The Human Person: Animal and Spirit

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In 1988 David Braine, who has taught philosophy at the University of Aberdeen for many years, published *The Reality of Time and the Existence of God*, a metaphysical proof of God's existence. Now, in this second book, *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit* (Duckworth, London, 1993) which certainly stands on its own although we are frequently referred back to the earlier book and forward to two (if not three) forthcoming volumes, he reconstructs the argument advanced by Thomas Aquinas in favour of our immortality, an even more audacious enterprise in the present intellectual climate.

The first move is to cut off every form of dualism which splits the animals that we human beings are into parts that then have to be related to one another. The traditional mind/body dualism to which Platonist Christians have always been attracted is, so David Braine argues, no different from the brain/mind identity theories which currently flourish under such labels as physicalism, behaviourism and so on. While of course he conducts the argument with reference in general terms to current literature he is surely right in saying that the modern debates raise no issues that would surprise Aquinas. The Platonists paid attention only to the immateriality of the human intellect while the pre-Socratic Ionians believed that knowledge is simply physical (cf *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 84, 2). The greater threat nowadays to the unitariness of the human being is, as Braine says, various forms of materialism and, in particular, some of the Artificial Intelligence theories. But mind-realized-in-brain theories are no different philosophically from soul-imprisoned-in-body ones. Even distinguished philosophers such as Norman Malcolm and Michael Dummett (themselves Christian) exhibit 'a reductionist tendency of a behaviourist kind' (page 192, cf 392). The idea, on the other hand, that the person is invisible in a private world is 'a peculiar excrescence of post-Reformation thought, whether empiricist or existentialist' (page 495). David Braine, appealing frequently to Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Ryle and J.L. Austin, steers his way through these extremes and builds up a convincingly holistic account of human beings as animals which is, as he says, essentially the Aristotelian perspective which was mostly abandoned in the seventeenth century.

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The implications for ethics, theology, and so on, of a properly holistic conception of what it is to be a human being are, of course, very great. David Braine's main concern here is, however, to argue that the animals that we human beings are may be 'capable of continued existence even after bodily death' (page 522). For Aquinas, there is no specific bodily organ by which we have knowledge or thoughts. The mind thus has its own intrinsic activity in which the body takes no part (Ia 75, 2). It follows that the human soul is something incorporeal and subsisting—capable, then, of existing after death. Revolutionizing this entire line of argument, David Braine insists that, as animals, we have no intellectuality other than what is linguistically expressible (page 351). He promises a further volume in defence of his understanding of language but the lengthy considerations in this book are enough to make his thesis plausible that linguistic understanding has no bodily organ through which it operates nor any neural correlate. It is, of course, a very shocking thesis, once pithily expressed by Wittgenstein in a remark which Braine does not quote: 'It is perfectly possible that certain psychological phenomena cannot be investigated physiologically, because physiologically nothing corresponds to them' (*Zettel*, 609).

Denying, then, that thinking is a bodily activity or an activity to which any bodily activity is internal, Braine clears the way for saying that, in thinking and understanding, the language-using animal 'transcends' the body. In taking language as his starting-point he begins, not from something supposedly immaterial, but from something psychophysical and peculiar to animals. With language, human beings find themselves in a situation where they are 'laid bare' (Braine's word), not only to the objects of their natural environment but to an indefinitely wider range of objects—'indeed to whatever human beings may, through language, be laid bare' (page 11). Our situation after death may be one of 'deprivation and emptiness' (page 544)—that is not for philosophy to decide. But if linguistic understanding and thinking in words are not neurologically determined activities but transcend physical processes, the 'religious wonder, hope and desire' revealed by language may not be 'chimerical'.

David Braine's argument, although not an exercise in the history of philosophy, is very much a reworking of what St Thomas held. There is no need for the reader to keep turning up the *Summa* to check on what Braine says, but anybody familiar with Aquinas's philosophical psychology will be intrigued and illuminated. For instance, Aquinas insists that human beings cannot have thoughts about anything without having recourse to sense images of some kind (*phantasmata*). How, then, are we to conceive of the intellectual activities of the human mind

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when it is separated from the body at death?

This is something of a test case for his understanding of the nature of the soul. Platonists of course have no problem, Thomas says: for them, once the impediment of body is removed, the soul returns to its true nature and the mind has thoughts of anything and everything, just as angels have (Ia 89, 1). To avoid such dualism, while preserving traditional Christian doctrine about the mental state of the separated soul, Thomas suggests that, without changing its nature, the soul has two ways of existing: one natural (embodied), the other '*praeter naturam*' (bodiless). According to its way of being in the world, as one might say, the mind works by turning to the sense images (*phantasmata*) that material objects generate in our bodies. When one is dead, however, the soul has a way of being (*modus essendi*) which is 'unrelated to the whole idea of its nature'—allowing it to have intellectual activities such as the minds of angels supposedly have. In the end, that is to say, the difference between Aquinas and the Platonists boils down to what he regards as the 'unnatural' character of the soul's way of existing after death (while awaiting reunion with the body). But, as Braine says (page 519, footnote 14, where the reference is to q. 89 not q. 84), this is surely a 'foreign idea', which Thomas should not have admitted. The notion that the soul could have two different ways of *being*, without any change in its *nature*, seems incoherent. This text should yield to the much better treatment of the whole subject in the *Quaestio Disputata de Anima*, so Braine tells us. In that text, 'amidst a magnificent *exposé* of the problematic of avoiding dualism', Aquinas confines himself to distinguishing two ways of *knowing* and says nothing about two ways of *being*.

It is not clear why Braine regards this unsatisfactory discussion in the Summa as '*much* earlier' (my italics) than the *QD de Anima*. According to the usual dating, the *Prima Pars* was completed late in 1268. Weisheipl places the disputation soon after Thomas arrived back in Paris in January 1269. Simon Tugwell, following Gauthier, regards it as 'fairly certain' that it took place even before he left Rome. The suggestion that Aquinas had time to reconsider his ideas between writing the *Summa* and taking part in the disputation does not seem to have much substance. But it is valuable to have what seems like an incoherent notion pointed out (a muddle in a great philosopher is more instructive than an uncontroversial insight). It is even more important to have attention drawn to the remarkable discussion in the *QD de Anima*: a small classic in the history of philosophy.

David Braine inveighs with vigour against the 'madness' which afflicts translators of Aquinas when they render the word '*species*' by

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the word 'image' (page 416, footnote 25). Such a translation would, in effect, interpose a screen of mental images of things between the mind and the things themselves. It would thus ruin what John Haldane calls Aquinas' mind-world identity theory. For Thomas, there is no gap to be bridged between the mind and the world—no room, then, for scepticism to arise about whether appearance and reality normally or ever match. What I know *is* the world. But it is not clear that this misleading translation which outrages Braine actually occurs. In fact, so far as I can see, the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (volume 4) and Paul Durbin in the Blackfriars version (volume 12), whom he singles out, far from making this error so 'particularly to be abominated', have simply left the word '*species*' untranslated. Even where Thomas argues against what anybody would naturally translate as 'innate ideas' (Ia. 84, 3), both versions stick to 'innate species'. Perhaps, as Peter Geach claimed (in *Mental Acts*), 'professed followers' of St Thomas impose 'abstractionism' on what he says about how our minds work. It is always a good story that the Thomists misunderstood Aquinas. But it is difficult to understand why these particular translators should be charged with propagating the idea that Thomas was any kind of representationalist in his theory of knowledge.

It would not be difficult to show that neoscholastic expositors of his theory of knowledge took great care to insist that, for Aquinas, the 'intelligible *species*' are merely the *means* by which we know and not the *object* of our knowledge, as representationalist theories make out. On the other hand, some of his own contemporaries, such as Henry of Ghent and Peter John Olivi, feared that his talk about 'intelligible *species*' inevitably introduced something that would 'veil' (Olivi's word) external reality from the mind (see *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*. page 609). But, to return to Braine's apparently somewhat unjust charge, perhaps choosing to leave the word '*species*' untranslated may itself have encouraged many students to read some form of representationalism into the text, so overwhelming is the temptation to postulate mental intermediaries between the mind and the world in the process of cognition.

The Human Person is a remarkable achievement. The wider ramifications, as the author says, stretch into ethics, aesthetics, our treatment of the environment and of other animals, and much else besides. Among the many intriguing and sometimes provocative asides and details it is pleasing, for example, that he refers, in his remarks about substance, to Columba Ryan's unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis (1948). As a revision of Aquinas' argument for the immortality of the soul, one could perhaps sum it up by saying that, instead of talking of

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man (*homo*) as body-soul compound (*compositum*), David Braine begins simply with the human being as an animal. Instead of starting with thinking as an incorporeal activity his focus is on the physical expressiveness of language. Both moves surely take Aquinas further than ever from 'Platonism', in the direction he would have wanted to go. On this view, then, if we are open to God it is as animals that we are so, not just as souls. And the intellectuality that differentiates us, our capacity for language, is the way that we transcend our material environment. Aquinas shows no interest in language in connection with his theory of knowledge and he even says that, as a theologian, he need not be concerned with the body except to the extent that it has some relationship with the soul (Prologue to q.75). By rescuing language from oblivion and by bringing us as animals to the centre of attention, David Braine drives us back to reconsider some of Aquinas' fundamental options—but above all he shows us how to treat the possibility of our having some real openness to God as a question worthy of metaphysical consideration. Even if some of his contentions turn out on further study to be mistaken (and many of them already seem irrefutable and some suddenly have the obviousness that it took his perception to reveal), David Braine has achieved the rare distinction with this book of completely renewing an ancient philosophical topic about which most philosophers nowadays would think nothing need be said- but which is, of course, of great interest and significance to the ordinary human being.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Eamon Duffy

Universities are curious, contrary institutions, and Oxford and Cambridge more curious and contrary than most. At one level they are centres of intellectual innovation and advance, places where the atom is split, new wonder-drugs developed, old orthodoxies overturned. And yet they are also the most conservative of institutions, wedded, with a fidelity which our society hardly grants to any ordinary marriage, to extraordinary rituals and ways of doing things whose sole commendation seems to be, that it has always been so.

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