human being due to their being connected with the emergence of virtues and vices within the human being. Only if the sensual appetitive powers were subjected in a more perfect way to the superior spiritual power called “the will,” they would execute in a more perfect way the will’s acts. As it is sometimes explained in the realm of moral theology, the lack of subordination of the sensual powers to the actions of the will is the effect of original sin. It clearly suggests that the power of the soul to organize matter for itself became weakened after this sin, ultimately resulting in death. On the other hand, the theology of original sin finds its basis in philosophical anthropology that indicates the autonomy of the sensual powers in relation to the will manifesting itself in the independence to a certain degree of their reaction to the sensually cognized good and in their autonomous inclination aimed at the fulfillment of the desires thus created within them. The very emergence of these desires, in turn, seems to be a fact that reflects the primal acts of the will—the so-called “primal love”—which are reactions to what is cognized and presented to the will by the intellect as “the goodness of a being,” i.e., the transcendental good (*bonum*).

And yet if one considered the relative autonomy of the sensual cognitive powers, one could state that the sensual appetitive powers are

bound in their actions not only by the will, but also by the sensual cognitive powers. Hence desires in the sensual appetitive powers could occur as brought about not by acts of the will, but by sensual cognition alone. Thus created sensual desires would be an actual problem for the will, namely the will being forced to work with these desires as something “strange” to itself as well as “strange” in reference to its acts. It seems dubious, though. Such a scheme for reaction would mean the existence of *an animal* within the human being (or else an *animalistic* nature) which would additionally be “covered by a layer” of rational powers. This is not the way it is. The human being is a person and hence the unity of personal action requires the subordination of sensual powers to personal ones: for this is the sense of the organization of matter into a body by the soul—the latter as an immaterial subject is required for its excellence of existence and action to organize some appropriate body. Without the body, the soul as a spiritual subject could exist, to be sure, but the action of its spiritual powers—without corresponding somatic powers and adequate organs—would not be possible in relation to objects of the material world, among which the life of the human being takes place. The limitation of the subject’s activity would indicate some sort of imperfection of its existence—the subject would be in fact not substantial, but functional.

An additional question is whether the activity of spiritual powers is possible without corresponding and cooperating sensual (somatic) powers, both cognitive and appetitive. This issue is tackled by St. Thomas Aquinas in various parts of his works, especially in the hypothetical context of a “separated soul” after death which he generally understood as an effect of the “separation of the soul from the body.”⁶ This state being unnatural—for only the unity of the soul and the body is natu-

⁶ For instance, see *S.Th.*, I, q. 89, and *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 85, a. 6. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

ral—caused apprehensions that the disembodied soul is limited to the actions of the powers constituted only within the soul: the intellect and the will. But they could not act without corresponding sensual powers. And this thus would give another equally unnatural state of the soul consisting in possessing intellect and will but not acting upon them. In such a state the soul would continue to be “frozen” or else conserved or “intercepted” as in a movie frame and would be compelled to await the resurrection of the body which, according to the Christian revelation, takes place at “the end of times” or after “the end of the world.”

What shows how serious these apprehensions were is the fact that, for St. Thomas, there was enough unnaturalness in the state of a persisting “separated soul” and with this he did not want to accept the inaction of the soul’s powers, hence he referred to the grace and omnipotence of God. This is because it is God alone, as an infinite Spirit, who with His action can activate the spiritual powers of the soul and aid the soul with His light in conducting an evaluation of one’s life and one’s making of the “ultimate decision:” choosing either Him or a life in eternity without Him. Above and beyond this, there were no reasons for God, as the Creator of human nature, to somehow “tolerate” the unnatural being states that arise in consequence of human death which, as the Christian revelation teaches, was ultimately defeated by the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

From this point of view one must assume that since the soul organizes a body for itself from matter, then all the functions of this body, its organs and the powers that correspond to them, are ultimately subject to the activity of the spiritual powers of the soul in order to serve the fulfillment of the ultimate purpose of the human being’s existence. This makes one look at the issue of so-called inclinations (carnal, sensual) which, being somehow present within the human being, constitute an additional problem for the individual in regard to controlling them or making them subject to rationality. This sort of inclinations, sometimes

called “instincts,” is present in animals—although their activities are classically said to be directed by the power of sensual evaluation.

In the case of a human being, as Plato noted in his *Symposium*, human inclinations are directed to a purpose surpassing objects available to sensual cognition,⁷ with this sensual cognition being the first stage of awakening the urge/desire typical of a human being. Of course, one could stop at the level of sensual cognition which would undoubtedly result in a threat that the human person is made equal to animals and his actions become reminiscent of animal life and thus limited to the level of urges and instincts. It was clearly expressed by Aristotle when he stated that the human being who acts irrationally, and with disregard for human virtues, becomes worse than animals, for animals have their own natural regulators, i.e., instincts, that fully determine them.⁸ The human being, who is devoid of natural instincts and who fails to use his rationality to become virtuous, becomes worse than animals and greatly surpasses them in their bestiality, for his intellect and ability to act become servants of desires generated by sensual objects.

Ultimately, one must say that the aforementioned activity of the sensual appetitive powers must have as its motive adequate acts of will, connected with the reaction to the good of every being expressed in the primal love and the natural desire of the will directed to the good, but

⁷ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 211 c–d: “Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty. In that state of life above all others, my dear Socrates, said the Mantinean woman, a man finds it truly worth while to live, as he contemplates essential beauty.” In *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1925); available online—see the section *References* for details.

⁸ See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253 a 32, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 21, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1944); available online—see the section *References* for details.

specified by the recognition of the nature of the individual concrete good. However, this appetitive reaction substantially requires the evaluation of the intellect and the adequate relation to a given object after the initial assessment of this object from the point of view of the good of the object and its subsequent actions. Each appropriate decision is a source of action proportional to the nature of the object, situation, and the intentions of the subject. The so-called inclinations can only be spoken of in the context of objects specific to a given appetitive-organic power (because for the will any good is an appropriate good) which follows the general rule that any power of action cannot act without relation to its specific object. Therefore, in the presence of the object specific to a given power, a corresponding act has to occur.

Nevertheless, in the case of the human person his powers work in a specific way. Due to the unity of the personal being and the ontic subordination of sensual powers to spiritual ones (with this being the general sense in which matter is organized by the soul), organs associated with the appetitive powers serve action that begins with desire coming from the will. Nevertheless, organs and sensual powers serve only the execution of the will through action in relation to the object of desire. The sensual-organic appetitive powers, due to the aforementioned unity of the human being, cannot act (i.e., follow desires) in or of themselves without the causative participation of the will. Therefore, one cannot say that the sensual appetitive power is a source of inclinations or desires. It can only serve as a tool for the superior power (i.e., the will) to determine the ways of satisfying its desires. Namely, it determines the cooperation between an organ proper to deal with a specific object of desire and an action taken to address this object. However, the use of sensual appetitive powers and their organs to perform an action depends on the will and its decision. This means that already at the stage of cognitive contact with the object specific to a particular sensual appetitive power, there is a natural reaction of the will to the good that is

immediately translated into a reaction of that power and organs associated with it. Perhaps it is this very reaction that is called “urge” or “instinct.”

If one, however, necessarily wants to call this sort of reaction “instincts” (or “urges”), then surely it is not something that is a source of desires which indeed inclines or somehow compels to act in a particular way. It seems to be exactly the opposite: the sensual power and its proper organ are what simplify the execution of a desire of the will; they do it through a specific action by virtue of their distinct structure. When there is lack of a proper power or organ, the desires (or wishes) of the will become harder to execute or realize. In such cases, one must resort to the help of other organs, people, technologies, or even law. For example, when a tourist in a foreign country does not speak the local language, he can use his hands to produce communicative signs or ask someone to do translation for him or make use of translation capabilities of his smartphone or call his embassy for assistance in emergency situations.

In the case of animals, the activation of powers and organs is managed by instinct, i.e., a natural, biological “program” that reacts to stimuli (data) coming from the senses. In relation to its adequate object, the animal appetitive power is activated automatically by nature. In animal powers, there is even a double compulsion for action: one toward acquiring an adequate object when known and another toward searching for an adequate object when unknown. It particularly manifests itself in the case of reproductive action that is instinctively adapted to not only the animal’s nature, but also external conditions of living, e.g., the season of the year conducive to bearing and raising offspring (abundance of food, mild weather, etc.).⁹

⁹ These facts were known already to the ancients, one of the references to the behaviors of the natural world is the fragment from Plato’s *Symposium*, 207 a–b: “[Y]ou must have observed the strange state into which all the animals are thrown, whether going on

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SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to discuss the problem of the human body as to whether it is wholly and directly influenced by the rational forces of the soul, or it contains something instinctive or unconscious that can exert a determinative influence on human actions and behavior. Drawing on Thomistic anthropology, the author gives his interpretation of organic factors in the human body and their place in the free and rational actions of the human being through the case study of sensual appetitive powers. The latter, he concludes, are what simplify the execution of desires of the soul.

KEYWORDS

Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Thomistic anthropology, human body, human being, human person, human action, reason, will, soul, instinct, urge, desire, organism, sense, appetite.

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earth or winging the air, when they desire to beget: they are all sick and amorously disposed, first to have union one with another, and next to find food for the new-born; in whose behalf they are ready to fight hard battles, even the weakest against the strongest, and to sacrifice their lives; to be racked with starvation themselves if they can but nurture their young, and be put to any sort of shift.”