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# Adam Wood, "Thomas Aquinas on the Immateriality of the Human Intellect"

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**Adam Wood.** *Thomas Aquinas on the Immateriality of the Human Intellect.* Catholic University of America Press 2019. 318 pp. \$75.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780813232560).

The primary purpose of Adam Wood's book is to explain and defend St. Thomas Aquinas's claim that human minds are immaterial. In order to accomplish this goal, Wood draws extensively upon the primary texts of Aquinas, the longstanding tradition of Thomistic philosophy, and plenty of secondary literature in the field. Originally written as a dissertation under the tutelage of Fordham philosopher Gyula Klima, scholars and other researchers who are heavily invested in the contemporary debates on the mind-body problem would do well to purchase a copy of Wood's comprehensively argued book. *The Immateriality of the Human Intellect* will also serve as an excellent contribution to graduate level courses in philosophy, and it will guide other readers into the relevant discussions that elaborate upon the medieval philosophy of Aquinas.

Recognizing that Aquinas's hylomorphic dualist view has received considerable attention in recent years, Wood offers the first book-length analysis of Aquinas's thought on the mind-body problem. Undoubtedly, it will help to position Aquinas's fundamental views in contrast to the dominant philosophical paradigms of Cartesian dualism and eliminative materialism. Although the book does not always situate Aquinas's thought within the broader historical and cultural contexts in which the great Dominican saint wrote and taught (i.e., the middle of the thirteenth century), he is interpreted and explicated from the perspective of a contemporary analytic philosopher, utilizing terminology and argumentation that Aquinas himself would not have recognized. Nonetheless, Wood has provided the guild of academic philosophers with a first-rate contribution to philosophical psychology in general and Thomistic thought in particular.

What is more, the implications of Aquinas's position on immaterial minds and incorruptible souls are wide-ranging and momentous for the study of theology and world religions. As Wood succinctly states: 'the immateriality of the intellect is tightly related to our power to make free choices, our capacity for self-knowledge, and ability to think and reason abstractly, [and] the possibility of our souls surviving death in a disembodied state' (1). For instance, the three major monotheistic religions of the world (i.e., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) unanimously proclaim that human beings will be raised from the dead at the end of time. Without a defensible belief in the immateriality of the human intellect, there can be no continuity between human beings who are now living with the glorified bodies that await them at the final eschaton. Though Wood's text has implications for theology and religion, it is not recommended for readers who have only rudimentary understandings of advanced works of philosophy. Wood's book should be consulted by students and scholars who are thoroughly familiar with and immersed in the relevant literature on metaphysics and the philosophy of the mind-body problem.

In the opening chapters, Wood defines and discusses the meaning of immaterial intellects. One common understanding of immateriality is the lack of matter. Furthermore, Wood updates Aquinas's philosophy of being in a way that pushes well beyond introductory level summaries and defenses of Thomistic metaphysics. This system is well-known for reflecting upon limited beings and conjoining but distinguishing matter and form, essence and existence, and substance and accident. To provide



one example of how Wood goes beyond the basic presentation of Thomistic metaphysics, he argues that Aquinas defined and understood form as a limiting principle of being. A form can be defined as the arrangement or organization of matter which makes a limited being the way it exists in the here-and-now.

The above-mentioned framework of metaphysics informs Aquinas' thought in multiple ways. 'That Aquinas understands forms or essences in this way as limiting principles provides the key to understanding how they could be immaterial' (8). Further, one should also 'appreciate Thomas's conception of forms or essences as principles delimiting or determining an act of being (*esse*) into various modes' (3; cf. 90). As with any other Thomistic philosophy, Wood pushes forward an analogical conception of limited beings, but he also relies heavily on Aquinas's earlier work, *De principiis naturae* in the case for immaterial intellects. Drawing upon the texts of Aquinas and Thomistic traditions, Wood acknowledges that the human intellect has its act of being in an immaterial mode. In addition, the immaterial mode presumes that all limited beings are composed of both matter and form, act and potentiality. This is precisely why the metaphysics of Aquinas allows him to argue for immaterial intellects.

For Aquinas, forms limit beings in a certain way, but they are also divided into various modes. Within the broader context of form and matter, the intellect 'is one such mode in which Aquinas thinks that various forms have their acts of being. By calling the human intellect immaterial, he primarily means that it is a form with its act of being in an immaterial mode' (3). Next, Wood expands upon the various ways in which forms can be actualized into different roles within the fabric of limited, created beings (e.g., they can be actualized as essences, structures, truthmakers, and powers). Proceeding to other texts in the Thomistic corpus, Wood argues that intellect and will are seen as modal powers that have nothing to do with the organic composition of human beings. Correlatively, the intellectual powers of human beings should not be understood in terms of the coordination between physical parts or processes. It is precisely at this point that one begins to recognize *how* the Common Doctor understood intellects as incorporeal and incorruptible aspects of human existence.

An accurate definition of the human intellect sets the stage for a detailed examination and evaluation of Aquinas's traditional arguments for the immateriality of the intellect. The first one is based upon 'the potentially infinite variety of different objects that the intellect is able to cognize. another based upon the intellect's ability to cognize itself, and a third upon the "absolute" or "universal" way that it cognizes its objects' (4). It is rare to find Thomists disagreeing with the Master, but Wood calls into question the soundness of all three of Aquinas' arguments for the intellect. In Wood's words: 'It is easy enough to arrange the premises of Aquinas's arguments such that they are formally valid. Having done so, however, by my lights each has at least one premise that appears difficult (at least) to defend. It should not be at all surprising if Aquinas's arguments for the human intellect's immateriality fall short of the dialectical standard we would expect of such reasoning nowadays' (194). According to Wood, even the exponents of Thomistic philosophy have been unable to salvage the soundness of Aquinas's arguments in defense of immaterial intellects. Notwithstanding this seeming predicament within Thomism, Wood utilizes the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Thomas Nagel, and James Ross to reconstrue the second argument in order to strengthen

its overall plausibility.

By the end of the book, Wood presumes that the major conclusions in the previous chapters have been established. In the sixth and final chapter, Wood traces some of the philosophical and theological implications of the human intellect's immateriality, and the most salient among them is that the soul continues to persist incorruptibly into the next lifetime. Considering Aquinas's understanding of the human person (i.e., a hylomorphic unity that consists of the physical body and its form), it follows inescapably that an aspect of the person will survive death, but not the person himself. The human person will therefore be reconstituted on the last day in what is known as the resurrection of the body. The latter is not a tenet that can be philosophically proven or established as 'more probably than not,' but it must be accepted in faith. Thus there is something of a gap between a human's death and his or her final resurrection.

One of the major takeaways of *The Immateriality of the Human Intellect* centers around Wood's sophisticated grasp of Aquinas and the culture of analytic philosophy that informs his perspectives. One simply cannot advance the relevant discussions on Aquinas' philosophical anthropology without consulting this book and studying its meticulous arguments at length.

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