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John Buridan on the Immateriality  
of the Soul

Q.4 Fourth, it is asked whether the human intellect is a form inhering in the human body.

It is argued that it is, on the authority of Alexander and the Catholic faith.

The opposite is argued on the authority of the Commentator. The opinion of the Commentator was that the intellect does not inhere in the body although it is present to it,<sup>1</sup> just as Aristotle supposed that an intelligence is present to a celestial sphere, or that God is present to the world.<sup>2</sup> For although an intelligence is indivisible and not inherent, it is supposed to be immediately present to the entire sphere and to each and every part of it, just as God is present to the entire world and to each and every part of it. And so the Commentator says that the human intellect, an indivisible and unique existent, is immediately present to each and every man, even though it inheres in none of them.

And there are in this connection the Commentator's probable arguments.

The first is that no form inheres in matter if it is not derived from a material potentiality. But the human intellect is not derived from a material potentiality, as the Commentator says.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, etc.

His second argument is that there is a unique intellect for all men, for it is, as he says, everlasting, and everlasting things are not multiplied by the number of corruptible things.<sup>4</sup> But that which is unique and undivided does not inhere in a plurality of things, distinct in place and with parts outside parts, and human bodies are of this sort. Therefore, etc.

Again, the intellect is assumed to be indivisible (also according to the faith), because it is not materially extended, since it is not educed from a material potentiality. However, such an indivisible would not inhere in a divisible subject, and the human body is of this sort. Therefore, etc.

This argument can be set out deductively as follows: if an indivisible existing intellect inheres in a divisible body, it must be that it inheres in either (1) each and every part of

1 Cf. Averr. *In De an.* III.5; Crawford *Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis De anima libros*, ed. F. Stuart Crawford (CCAA: Versio Latina, vol. 6, 1), Cambridge, MA, 1953. pp. 401–4, ll. 449–500.

2 Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* XII.7.1072b20–1; XII.10.1075a11–16.

3 Averr. *In De an.* III.5; Crawford, pp. 404–5, ll. 501–20.

4 Averr. *In De an.* III.5; Crawford, pp. 406–7, ll. 556–96.

that body or (2) some part and not in another. If it is said that it inheres in one part and not in another, this is manifestly false, since it could not be consistently attributed to each part and quantity of the body. But if it is said that it inheres in the entire body, that is, in each and every part of it, it is certain that this will be in keeping with the body as a whole, since the intellect is not divisible.

And from this, many absurdities appear to follow.

The first is that the same thing would as a whole be moved and at rest simultaneously, and since resting is the same as not being moved, the same thing would be moved and not moved simultaneously, which implies a contradiction. The consequence is obvious. Suppose that your foot is at rest and your hand is moving. In that case, the same thing which, considered as a whole, is in your hand would be moved with the motion of your hand (since otherwise, it would not be continuous with your hand and in your hand) and, insofar as it is continuous with your foot, at rest in your foot, for it remains continuous in the same place, i.e., the place occupied by your foot. Therefore, your intellect, the same indivisible existent, would be moved and at rest simultaneously, since it would be moved in your hand and at rest in your foot.

But the absurdity grows, because it would follow that the same thing would be moved as a whole by contrary motions simultaneously: if you move your one hand to the right and the other to the left, or the one lower and the other higher, there is another inconsistency because it follows that the same thing would be apart from itself, which is impossible. The consequence holds, since the hand is apart from the foot, and so that which is wholly in the hand would be separate from that which is wholly in the foot as a whole.

Third, it would follow that your foot would understand, because the intellect, considered as a whole, would be present in it, and consequently, so would the act of understanding.

Fourth, it would follow that your foot would be a man, because there must be a composite of body and entire human substantial form for there to be an actual man, since a substantial form must actually exist as a particular entity. And your foot would be this kind of thing, since the intellect is the substantial form of the entire man.

Fifth, it would follow that a substantial form would move from subject to subject, which is plainly absurd. The consequence holds because through change, some parts of the body pass away and others come to be, and so the same intellect that was previously in the parts that have passed away would later be in those that have come to be.

Nevertheless, the Commentator's opinion is false, which is why I advance the opposite thesis: namely, that your intellect, by which you understand, inheres in your body or your matter.<sup>5</sup>

First, this thesis must be firmly upheld on the basis of the Catholic faith.

Second, this thesis must also be upheld by natural arguments, leaving the Catholic faith aside, just as a pagan philosopher would uphold it. My proof is that I think a pagan philosopher would follow the opinion of Alexander. More will be said about this later.<sup>6</sup>

There are, however, natural arguments that the soul inheres in the human body.

The first is that otherwise, the soul would not belong to the essence of a man, or a man would not be a single something essentially. Both appear false. That is why it was adequately

5 Or possibly, 'without your matter [*sine materia tua*]' . For this ambiguity in the manuscripts, see Jack Zupko, "On Buridan's Alleged Alexandrianism: Heterodoxy and Natural Philosophy in Fourteenth-Century Paris," *Vivarium* 42 1 (2004), 47 n. 11.

6 See below, pp. 00–00.

argued in the preceding question that the intellect must be an intrinsic part of the substance of a man.<sup>7</sup>

The second argument is that one would assume either that there is a unique intellect for all men or that there are as many intellects as there are men. But both are obviously absurd. The first absurdity is that it is assumed to be unique, as we will see shortly.<sup>8</sup> And I also state that if the intellect is not inherent, there must not be one for me and another for you because suppose that they are A (yours) and B (mine). Then, since they would not inhere in us, they must have the same nature, and would be no more movable in keeping with your motion than they would mine. Therefore, intellect A would be no closer or more proximate to you than intellect B is to me, and vice versa – i.e., before either of us understood anything. Therefore, natural reason would not tell us that A is any more your intellect than mine.

The third argument is close to the preceding: Socrates' intellect is either moved from place to place with Socrates, or not. If you reply that this [i.e., that the intellect would be moved from place to place with Socrates] does not seem like a natural thing to say because it does not inhere in him (for no means could be given by which this might occur either by touch or impulse, nor could it be said how the intellect would be bound to Socrates' body, given that it is continuously moved with Socrates' body), this will not do, especially before Socrates understands anything. But if you say that it would not be moved from place to place with Socrates, then he would be apart from his own intellect, and so he could not understand through himself [*per ipsum*], unless you were to say that this intellect is everywhere by immediacy, as we speak of God. And then only one intellect would need to be assumed, since it would be just as close to me as it would be to you, especially before either of us understood anything. Therefore, I could understand through it just as well as you could, and so it would be a fiction to posit one for you and another for me. That is why the Commentator believed that it is unique<sup>9</sup> – a conclusion that will be disproved later.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth argument is that human reason, leaving the faith aside, or even [assuming] the faith, would not say that your intellect exists before you do unless it is assumed to be everlasting and unique, as the Commentator thought. But if it comes into existence in time, this would be either by creation – which natural reason, leaving the faith aside, does not consider – or by natural generation, in which case it would be educed from a material potentiality and inherent in the body. Therefore, everyone should assent to this conclusion, as long as men live in this world, whether they count themselves among the faithful or not.

For this reason, it seems to me that we must note that natural reason, leaving the faith and supernatural action aside, dictates that these [six characteristics], or their opposites, obtain as regards every form: being (1) inherent in matter; (2) educed from a material potentiality; (3) materially extended (4) numerically many (rather than unique and undivided by bodies that are separate and at a distance from one another); (5) generated; and (6) corruptible. Now Alexander thought that all of these are true as regards the human intellect, and others deny them all the same. But our position, based on faith, is that they do not follow from one another by necessity: i.e., we accept the [bodily] inherence and multiplication of the intellect, but deny that it is educed from the potentiality of matter and extended. And we also assume (1) that it is made in a supernatural way, i.e., by means of creation rather than natural

7 See Buridan, *Questions on Aristotle's De anima*<sup>3</sup>, III. 3.

8 i.e. *ibid.* III.5.

9 Averr. *In De an.* III.5; Crawford, p. 401, ll. 424–5.

10 i.e. in Buridan, *Questions on Aristotle's De anima*<sup>3</sup>, III.5.

generation; (2) that it is not strictly speaking corruptible, i.e., corruptible by natural means (although it can be annihilated); and (3) that it will never be annihilated.

To the Commentator's arguments, however, the person of faith would respond in one way and Alexander in another.

For to the first, the person of faith would deny the major and Alexander the minor.

As for the second argument, the person of faith and Alexander would both deny that there is a unique intellect belonging to all men. More will be said about this later.<sup>11</sup>

To the third argument, Alexander would deny that the intellect is indivisible, and so the absurdities raised against its being indivisible would not apply to him. But the person of faith grants that it is indivisible.

And so to the first counter-instance, it is replied that the intellect is not moved and at rest at the same time, since that would be contradictory, as the argument shows. But it is granted that the intellect is moved in the hand and at rest in the foot simultaneously. Therefore, it is simultaneously moved in the hand and not moved in the foot. But this is not a contradiction. For this reason, 'The intellect is at rest in the foot; therefore, it is at rest' does not follow, since 'The intellect is not moving in the foot; therefore, it is not moving' also does not follow. And when it is said that it is moved by contrary motions, we can speak of this just as we speak of the body of Christ in the consecrated host when one priest carries the body of Christ to the right and another to the left, for the body of Christ is moved neither in itself nor by a motion inhering in it, just as the magnitude of the host does not inhere in it. So in the same way, the intellect is moved neither in itself, nor by a motion inhering in it. If, however, something is denominated by contrary motions, there is no absurdity, since it does not follow from this that contraries exist in the same thing at the same time. For just as it is not absurd for the same thing to be in different places apart from each other (as will be discussed in reply to the next argument), so it is not absurd for the same thing to be moved to those places simultaneously, since those motions do not inhere in it, nor are they commensurably related to it.

To the second counter-instance, it is said that the intellect is not apart from itself because it does not exist in the hand or foot commensurably, given that it is not extended by the extension of the hand or foot. And it is not absurd for the same thing to be wholly and incommensurably in different places apart from each other, although this would be by supernatural means, as the body of Christ is simultaneously in paradise and on the altar: the body of Christ in the host on the altar is not on that account said to be apart from itself for it is not commensurate with the magnitude of the host, but exists in each and every part of it, although those parts are separate from each other. And so in a similar fashion, the intellect is somehow in the hand and foot, though in neither commensurably, since it is not extended in either of those members.

To the third counter-instance, we would not think it absurd to say that your foot understands as a partial understanding [*partiale intelligens*]. But I call that which is part of another understanding a 'partial understanding', and that which understands but which is not part of another understanding, a 'total understanding'. For this reason, neither the intellect nor some part of a man, but only the [entire] man himself, is a total understanding.

To the fourth counter-instance, it will be said that nothing is called a man or an animal in familiar and ordinary speech except the whole substance, i.e., that which is not part of another substance. Nor is any substance strictly called a particular thing, whether by its

<sup>11</sup> i.e. *ibid.*

substantial form or in another manner (especially where living things are concerned), unless it is a whole substance. And this is better treated in another place.<sup>12</sup>

To the final counter-instance, it will be said that the way in which the intellect inheres in the human body is not natural but supernatural. And it is certain that God could supernaturally not only form what has not been educed from a material potentiality, but also separate what has been so educed from its matter, conserve it separately, and put it in some other matter. Why, then, wouldn't this be possible as regards the human intellect?

12 Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* VIII.3.1043a29–b5; Buridan, *Questions on Aristotle's De anima*<sup>3</sup>, II.7: Peter Gordon Sobol, "John Buridan on the Soul and Sensation: An Edition of Book II of his Commentary on Aristotle's Book of the Soul, with an Introduction and a Translation of Question 18 on Sensible Species," Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, pp. 92–104.

