

understand when we say that man *lives*? Are the activities manifested by a living being—man, animal, or plant—merely a more perfect type of transient action? Do the operations of a living being, and in particular those of man, constitute its life? What is the first intrinsic principle from which the vital operations of a living being proceed? What is the metaphysical basis for the difference between the most general types of living beings, and to what type does man belong? These are some of the initial problems that arise in a philosophical study of man, and their solution is the aim and purpose of this chapter.

Division: There will be three questions. The first is concerned with the operations of living beings, the second with living beings themselves; the third question will be an inquiry into the general types of living beings.

Question I

OPERATIONS OF LIVING BEINGS

This question is divided into three articles in which we shall examine: (1) the immanence which characterizes the operations of living beings; (2) two general types of immanent action; (3) apparent immanent action.

ARTICLE I: The Operations Proper to Living Beings Are Immanent

Since the nature of a being is known through its operations,² it will be necessary, for the purpose of distinguishing living from non-living beings, to observe the general character of the operations

² . . . since nothing acts except in so far as it is in act, the mode of action in every agent follows from its mode of existence." (S. Th., I, 89, 1, c.) Cf. *Contra Gentis*, II, 79. Cf. *In III Sententiarum*, 35, 1, 1, ad 1^m.

proper to living beings. The philosopher must search for a common element in the activities found only in living beings. He discovers this common element in the fact that their operations are *immanent*. This statement must be explained.

Preliminary Notion of Immanent Operation: Non-living beings, we observe, move only when moved by another. Living beings, on the contrary, move themselves; they are the causes of their own local movement, or, at least, of their own vegetative changes³—nutrition, growth, and reproduction. When such a being is no longer capable of causing its own motion, it is no longer considered to live.

. . . We can gather to what things "to live" (*vivere*) belongs, and to what it does not, from such things as manifestly possess life (*vivunt*). Now "to live" manifestly belongs to animals. . . . We must, therefore, distinguish living from non-living things by comparing them to that by reason of which animals are said to live; and this it is in which life is manifested first and remains last. We say then that an animal begins to live when it begins to have *motion (motus) of itself* [italics added]; and as long as such motion appears in it, so long is it considered to live. When it no longer has any motion of itself, but is moved only by another, then its life is said to fail, and the animal to be dead. Whereby it is clear that those beings are properly called living that move themselves by some kind of motion.⁴

More Precise Notion: It is obvious that the notion of vital operation obtained in this first consideration is derived from the *material* self-motion of corporeal living beings. This preliminary notion must be refined and made more exact so as to include: (1) the sensory operations, which, as we shall discover, are somewhat immaterial, and (2) the intellectual operations, which are strictly immaterial, that is to say, spiritual. In this precise sense, we

³ The vegetative operations—nutrition, augmentation, and generation—will be discussed in detail at a later stage in this course.

⁴ S. Th., I, 15, 1, c.

understand immanent operations to be those "whose principles are within the operator, and in virtue of which [principles] the operator moves itself to operation."⁵

... For this is the first reason why some beings are said to live, namely because they are perceived to have within themselves something that moves them in some way; whence, the name "life" has come to be applied to all beings that have within themselves the principle of their own operations; whence, too, some beings are said to live because they have intellect or sensation or volition, and not merely because they move locally or grow.⁶

The operation, therefore, which distinguishes living beings from those that are non-living is self-operation, whether it be material, partly immaterial, or spiritual. Accordingly, a living being is one that has within itself the principle of its own operation.⁷

Transient and Immanent Action Compared: A limited being is not its end; rather, it is in potency to its end and acts to attain this end. Only by action of some sort can it achieve its full development, its full actualization. Now action is of two general kinds: the transient action which was studied in the philosophy of being,⁸ and the immanent operation of living beings considered in this chapter. When we compare these two types of action, we note several important points of difference:

a) Transient action—for example, the action of heating—is in the *patient*; the agent acts upon a distinct patient. The vital activity of a living being, on the other hand, is intrinsic to the *agent*; the action is not "received" in a distinct patient. Rather,

⁵ S. *Th.*, I, 18, 2, ad 2^m.

⁶ *De Veritate*, IV, 6.

⁷ It should be noted that our consideration is concerned primarily with the self-operation of living beings that are limited. Such operations can truly be termed self-motion, since there is a real passage from potency to act, in as much as the limited nature is perfected by its own operation. On the other hand, in God operation is one with the Divine act of being and consequently does not imply a motion or change.

⁸ Cf. *The Philosophy of Being*, pp. 137-140.

the vital operation remains "in" the agent, that is to say, it begins and terminates in the agent, and for that reason this type of action is aptly called *immanent*.⁹

b) Transient action is the predicament "action" (motion as from an agent). Immanent action is a *quality*.

c) Transient action is the act, the perfection, of a being in *potency*; it implies the passing of a patient from potency to act. Immanent action is the act, the perfection, of a being *in act*; it is the act, the perfection, of the agent, not of a distinct patient.¹⁰

Living Beings Are Supposit: Transient action, we have seen, implies more than one supposit: agent and patient. Immanent action, on the contrary, is action within a single supposit; in this type of action, a complete, distinct, individual substance (a supposit) perfects itself by its own operation. Although such a being may have many distinct parts (and many activities), these parts act primarily and directly for the good of the whole, the existing substantial unit; the finality of the various parts (and activities) is primarily the perfection or good of the whole, not of the parts alone. Since the living being *acts* as a substantial unit, we know that it *is* a substantial unit (a supposit), for as a thing is so does it act (*agere sequitur esse*).

In brief: those beings are living which act immanently; and since immanent action necessarily is action within a supposit which

⁹ "... action is twofold. Actions of one kind pass to external matter, as to heat or to eat, while actions of the other kind remain in the agent, as to understand, to sense, and to will. The difference between them is this, that the former action is the perfection, not of the agent that moves, but of the thing moved; whereas the latter action is the perfection of the agent." (S. *Th.*, I, 18, 3, ad 1^m.) Another text considers the principle of operation: "In things which are moved or perform some action there is this difference: that some have the principle of their motion or operation within themselves; but others have this principle outside themselves." (*De Ver.*, XXIV, 1, c.)

¹⁰ "... an action of this kind [immanent action] is the act [perfection] of the agent; and, although motion is an act of the imperfect, that is, of what is in potency, this kind of action is an act of the perfect, that is to say, of what is in act [substance added]. . . ." (S. *Th.*, I, 18, 3, ad 1^m.)

it perfects, living beings must be suppositis; that is to say, a living being must be a perfect existential unit.¹¹

ARTICLE II: Two General Types of Immanent Action

Purely Immanent: Immanent actions are of two general types. The first, the *act of the perfect*, comprises the sensitive and intellectual functions. The act of knowledge, for example, is strictly immanent, in no way transient; it is the operation of a knowing power which is in act to place the operation called knowledge. Consequently, in the very act of knowing, there is no passing of the faculty of knowledge from potency to act, for a being is changeable only in so far as it is in potency. Rather, the operation flows ("emanates") from the faculty, which is "perfect"¹² in the sense that it is in act.

Semi-Transient: Vegetative functions are a less perfect type of immanent action and hold a midway position between the perfection of the act of a perfect being (sensitive and intellectual operations) and the imperfection of transient action, thus partaking somehow in the nature of both. The vegetative operations bear a certain resemblance to transient action, for the perfection of one part of the vegetative unit is communicated to another part which did not previously possess it. The quantitative (integral) parts of the organism—roots, trunk, leaves, for example—are distinct one from another. One part in act causes another part to pass from potency to act; thus there is a certain transience in vegetative activity. On the other hand, since the entire being is a strict unit, that is to say, a supposit, the vegetative operation begins and terminates in the agent. The operation must, there-

¹¹ A mechanical unit, for example, an automobile, in a certain sense moves itself, but it is not a perfect unit, a supposit. Consequently, it is not a living being and its "self-motion" is merely a series of transient actions. Although a corporeal living being may have many quantitative parts, it is an existential unit, a supposit existing by one substantial "no be."

¹² "To sense and to understand are a certain type of motion in so far as motion is said to be the act of a perfect [being]." (S. T. A., II-II, 179, 1, ad 3^o.)

fore, be called an immanent operation. This type of immanent action Aquinas calls the *act of an imperfect being*.

... Those beings are properly called living that move themselves by some kind of movement (*motus*), whether it be movement properly so called, as the act of the imperfect, that is, of a thing which exists in potency, is called movement; or movement in a more general sense, as when said of the act of the perfect, as understanding and sensing are called movement. . . .¹³

ARTICLE III: Apparent Immanent Action

There are certain corporeal beings which seem to move themselves and yet cannot be called living; their activity is only apparently immanent. Smoke, for example, will rise of itself; a stone will fall naturally to the ground. Evidently, such motions cannot be called the operations of a living being. What, then, distinguishes them from the truly immanent actions found in other corporeal beings, as, for example, the vegetative processes in plants or the local movement of animals? To answer this question it is necessary to distinguish two types of local movement.

Local Motion and Locomotion: A vital act not only begins in the agent, but must somehow terminate in the same supposit. Now local motion, of itself—even when caused by the nature itself, that is to say, when it begins from within—does not terminate in the same supposit. In itself, therefore, local motion is not an immanent but a transient operation. Only that type of local motion which we call locomotion denotes that the subject of the motion is living. The reason is that local movement of this kind presupposes some sort of *knowledge* and *desire*, some type of awareness. These are obviously immanent actions and manifest a living being. On the other hand, local motion in inanimate beings, even when proceeding in some way from the nature itself—as in the case of the rising smoke and the falling stone—does not pre-

¹³ S. T. A., I, 18, 1, c.

suppose an immanent operation in the nature preceding and directing the motion. Such local motion in non-living beings flows immediately from the determination of their nature to their end.

St. Thomas insists that although these natures really "move of themselves (*moventur seipsis*), they are not moved by themselves (*a seipsis*)";¹⁸ that is to say, they do not move locally through immanent actions preceding and accompanying this local motion.

Activity With "Static" Finality: Another reason may be given why the local motion of non-sentient bodily beings cannot be called immanent or self-perfecting operation. It is the perfection of these bodies to be at rest (or, at least, to be in a state of equilibrium); it is their nature to move only in order to seek rest. Their nature is not an intrinsic principle of constant, dynamic action which is perfective of the nature. Rather, these beings are inclined to move only when displaced from their natural conditions or from their proper place.¹⁹ This type of tendency or inclination we shall call "static" finality.

Activity With "Dynamic" Finality: The true immanent action of living corporeal beings, on the contrary, is a constant activity. Their nature is an inclination, not to a state of rest, but to a fuller development and actualization by self-perfective action that does not cease. Indeed, cessation from these operations does not perfect

¹⁸ "Eorum autem quorum principium movet et operis in suis est, quaedam talia sunt quod ipsa seipos movent, sicut animalia; quaedam autem, quae non moventur seipso, quantum in seipsis sui motus aliquod principium habent, sicut gravia et levia; non enim seipso movent, cum non possint distinguere in duas partes, quantum una sit movent et alia movet in animalibus inventur, quantum motus eorum continetur aliquod principium in seipsis, sicut ferream, quam quia a generantibus habent duntaxat a generantibus moventur per se. . . . sed a remote prohibentur per accidentia; et haec moventur seipsis, sed non a seipsis." (*De Ver.*, XXIV, 1.)

¹⁹ ". . . to bodies whether light or heavy, movement does not belong except in so far as they are displaced from their natural conditions, and are out of their proper place; for when they are in the place that is proper and natural to them, they are at rest. . . . Furthermore, heavy and light bodies are moved by an extrinsic mover, either generating them and giving them form, or removing obstacles from their way. . . . They do not therefore move themselves as do living bodies." (*S. Th.*, I, 18, 1, ad 2^m.) Cf. *De Ver.*, XXIV, 1, 1. Modern physical theory would explain such occurrences in terms of gravitational forces, whose action is reducible to some kind of transient, not immanent, action.

the living nature; rather, cessation implies that this nature is no longer in existence, that it no longer lives.²⁰ The inclination of a living corporeal nature to an end to be attained by constant vital motion we shall term "dynamic" finality.

Question II

LIVING BEINGS

This question is divided into three articles in which we shall discover that: (1) for living beings to exist is to live; (2) the existence of living beings is life; (3) living being is an analoguous notion.

ARTICLE I: For the Living, "To Be" Is To Live

Problem: Living beings are those which operate immanently; they are the principles, the agents, of their own operations. Now an agent acts in so far as it is in act. Living beings, since they are true agents with respect to their own vital operations, must, therefore, be *in act* to act immanently. The philosopher, in his inquiry into the nature of living beings, desires to know what is the first, intrinsic, *actual* principle that enables a living being to operate immanently.²¹ He wants to ascertain what is the root factor in a living being by which it is in act as a vital agent. This first, intrinsic,²² actual principle in a living being, from which its immanent action proceeds, cannot be:

²⁰ ". . . plants and other living things move with vital movement, in accordance with the disposition of their nature, but not by approaching thereto, or by receding from it, for in so far as they recede from such movements, so far do they recede from their natural disposition." (*S. Th.*, I, 18, 1, ad 2^m.)

²¹ It should be noted at this juncture that philosophers will give diverse answers to this question depending on their philosophy of being. An essentialist philosophy will find this first radical principle in the essential order. An existential philosophy worthy of the name must go beyond a consideration of the essence and look to the absolutely first order of existence for a satisfactory explanation of the operations of living beings.

²² We are not concerned with an inquiry into the absolutely first *extrinsic* principle of operation of living beings. From *The Philosophy of Being* we know that