THE SCIENCE OF THE SOUL
ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

DE WULF-MANSION CENTRE
Series I

XLVI

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THE SCIENCE OF THE SOUL

The Commentary Tradition on Aristotle’s De anima, c. 1260–c. 1360

SANDER W. DE BOER

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS
## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 1X  
Abbreviations XI  

### CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1  
1.1 Subject matter 2  
1.2 Status quaestionis 4  
1.3 Periodisation and sources 9  
   1.3.1 A chronological list of consulted commentaries 10  
1.4 Orthography, punctuation and translations 14  

### CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW 15  
2.1 The introduction of the *De anima* into the Latin West 15  
2.2 The soul as *perfectio* 18  
   2.2.1 Avicenna’s influence 23  
2.3 The soul as *forma* 25  
   2.3.1 Immortal but not personal: radical Aristotelianism 26  
   2.3.2 Formality and subsistence combined: Thomas Aquinas 30  
   2.3.3 A substance, but also a form 33  
2.4 Unicity versus plurality of substantial form 36  

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS 45  
3.1 The scientific status of the *scientia de anima* 48  
   3.1.1 Imperceptibility 49  
   3.1.2 Simplicity 53  
   3.1.3 Potentiality 55  
   3.1.4 The study of the soul within natural philosophy 57  
   3.1.5 Radulphus Brito against John of Jandun 58  
   3.1.6 An increasing focus on the intellect 65  
3.2 The subject matter of the *scientia de anima* 71  
   3.2.1 The soul as subject matter 74  
   3.2.2 The ensouled body *sub ratione animae* as subject matter 86
3.2.3 Leaving the subject matter undecided 88
3.2.4 Summary 90

3.3 The epistemic status of the *scientia de anima* 92
3.3.1 Unproblematic beginnings: Thomas Aquinas 98
3.3.2 Certitude and nobility combined: Anonymus Van Steenberghen and Walter Burley 103
3.3.3 Increasing difficulties: Anonymus Bazán, Radulphus Brito and John of Jandun 106
3.3.4 The final stages: John Buridan and Nicole Oresme 114

3.4 Conclusions 119

CHAPTER 4: THE ARISTOTELIAN DEFINITION OF THE SOUL 123

4.1 Aristotle’s definition of the soul 124
4.1.1 Thomas Aquinas’s views on the matter of the soul 130
4.1.2 The Anonymi 141

4.2 Fourteenth-century interpretations 155
4.2.1 The substantiality of the soul 157
4.2.2 The actuality of the body 166

4.3 Can we perceive the identity of accidents? 168
4.3.1 Thomas Aquinas 169
4.3.2 Radulphus Brito 173
4.3.3 John of Jandun 181
4.3.4 John Buridan 190

4.4 Excursus: condemnations and polemics 197

4.5 Conclusions 206

CHAPTER 5: SUBSTANCE, POWERS AND ACTS 209

5.1 A curious fourteenth-century thought experiment 211

5.2 One soul or multiple souls? 216
5.2.1 John Buridan’s arguments against a plurality of souls 221
5.2.2 Nicole Oresme’s hesitation 224
5.2.3 Summary 226

5.3 The relation between the soul and its powers 227
5.3.1 Arguments against a real distinction 230
5.3.2 Arguments in favor of a real distinction 235
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a revision of my dissertation written at Radboud University Nijmegen. The writing of this dissertation was made possible through financial support from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), grant nr. 276-20-004. This grant was awarded to the VIDI project ‘Form of the Body or Ghost in the Machine? The Study of Soul, Mind, and Body (1250–1700)’, directed by my supervisor Paul Bakker. The original dissertation also included an edition of questions 1.1 – 11.13 of Radulphus Brito’s commentary on De anima, which will be published in a forthcoming issue of Vivarium. I would first and foremost like to thank Paul Bakker for his continued support and for his incredibly detailed remarks and suggestions on both the edition and the general study. His seemingly never ending series of critical, and accurate comments have greatly improved both, for which I am very grateful. I also want to thank my second promotor, Hans Thijssen for his help and insightful comments. A first draft of the third chapter was written during a fruitful and pleasant three-month period of research at the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame. I would therefore like to thank the Société Internationale pour l’Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale and the University of Notre Dame for awarding me the SIEPM–Notre Dame grant that made this visit possible. I would lastly like to thank Lodi Nauta for giving me the time and opportunity to work on this revision.

I had the fortune of being able to write my dissertation at the Center for the History of Philosophy and Science, a place that offers everything a scholar could wish for. I want to thank my former colleagues for the many pleasant discussions and simply for making my stay there so enjoyable: Cees Leijenhorst, Christoph Lüthy, Carla Rita Palmerino, Femke Kok, Michiel Streijger, Davide Cellemare, Sanne Stuur, Adam Takahashi, Alexis Smets, Hiro Hirai, Mihaela Dobre, Delphine Bellis, Michiel Seevinck, Thomas Baumeister, and Harm Boukema.

I have also benefited greatly from the insightful and critical comments of several scholars from outside the Radboud University. I especially want to thank Robert Pasnau for his comments on a draft of chapter four, Edith Sylla for her comments on a draft of chapter five, and Jack Zupko for his detailed comments on both of these chapters. Their efforts saved me from several embarrassing mistakes. Lastly, Dominik Perler, Chris Schabel, and Timothy Noone were kind enough to suggest several improvements to the manuscript. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my own.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>J. Hamesse, Auctoritates Aristotelis</td>
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<tr>
<td>AHDLMAM</td>
<td>Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge</td>
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<td>AL</td>
<td>Aristoteles Latinus</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</td>
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<td>CHLMP</td>
<td>Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHMP</td>
<td>Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIMAGL</td>
<td>Cahiers de l’institut du Moyen Âge grec et latin</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSEL</td>
<td>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUP</td>
<td>Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis</td>
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<td>PL</td>
<td>Patrologia Latina</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIEPM</td>
<td>Société Internationale pour l’Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale</td>
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I cannot think of a more fitting way to begin this book than by quoting this passage from Augustine. With the support of an authority of such stature, devoting a study in the history of philosophy to the soul seems to need little justification. Augustine's words are, indeed, apt to describe the situation in the period under discussion in this book, the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. After studying the commentary tradition on Aristotle's *De anima* — the most obvious place to look for philosophical discussions on the soul in that period —, Augustine's remark no longer seems to be the exaggeration it seemed to me to be when I first read the passage.¹ The soul is one of the most important philosophical subjects in the later Middle Ages. I am not referring here to the idea that the soul is one of the most important things to gain knowledge about, although it certainly was perceived as such by all the commentators on the *De anima*. Rather, I mean that for a study of the soul in the later Middle Ages one had to draw upon, and combine, so many disciplines and discussions, that it became a focal point for some of the most important philosophical controversies.² With the immortal, and somehow immaterial,

¹ Although the most obvious source, the commentaries on the *De anima* are by no means the only source for philosophical discussions on the soul. The commentaries on Peter Lombard’s *Sententiae* in particular contain a wealth of interesting discussions on the topic. A recent SIEPM colloquium, organized by P. J. J. M. Bakker, M. B. Calma and R. L. Friedman, was devoted entirely to the material in these commentaries: “Philosophy and Psychology in Late-Medieval Commentaries on Peter Lombard’s Sentences”, Nijmegen, 28–30 October, 2009.

² For a series of examples of how psychology was influenced by the other *artes*, medicine and theology — and vice-versa —, see P. J. J. M. Bakker, S. W. de Boer and C. Leijenhorst (eds.), *Psychology and the Other Disciplines. A Case of Cross-Disciplinary Interaction (1250–1750)*, Leiden [etc.]: Brill, 2012.
human intellective soul as the noblest among its objects, the *scientia de anima* became much more than just another part of natural philosophy. The unicity or plurality of substantial form, the correct description of the processes of generation and corruption, the structure of the soul in terms of its essence and powers, the possibility of self-knowledge in this life and perhaps the next, all these topics and many more were discussed in the commentaries on Aristotle’s *De anima*.

1.1 SUBJECT MATTER

The subject matter of this book is, in short, the history of psychology in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But although this description is convenient because of its brevity, it should immediately be qualified in three respects. First, because it contains an anachronism. The word ‘psychology’, although derived from the Greek, does not occur in any ancient Greek text. Aristotle’s famous treatise on the soul is simply entitled Περὶ ψυχῆς, *On soul*, and he never combines the terms ‘ψυχή’ and ‘λόγος’. The same applies to the Latin commentary tradition, in which the science that studies the soul is simply referred to as the *scientia de anima*. In fact, it is only in the sixteenth century that the term seems to have been used for the first time.3

The earliest use of the word ‘psychology’ is found in a catalog reference to a work by Marko Marulić (1450–1524) entitled *Psichiologia de ratione animae humanae liber i*, supposedly written c. 1520. The work itself, however, has not been found. The first available work in which the word occurs is Johannes Thomas Freigius’s *Catalogus Locorum Communium*, a text that is prefixed to his *Ciceronianus* (1575).4 But these are still only isolated occurrences. The term only becomes widespread in the eighteenth century when Christian Wolff (1679-1754) uses it in the title of two of his works: *Psychologia empirica* (1732) and *Psychologia rationalis* (1734).5 Taking psychology in its current meaning, as an experimental discipline, we move to the end of the nineteenth century; its beginning is usually dated to 1879, when Wilhelm Wundt opened the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig. Still, the anachronistic terminology is not that important here; the lack of a word does not imply the lack of the corresponding concept. The tradition of the *sci-

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4 Lapointe, ‘Who Originated the Term ‘Psychology’?’, 332.

entia de anima will still count as the precursor of psychology if the topics that are discussed in it are the same as, or closely related to, those we would now label psychological.

The second qualification is that this book only covers what the medieval commentators called the science of the soul (scientia de anima). In other words, it only takes into account those views that were expressed in commentaries on Aristotle’s De anima. This choice has its benefits and its drawbacks. The most important benefit is that it allows me to tease out the subtle relation between the methodological considerations that are often found in book I of the commentaries and the various doctrinal positions that are defended in the other two books. Also, given that the medieval commentators were convinced that the scientia de anima has its own subject matter, there is much to be said for considering the De anima tradition on its own terms. The main drawback of this choice, however, is that it sets aside a great deal of interesting material pertaining to philosophical psychology, especially as can be found in the many commentaries on Peter Lombard’s Sententiae. Although a comprehensive study on philosophical psychology as found in these commentaries is highly desirable, it would require a lengthy volume on its own.  

Given the current state of research, I think that the benefits of my approach outweigh its drawbacks. But the reader should be aware that the conclusions of this study are only meant to apply to the De anima tradition. This notwithstanding, there are cases where I felt that a comparison with other textual genres was crucial to understanding the transformations of the De anima tradition. Such comparisons are usually included as an excursus or in the footnotes, and are not meant to be exhaustive. Doubtless there are many more interconnections between the discussions in the science of the soul and those in the various other sciences and in theology.

The third, and most important qualification concerns the scope and the place of the science of the soul. In the Aristotelian tradition, at least up until the late fourteenth century, the scientia de anima was considered to be a part of natural philosophy; it was therefore subordinated to physics, as one of its special branches. Now physics as a whole deals with beings in so far as these are subject to motion

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6 Such a volume would also require a great deal of editorial work, given the limited number of commentaries that have been (partially) edited. For those readers interested in philosophical psychology as discussed in commentaries on the Sentences, the best place to start is W. Duba, ‘The Souls after Vienne: Franciscan Theologians’ Views on the Plurality of Forms and the Plurality of Souls, ca. 1315–1330’, in: P. J. M. Bakker, S. W. de Boer and C. Leijenhorst (eds.), Psychology and the Other Disciplines. A Case of Cross-Disciplinary Interaction (1250–1750), Leiden [etc.]: Brill, 2012, 171–272.

7 For some important examples, see sections 4.3, 4.4, 5.3.4.
and change.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Physica}, translated by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in: J. Barnes (ed.), \textit{The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation}, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, 111.1, 200b12–14, p. 342: “Nature is a principle of motion and change, and it is the subject of our inquiry. We must therefore see that we understand what motion is; for if it were unknown, nature too would be unknown.”} The \textit{scientia de anima}, in turn, studies these mobile, changing things in so far as they are alive. This subordination of the study of the soul to physics implies that there is a fundamental difference between the place of contemporary psychology in the system of the sciences and that of the \textit{scientia de anima}.\footnote{By the time the term psychology becomes commonplace, the \textit{scientia de anima} is no longer considered to be a branch of natural philosophy, but a special branch of metaphysics. Or more precisely, the most speculative and difficult part of it is assigned to metaphysics (the \textit{psychologia rationalis}). A large part of this transformation from a natural philosophical to a metaphysical discipline took place in the Renaissance, but this study aims to show that the seeds for this transformation were already sown in the medieval commentaries.} But it also implies that there is an important difference in the scope of their respective subject matters. Whereas psychology studies cognitive being, the \textit{scientia de anima} studies living being. As a result a number of topics that were discussed extensively as a part of medieval “psychology” would nowadays be considered to be a part of biology or even physiology. This difference should not be neglected. The \textit{scientia de anima} is as much about animals and even plants as it is about human beings. One of things I aim to show in this book is the importance of always keeping this difference in scope in mind when interpreting the commentaries on Aristotle’s work.

In spite of these major differences between contemporary psychology and the ancient and medieval \textit{scientia de anima}, there is a lot to be said for considering the latter as one of the most important historical roots of modern-day psychology. For although the term ‘soul’ as Aristotle uses it applies to all living things, there is a strong emphasis in the \textit{De anima} on the human soul. Aristotle’s treatise deals with the nature of perception, the acquisition of knowledge, the workings of all the senses, and above all —connecting all these themes— the ontological status of the soul and its relation to the body. It is just that we should never forget that the study of these themes is embedded within the same framework that also includes the study of plants and animals.

\section*{1.2 Status quaeestionis}

In the past fifteen years, a substantial body of scholarly literature has been devoted to the study of Aristotelian psychology and its reception. Some of these studies employ the term ‘transformations’ when writing about the history of the
De anima tradition, a term that I think is well chosen.\textsuperscript{10} It is much more accurate to say that the scientia de anima transformed over time than simply to say that it changed. The important difference is that transformation implies both change and continuity. More often than not, the views of predecessors were neither simply discarded, nor uncritically taken over. Instead, they were often adapted in subtle ways. This book is devoted to describing some of the most important transformations in the period from the later thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century.

The increasing attention to the tradition of the scientia de anima notwithstanding, our knowledge of it is still sketchy. There are several reasons for this. First, many of the commentaries remain unedited. Second, the vast majority of the studies that are available tend to focus so much on the human soul that the broader context of the De anima, as a science that studies all souls, becomes lost. When it comes to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, our knowledge is sketchier still, because the available material from that period has never been studied as a coherent whole. Whereas there are several synthetic studies about the period from the introduction of Aristotle’s De anima into the Latin West up to Thomas Aquinas — even if these studies focus almost exclusively on the human soul —, the same cannot be said for the later periods.\textsuperscript{11} When it comes to the period from Thomas Aquinas to, let us say, Pierre d’Ailly, which is the period I will focus on in this book, there are a few good monographs on some individual commentators.\textsuperscript{12} But what is lacking is a more detailed narrative that connects the late thirteenth and fourteenth-century traditions. As a consequence, we know very little about the developments in the De anima tradition in that period, let alone about their causes or impact. An important first step, however, in describing the transformations of the scientia de anima in this period has already been made by Jack Zupko.

\textsuperscript{10} See for example D. Des Chene, Life’s Form. Late Aristotelian Conceptions of the Soul, Ithaca [etc.]: Cornell University Press, 2000, vii and even more clearly D. Perler (ed.), Transformations of the Soul. Aristotelian Psychology 1250–1650, Leiden [etc.]: Brill, 2009, where the term is used in the title of the volume. Both volumes aim to describe the complex routes in which Aristotelian psychology was transmitted and transformed without making reference to the traditional, and misleading manner of dividing the history of philosophy into a Medieval, Renaissance and (Early) Modern period.


Zupko has argued for a rehabilitation of Ernest Moody’s description of the fourteenth century as a time of growing empiricism. He has tried to show that Moody’s description is applicable to the developments in the *scientia de anima*, in the period starting from Thomas Aquinas and ending with Nicole Oresme, by studying the different views on the subject matter of the *scientia de anima*. One of his main conclusions is that there is a clearly noticeable shift in the commentaries on the *De anima*, namely a shift from trying to determine the essence of the soul to focusing instead on its perceptible powers. This shift can then be characterized as a growing empiricism because there is (1) an increasing emphasis on the perceptible aspects of the soul and (2) a declining interest in metaphysical speculations about the soul’s essence.

Zupko’s argument deserves careful examination. There can be no doubt that there is a change of interest in the fourteenth century. But there are, at least at first sight, also several counterexamples to Zupko’s claims, especially in the commentaries by Buridan and Oresme. For example, when Oresme argues for the inclusion of the study of the intellect in the *scientia de anima*, he mentions its indivisibility, its being abstracted from the body and its perpetuity as conclusions belonging to the *scientia de anima*, which seems ad odds with a growing emphasis on the empirical study of the soul’s powers. And how to interpret the debate found in both Buridan and Oresme on the question of whether or not a horse would be able to see with its foot, once God has created an eye there, in terms of a growing empiricism? On the other hand, there are several examples that seem to support Zupko’s claim. For instance, later fourteenth-century commentators often argue that the immortality and indivisibility of the human intellective soul cannot, strictly speaking, be demonstrated in the *scientia de anima*, whereas the late thirteenth-century commentators were convinced that this was possible.

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14 Nicole Oresme, *Quaestiones in Aristotelis De anima*, in: B. Patar, *Expositio et quaestiones in Aristotelis De anima*, études doctrinales en collaboration avec C. Gagnon, Louvain [etc.]: Peeters, 1995, 111.1, 309: “Tertio est dicendum quod scientia hic accipitur pro aggregatione ex multis conclusionibus; modo de intellectu multae sunt conclusiones, sicut quod est abstractus, quod est perpetuus, et quod est indivisibilis, etc., quorum quaedam sunt de primo, et aliae non de primo quia praedicatum non convertitur cum subiecto.”

15 See below, section 5.1.
In order to assess how and to what extent the *scientia de anima* transforms in the period c. 1260–c. 1360, two related areas need to be studied. First, we need to look at what the commentators say about the methodology of the science of the soul in their commentaries on the *De anima*. What kind of science are we dealing with? What exactly do we study in it? And what kind(s) of method(s) do we need to follow in order to proceed in this science? This is what I will do in chapter 3. This part will pay attention to topics such as the subject matter of this science, its particular difficulty, and the certainty of its conclusions.

Second, we need to see how the methodological standpoints are being put into practice. Do the commentators adhere to any particular method when studying the soul, and if so, in what sense? Is a difference in their discussions about the methodological aspects of the *scientia de anima* always accompanied by a difference in doctrinal positions? And if not, then what is the exact function of the methodological questions in the first book of the commentaries on *De anima*? In order to be able to answer these and related questions, I will present two case studies.

First, in chapter 4, I will look at how the commentators interpreted Aristotle’s famous definition of the soul as ‘the first act of a physical organic body that is potentially alive’.[16] I will show what elements were being singled out as needing discussion, and how the discussion of this definition is closely related to the views that commentators held about what happens in generation and corruption. Second, in chapter 5, I will discuss how the commentators described the soul in terms of its essence, powers, and acts. The two case studies combined give what we might call the metaphysics of the soul, that is, they describe the soul–body relation on a general ontological level. This is usually followed in the commentaries by more detailed questions on the different senses individually and then by questions on the intellective powers, but these I will not discuss.

I should make it clear from the start that in chapters 3–5, I am not trying to determine which of the commentators gave the correct interpretation of Aristotle. In those cases where I do write about what Aristotle’s views were, the reader should always supplement this with the qualification ‘according to the common interpretation’. Aristotle’s *De anima* is a remarkably complex work, and, on top of that, the transmitted text suffers from much corruption. As a result, there is still no complete consensus on even the basic questions of whether or not Aristotle thought that soul and body constitute one thing rather than two, or on whether or not the active intellect is a part of the human soul.[17]

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[17] The interested reader can find information about some of the debates on what Aris-
I have chosen not to focus on what is often considered to be the most interesting topic in the *De anima*, the intellective soul, but rather to focus on the soul in general and treat the intellect only insofar as it helps to understand this general framework. I have two main reasons for this choice. First, since this study is about the relations between methodology and doctrinal position, I want to take the aim that the medieval philosophers themselves put forward in the beginning of their commentaries seriously. In the footsteps of Aristotle, all of them make it clear that they intend to discuss the soul in general and not merely the intellective soul. To put this more strongly, they often felt the need to argue explicitly for the legitimacy of including a study of the intellective soul within the *scientia de anima*, whereas they took it for granted that the vegetative and sensitive souls are part of the proper subject matter of this science. I would argue that the fact that the human mind proves to be the most resistant to a natural philosophical treatment does not imply that it is *necessarily* the most important (or even controversial) topic within the *scientia de anima*. The second reason for my focus on the soul in general rather than on the intellect is that I have become convinced that the *body* was often as difficult to understand philosophically as, if not more than, the *soul* in the later Middle Ages.\(^{18}\)

As a consequence, my approach will focus on the soul as the principle of life more than as the principle of understanding. The implications of the soul as principle of life are then drawn out in two chapters discussing the Aristotelian definition of the soul, its division into various powers, and its mode of presence in the body.\(^ {19}\) I am convinced that this perspective on the material is much more than just a valuable addition to the approaches that focused on the intellect. By discussing the intellect in separation from the rest of the *De anima* tradition, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to see why certain aspects of the intellective soul were being singled out as problematic. For this we also need to know which problems already arise on the levels of the vegetative and sensitive souls. By looking at the *De anima* tradition from the perspective that the commentators argued for explicitly, namely, as a science that studies the vegetative, sensitive and intellective souls both separately and in relation to one another, what they write about the human totality could have meant in the footnotes.

\(^{18}\) I agree with Caroline Walker Bynum in her study on medieval debates on the resurrection of the body when she says that “Yet, for medieval thinkers, body far more than soul raised technical philosophical questions about identity and personhood.”, although I would place the emphasis on *identity* rather than on *personhood*; C. Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*, New York [etc.]: Columbia University Press, 1995, xviii.

\(^{19}\) Dennis Des Chene has studied the later tradition of the science of the soul (1550–1650) along similar lines in his impressive study: Des Chene, *Life’s Form*. 