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ARISTOTLE AND AQUINAS ON SEX DIFFERENTIATION

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When analyzing the difference between male and female humans—humanity being the common bond between them—it is important to understand what makes an individual human before we investigate what makes an individual a *sexed* human. An individual is a human being if he or she is informed by a human soul. Aristotle addresses the soul in his treatise *De anima*, in which he explains that the soul is the organizing principle of matter, providing life and functionality to inanimate material. Contrasting primary act and secondary act, he defines the soul as “the primary act of a physical bodily organism.”¹ Primary act and secondary act are equivalent to the distinction between active potency and actuality. Active potency is particular to ensouled beings. For example, water does not have active potency to do anything; as soon as it exists, it performs the function proper to water—being wet. Water never exists without being wet.

On the other hand, eyeballs often exist without exercising sight. The potential to see is not present simply when an eyeball is present; an eyeball alone is not capable of sight, but only an eyeball of a living animal, present in the proper place, connected with the right nerves to the right parts of the brain. And a functioning eyeball can even have the power to see when it is not actively exercising sight (such as when the eye is closed), provided it is being informed by a soul with the power of sensation. Unlike the power of sight in an eyeball, there is no function of water that ever lacks actuality; while a water molecule would cease to be a water molecule when it ceases to act like water, a living thing would remain a member of its genus even while not actively participating in the distinctive activity of that genus. Only ensouled beings possess this active potency. Therefore, since human sex is fundamentally about innate potential, it concerns not only the body but also the soul.

Further, the soul is not simply a primary act, but the primary act of a physical bodily *organism*. In his essay “The Specification of Sex/Gender in the Human Species,” Nicanor Austriaco views an organism “as a single, unified whole, a complex and dynamic network of interacting molecules.”² Unlike inanimate objects, whose function can be readily recognized due to their simple actuality, organic beings are more complex. Investigating their functions cannot simply be reduced to actualized material causes but involves a comprehensive understanding of their entire hylomorphic individuality. As Abigail Favale says in her recent book *The Genesis of Gender*, “Sex reflects a reproductive capacity, one that is not reducible to genitals or chromosomes but characterizes the organism as a whole.”³ Fundamentally, male and female are not present exclusively to bodies or souls but are present in human beings.

Whether Sex Is a Substance or Accident

With this understanding in place, we can now investigate the specific type of difference that exists between men and women. When speaking of categories of being, Aristotle posits the primary division between substance and accidents. Everything which exists is either a substance or accident; there likewise exists either a substantial or accidental difference between any two distinct beings. Therefore, the difference between male and female must be either substantial or accidental.

The primary difference between these two main categories of being is that substances are “never present in a subject,” while accidents are always present in a subject.⁴ Aristotle separates substance into primary and secondary substances—a primary substance is an individual thing, while a secondary substance is the genus in which the individual thing participates. For example, a particular man would be a primary substance, while the genus in which he participates—human—would be a secondary substance. Included within the idea of substance is the essence or definition of a thing; simply speaking, substance is what a thing is. To say that being human is “present in” an individual man, like a foot is present in a shoe, would be reductive, for an individual man *is* a human being. Human is the definition of his very nature.

Accidents on the other hand completely depend on a substance for their existence; they only exist when “present in” a substance, such as height, weight, and color. For example, the concept of *six feet* has no existence apart from a particular six-foot substance. Now, the same substance can admit of different accidents; this is substance’s “most distinctive mark.”⁵ Among primary substances, a particular man can be three feet tall when he is a child and six feet tall when he is an adult while remaining the same substance. Likewise, there can be multiple individual men with different heights while still participating in the same genus of human. Aquinas explains that “the difference between accidental form and substantial form is that . . . the former does not make a thing simply be, but only makes it be in this or that mode.”⁶

Now, the substance of a living thing is determined by its soul. In Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima*, he remarks that “the soul is a substance in the manner of a form that determines or characterizes a particular sort of body.”⁷ As said above, souls form unorganized matter into particular living things—bodies with powers and functions. Defining human beings as rational animals is equivalent to defining human beings as things with rational souls. Uniting multiple primary substances under the same secondary substance is essentially recognizing that their respective matter is informed by the same kind of soul—or, as stated above, that they have the same innate potency. Inquiring into whether the difference in potency between the sexes is substantial or accidental, then, is inquiring into whether men and women have different souls. If the difference is substantial, men and women would have different souls.