

Existing As My Soul: A Response to Christopher Tollefsen

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IT IS TRUE THAT UNDER normal conditions I am not my soul. But it seems to me to be the received teaching of the Church that, in the extraordinary condition of my death, I then will indeed exist as my soul.

Catechism 1023 reads: “Those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they ‘see him as he is,’ face to face.” The Scripture references here are to 1 John 3:2, 1 Corinthians 13:12, and Revelation 22:4. Notably, the passage in the *Catechism* is not worded to say “*the souls of* those who die....” It then goes on to cite a lengthy passage from the papal constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336) [DS 1000] of Pope Benedict XII on the beatific vision of God:

By virtue of our apostolic authority, we define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints...and other faithful who died after receiving Christ’s holy Baptism (provided they were not in need of purification when they died...or, if they then did need or will need some purification, when they have been purified after death...) already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment – and this since the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven – have been, are and will be in heaven, in the heavenly Kingdom and celestial paradise with Christ, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature.

Here, the wording, in fact, contains a reference to souls: “*the souls of*...have been, are, will be...joined to the company of angels..., see the divine essence....” But this text is emptied of any significance if it is not implied here that, in referring to “the souls of” the deceased, the Church is speaking about *the deceased*. This very topic is emptied of any relevance if it is not about you and me, as opposed to being about *some part of* you and me. What would be the point of definitive teaching about some *thing* (the souls of the faithful departed) that is not *us*?

The same passage in the *Catechism* also refers back to *Lumen Gentium*

§49.¹ Part of that text reads as follows: “Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods.” We wayfarers do not engage in communion with impersonal detached substantial forms. Rather, the Church holds that we continue in communion with “the brethren,” with our brothers and sisters who have gone before us.

As for the survivalist/corruptionist debate within Thomism, count me with Tollefsen as firmly in the survivalist camp. And while I suspect that corruptionism is not contrary to received teaching, it remains very difficult to see how it can harmoniously accommodate itself to that teaching.²

I did not mean that comment to be a digression, for the reality of “existing

¹ “Until the Lord shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him and death being destroyed, all things are subject to Him, some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory beholding "clearly God Himself triune and one, as He is"; but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbor and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. For all who are in Christ, having His Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in Him. Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods. For by reason of the fact that those in heaven are more closely united with Christ, they establish the whole Church more firmly in holiness, lend nobility to the worship which the Church offers to God here on earth and in many ways contribute to its greater edification. For after they have been received into their heavenly home and are present to the Lord, through Him and with Him and in Him they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, showing forth the merits which they won on earth through the one Mediator between God and man, serving God in all things and filling up in their flesh those things which are lacking of the sufferings of Christ for His Body which is the Church. Thus by their brotherly interest our weakness is greatly strengthened.”

² It likewise remains open to debate whether Aquinas was, strictly speaking, a corruptionist. See Turner Nevitt’s argument: “The corruptionist takes [Aquinas’s metaphysical account of the hylomorphic composition of the human person] at face value. If the soul is not the person, but only a part of the person, and if only the soul exists between death and resurrection, then only a part of the person exists between death and resurrection; the person, strictly speaking, does not.” Turner Nevitt, “Survivalism, Corruptionism, and Intermittent Existence in Aquinas,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31 (2014): 4, available at: <http://hpq.press.illinois.edu/31/1/nevitt.html>, accessed 10.01.16.

as my soul” is central to Tollefsen’s line of reasoning. It is precisely the potential of a part of me *that I could exist as this part* that distinguishes this part as “irreplaceable” in the strong sense that Tollefsen has articulated: the brain (*like the soul*) is the part of the human being that I could exist as, under certain extreme circumstances. Remove that part, and you have removed me. I would be dead.

In arguing for the distinctiveness of the brain, Tollefsen takes a tack different from that of other proponents of the brain-death criterion who have argued for the irreplaceability of the brain in virtue of its central integrating function or its being the foundation for organismic self-direction and so on. Tollefsen acknowledges that such approaches have vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the research of Alan Shewmon and others.

The question that his paper invites then is whether his proposed criterion for claiming the brain’s intrinsic and irreplaceable role in sustained human existence – his “could exist as” criterion – is sound and if it offers any better grounding for determinations of death based on the brain death criterion.

Even though his entire argument refers to the soul as a “part” of the human organism, I believe that he would agree that the soul is not a “part” – at least not in the same order of being in which body parts, the brain included, are “parts.” Rather, the soul is a principle – a principle of being, in fact, *the principle of being – that makes parts possible*.³ In fact, Tollefsen acknowledges this in his second aside by noting that even existing as our brains we would still be ensouled, that is, the soul would still be present and in-forming the apt matter for the presence of my brain. Therefore, I myself would still be existing, albeit in extremely dire circumstances.

The soul is the substantial form of the body – a truth at which I believe that we can arrive philosophically, but also, again, something taught defini-

³ As Aquinas explains in *Contra Gentiles*, II, c. 69: “For the body and the soul are not two substances existing in act, but rather from these two, there emerges one substance existing in act: the body of a man is not the same whether the soul is present in act or not; rather the soul causes the very body to be in act.” (Non enim corpus et anima sunt duae substantiae actu existentes, sed ex eis duobus fit una substantia actu existens: corpus enim hominis non est idem actu praesente anima, et absente; sed anima facit ipsum actu esse.) So, again, the more accurate reading of Thomas’s notion of the soul is to understand it as substantial form, subsistent in itself (because immaterial), yet incomplete, a co-constitutive principle, along with *material prima*, of an individual human substance.

tively by the Church and defined at the Council of Vienne in 1312.⁴

Returning then to the merits of Tollefsen's argument, it should be noted that his argument is not really about "two irreplaceable parts." Rather, I find that Tollefsen's argument is simply transparent for an argument about the irreplaceability of the brain, in the strong sense of irreplaceability articulated in terms of his "can exist as" criterion. The standard of this criterion is the soul as the substantial form of the body. In this respect it has the merit of avoiding a series of objections that can be raised against arguing that the brain is the central integrating element of the human organism and so on.

Tollefsen's argument seems to entail, furthermore, that when one of these "two" irreplaceable "parts" is gone, then they are *both* gone: otherwise he would seem to leave open the possibility that the brain could be gone but the *other* irreplaceable part could still be informing what remains. In other words, he would be leaving open the possibility that the brain-dead individual is still living, a view that he rejects.

So, implicit in his argument is the assertion that there is a tight relationship between brain and soul – at least in the respect that I have mentioned, that the soul's capacity *to be* (although not numerically identical to⁵) the same human subject that was the person for whom it was the substantial form prior to death. This simply constitutes the criterion that Tollefsen is looking for in an organ of the human body, and he believes that the brain fits the bill.

So, Tollefsen's argument is reducible to the assertions that (1) I could exist only as my brain; (2) this is true only of the brain; and (3) the brain is irreplaceable in this strong sense, which simply follows from (1) and (2).

It seems to me that the strength of the argument rests in the central claim (1) that a human person could exist (or survive) only as his brain. As argued in the paper, this point seems to be little more than an assertion. Yes, there is some persuasive power in the thought-experiment approach that he uses when he writes: "Few, I think, would deny that if the brain were kept alive and then transplanted into a new organism, then the waking organism would be you.

⁴ This doctrine on the human soul is also neatly summarized and affirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §365: "The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature."

⁵ As Tollefsen rightly points out, "existing as" is not the same as numerical identity.

And I think it would make sense as well to think that you had survived through the process.”

But I think that the argument as such remains weak. And I do not find here something that Tollefsen’s argument very much requires to be effective, namely, a convincing criterion or indicator as to when, in what moment, given the extreme circumstances, I would begin to exist as my brain, because this would be indicative of a brain-death criterion. When is the brain so absent or removed from the body (so much so that, if it were intact, I would in fact now be existing as my brain) that the rest of the body is dead?

To underline this point, I will tease out some elements of Tollefsen’s thought-experiment. As my brain is placed in the vat, perhaps in the same room where my body remains, for a period of hours or days, and my heart is kept beating, on what grounds would we eliminate the possibility that the same substantial form – human soul, my soul – is still informing the brain *and* whatever else remains of me? Or what if my brain were temporarily shipped to California (while my body remains on life support) for further research in the hope that it could be re-implanted in my skull cavity and I could be removed from life support and revived? My point is this: what triggers my beginning to exist as my brain? In other words, at what point is the rest of my body no longer “me,” no longer ensouled, dead? I do not think that Tollefsen’s argument – as developed so far – is able to resolve that conundrum.

It also seems to me that buried within the argument is the contention that the organism – if it is an organism – that survives the complete destruction of the brain is nonetheless no longer “apt matter” to be informed by the substantial form that once informed it, thereby constituting it as a human organism and a human person. But that would beg the question as to why absence of a brain brings about this substantial change, which likely leads back to arguing that the brain, and the brain alone, owns the central integrating function of the human organism, or some such argument, a direction in which Tollefsen, admittedly, does not want to go.