

## INTRODUCTION

### Questions

In Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, we find this brief exchange:

First Sgt. Edward Welsh (played by Sean Penn): "In this world, a man himself is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one."

Private Witt (played by Jim Caviezel): "You're wrong, there, Top: I've seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination."

Welsh: "Well, then you've seen things I never will."

This interchange draws our attention to a truth unique to human persons: the fact that we are both bodily as well as spiritual beings. On the one hand, we live, like other animals, in the world as beings that experience reality through our bodies, with our senses, and with our feelings; that is, we are embodied beings. On the other hand, unlike all other animals, we are aware of being in the world, we are conscious of being aware, we pose questions, and we at times experience a deep sense that there is something beyond this world; that is, we are spiritual beings. And yet, a human being is not a combination of two separate beings (a body plus a spirit), but rather one substantial unity of body and soul. We are spiritual beings, but not separate spirits that come to dwell in bodies. We are, instead, *incarnate spirits*. As incarnate spirits, we are material beings with an inner personal intimacy.

A hallmark of Terrence Malick films is the prevalent use of an off-camera voice when we hear the protagonist thinking and pondering. Its use is not simply expository: it is not merely filling in some contextual hole that requires explanation. The character's voice, instead, makes us privy to her innermost thoughts and feelings to which those outside her intimacy would be completely oblivious. But hearing someone's inner voice allows us to enter even more deeply into a person's heart, to share not only someone's thoughts but also to experience, in some mysterious way, the heart and the intimacy of this person. The result is not only knowledge of the characteristics or traits of a person, or an insight into her actions or thoughts or feelings; instead, we come to know *who* she is. We enter, in some way, into the mystery of her intimacy. And as we do so, we begin to ask fundamental questions: What is a human person? Who is she? What is life? What does it mean to live in the world? What makes human beings different from other animals? What is reason? What is a soul? What is freedom? What happens when we die? Who are we? Who am I? What is my destiny?

These are questions that reverberate throughout human culture and history. They are also questions we pose to ourselves when alone, perhaps at the most random moments.

This little book is designed as an introductory guide for those who find themselves asking these questions. And to make things as simple as possible, we can reduce this to two questions: What is a human being? and Who am I?

More than simply giving quick and easy answers to these questions, this book offers a basic framework around which you, the reader, can begin to build habits and structures of thought that will enable you to personally grapple with these questions. It will also help you engage others and encourage

them to do the same, as you, together with them, embark upon a lifelong journey of inquiry and discovery.

### Philosophical Anthropology

The main perspective of this book is a philosophical one. By *philosophical*, we mean a *rational inquiry into the explanations (principles and causes) of realities*. Insofar as the area of our interests concerns human beings and to the extent that it is an introduction, this book is an introduction to *philosophical anthropology*.

The emphasis on a philosophical point of view distinguishes this introduction methodologically from (but does not completely separate it from) other modalities of wisdom (mythology, artistic insight, divine revelation, and so on), insofar as it seeks answers to fundamental questions using *rational inquiry* without depending directly on divinely revealed truths. This does not, however, mean that we will completely ignore other sources of knowledge, especially that of Christian revelation, since a complete answer to the kinds of questions we are asking can ultimately only be answered by God.

### Our Guides

The questions that we are exploring in this book are wide-ranging and have been the object of inquiry for centuries, not only in the West but in every other culture as well. It is thus possible to go in many directions and to follow many paths, or even to make our own. In this book, however, we will take a well-trodden (yet still exciting) philosophical path.

The specific type of philosophical anthropology that will be a map for our journey is one that is based on Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy. This philosophy, with its origins in Aristotle (fourth-century BC Greece) and Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth-century Western Europe), has for centuries been a central and organizing principle of Western philosophical and theological thought. Later chapters will supplement this map with philosophical insights from contemporary thinkers, especially Joseph Ratzinger, Karol Wojtyła, and Leonardo Polo.

The choice to take Aquinas as our guiding and structuring philosopher arises from a number of considerations.

First, Aquinas' philosophy introduces us to key philosophical notions that are crucial for any in-depth inquiry into the nature of human beings. This includes notions such as soul, corporality, substance, power, operation, object, habit, ends, and means.

Second, Aquinas offers an expansive yet structured view of human nature. Aristotle and Aquinas (with considerations from medieval Islamic philosophers) have developed an anthropology that is both comprehensive and minutely detailed. Aquinas lays out and describes a wide range of powers that are found in human beings. These powers or capabilities range from the most basic (the powers of nourishment, growth, and reproduction) to more elaborate ones (such as the external senses, the powers by which we organize sense perceptions and evaluate them, the powers to respond emotionally to sense stimuli) to those that are most spiritual (reason and free will). At the same time, this description is filled with detailed accounts of the various operations and vital activities that make up human life: eating, seeing color, smelling roses, feeling joy or pain, making saddles, scientific knowledge, moral action, growing in virtue, seeking happiness, and much more.

Third, since Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy has been so central to Western thought, a familiarity with its basic elements and language will unlock for the reader an immense treasure-trove of philosophical thought from the past and the present.

And finally, having a basic map that helps us understand human nature and its dynamism allows us to critically and creatively engage with questions of special relevance in today's world. Questions, for example, that concern the difference between animal and human intelligence, artificial intelligence, gender, and personal identity.

### The Structure of This Book

Broadly speaking, this book has two parts.

The first part covers the basic structure of the human person based on an Aristotelian-Thomistic framework. The first eight chapters lay out the essential elements of this anthropology: life and the soul (chapter 1); the organic body and the notions of powers and operations (chapter 2); sense knowledge (chapter 3); feelings (chapter 4); intellect and reason (chapter 5); the will (chapter 6); science and craft (chapter 7); and moral action and virtue (chapter 8).

Chapters 9 and 10 add contemporary elements to the Aristotelian-Thomistic anthropology covered in the first eight chapters. Chapter 9 considers human subjectivity and the person as gift-love. Chapter 10 expands this perspective to manifestations of the person in the world and with other human persons.

### Advice on How to Read this Book

Finally, a word of advice (or warning) to you, the reader. Taking Aquinas as our guide and looking to authors such as Ratzinger, Wojtyła, and Polo for insights into human existence is not for the faint of heart. It will require serious attention and sustained focus. It is not an effort simply to understand complex notions and memorize vast amounts of information. Rather, it is an attention and focus directed at engaging with these guides in a conversation that demands that the reader actively engage the intellect and sometimes even the heart. Though at first seemingly daunting, it will enable us to take the first steps in a long-lasting and fruitful adventure of inquiry and wonder.