

QUESTION 18

God's Life

Since understanding belongs to living things, now that we have considered God's knowledge and understanding, we must turn to a consideration of His life. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Which things are living? (2) What is life? (3) Does life belong to God? (4) Do all things have life in God?

Article 1

Do all natural things have life?

It seems that all natural things have life:

Objection 1: In *Physics* 8 the Philosopher says that motion is, as it were, a sort of life in all things that exist by nature. But all natural things participate in motion. Therefore, all natural things participate in life.

Objection 2: Plants are said to be alive because they have within themselves a principle of the motions of growth and diminution. But as *Physics* 8 proves, local motion is more perfect than, and naturally prior to, the motions of growth and diminution. Therefore, since all natural bodies have some principle of local motion, it seems that all natural bodies have life.

Objection 3: Among natural bodies, the least perfect are the elements. But life is attributed to the elements—for instance, waters are called 'living waters'. Therefore, *a fortiori*, all natural bodies have life.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 6, Dionysius says, "Plants have life in its last echoes." From this one can infer that plants have the lowest grade of life. But inanimate bodies are lower than plants. Therefore, they do not have life.

I respond: Beginning with those things that clearly have life, we can determine which things have life and which do not. Now life clearly belongs to animals; for *De Vegetabilibus* says, "Life is manifest in the animals." Hence, we should distinguish living things from non-living things by looking at the reason why animals are said to have life. But this will be whatever life is first manifested in and which remains to the last.

Now we first say that an animal has life when it begins to have motion from itself; and an animal is judged to be alive for as long as such motion is apparent in it. However, when it no longer has motion from itself, but is moved only by another, then an animal is said to be dead because of the absence of life. From this it is clear that the things that have life in the proper sense are those that move themselves with some type of motion—regardless of whether (a) motion is taken in the proper sense, according to which a motion is said to be the act of what is imperfect, i.e., of something that exists in potentiality, or (b) motion is taken in a broad sense, according to which an act of what is perfect is called a motion—in the way that acts of understanding and of sensing are called motions, according to *De Anima* 3. Accordingly, things that impel themselves to some sort of motion or action are said to have life, whereas things whose nature is not such that they impel themselves to any motion or action cannot be said to have life, except according to some likeness.

Reply to objection 1: This passage from the Philosopher can be understood to apply either to the first motion, viz., the movement of the celestial bodies, or to motion in general. And in both senses motion is said to be like the life of natural bodies according to a certain likeness and not properly speaking. For the motion of the celestial bodies in the universe of corporeal natures is like the motion of the heart by which life is conserved in an animal. Similarly, every natural motion is, as it were, a certain

likeness of a vital operation in natural things. Hence, if the whole corporeal universe were a single animal, so that (as some have claimed) its motion were from an intrinsic mover, then it would follow that its motion is the life of all natural bodies.

Reply to objection 2: Motion belongs to heavy and light bodies only insofar as what their nature is disposed to remains unfulfilled—more specifically, only when they are located outside of their proper place. For when they are located in their proper and natural place, they are at rest. By contrast, plants and other living things are moved by a vital motion insofar as what their nature is disposed to is fulfilled—and not insofar as they are approaching it or receding from it. Indeed, to the extent that they recede from that motion, they recede from what their nature is disposed to.

What’s more, as *Physics* 8 says, heavy and light bodies are moved either by an extrinsic mover, or by that which generates them and gives them their form, or by that which removes an impediment. And so they do not move themselves in the way that living bodies do.

Reply to objection 3: What are called living waters are waters that are continuously flowing. For standing waters, which are not connected to a continually flowing source, are called dead waters, e.g., the waters in cisterns or ponds. And this is said by way of a likeness. For insofar as waters seem to move themselves, they have a likeness to life. Still, they do not have the true nature of life, since they have this motion not from themselves, but from the cause that generates them—just as happens with the motion of other heavy and light bodies.

Article 2

Is life an operation?

It seems that life is a certain operation:

Objection 1: Nothing is divided except into things that belong to its genus. But *to live* is divided into certain operations, as is clear from the Philosopher in *De Anima* 2, where he divides *to live* into four operations, viz., (a) to take nourishment, (b) to sense, (c) to move oneself by local motion, and (d) to understand. Therefore, life is a certain operation.

Objection 2: The active life is said to differ from the contemplative life. But contemplative people differ from active people only with respect to certain operations. Therefore, life is a certain operation.

Objection 3: To know God is a certain operation. But, as is clear from John 17:3 (“Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God”), this operation is life. Therefore, life is an operation.

But contrary to this: In *De Anima* 2 the Philosopher says, “In the case of living things, their living is their being.”

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 17, a. 1), our intellect, which properly grasps the ‘what-ness’ (*quidditas*) of a thing as its proper object, begins from the senses, whose proper objects are exterior accidents. So from a thing’s external appearances we arrive at a cognition of the thing’s essence.

And, as is clear from what was said above (q. 3, a. 1), because we name a thing as we know it, in many cases we impose names derived from exterior properties in order to signify the essences of things. Hence, names of this sort are sometimes taken properly for the essences of the things that the names were principally imposed to signify, but sometimes they are taken instead—less properly—for the properties because of which they were imposed. For instance, it is clear that the name ‘body’ was imposed to

signify a certain genus of substances, and it was imposed because three dimensions are found in those substances. So sometimes this name is used to signify the three dimensions themselves, in which case ‘body’ is being used for a species of quantity.

Now something similar must be said about the name ‘life’. For the name ‘life’ is taken from a certain external appearance of a thing, viz., that it moves itself. But this motion is not what the name was imposed to signify. Rather, it was imposed to signify a substance which by its nature moves or impels itself in some way to an action. Accordingly, to live is nothing other than to exist in such a nature, and the name ‘life’ signifies this very thing, but in the abstract—in just the way that the name ‘a run’ signifies running itself in the abstract. Hence, [the concrete name] ‘living’ is not an accidental predicate but a substantival predicate.

However, sometimes the name ‘life’ is taken less properly for the vital operations from which the name ‘life’ was first taken. This is the way that the Philosopher is talking in *Ethics* 6 when he says, “Life is principally sensing or understanding.”

Reply to objection 1: The Philosopher is here taking *to live* for a vital operation.

An alternative, and better, reply is to claim that ‘to sense’ and ‘to understand’, etc., are sometimes taken for certain operations and sometimes for the very *esse* of those things that have these operations. For *Ethics* 9 says, “To be is to sense or to understand,” i.e., to have a nature capable of sensing or understanding. And this is the way in which the Philosopher divides *to live* into the four operations. For the genera of living things are contained in these four logical subordinates: Some living things have a nature capable only of *taking nourishment* and of what follows from this, viz., growth and generation; other living things have, in addition, a nature capable of *sensing*, as is clear in the case of immobile animals such as oysters; others also have, along with these operations, natures capable of *moving themselves by local motion*, e.g., perfect animals like quadrupeds and birds, etc.; and still others have, in addition, a nature capable of *understanding*, e.g., men.

Reply to objection 2: The vital works are those whose principles exist within the agents, so that agents induce operations of this sort within themselves. However, it is possible for there to exist within men not only natural principles (e.g., natural powers) for certain works, but also certain added principles, e.g., habits that incline them in the manner of a nature to certain types of actions and render those actions pleasant. And on this basis—through, as it were, a certain likeness—a particular activity which is pleasant to a man, and to which he is inclined, and in which he spends his time, and to which he orders his life, is itself called the man’s life. Hence, some are said to lead the life of pleasure and some the noble life. It is in this same way that the contemplative life is distinguished from the active life. Also, it is in this same way that to know God is called eternal life.

Reply to objection 3: The answer to this objection is clear from what was just said.

Article 3

Does God have life?

It seems that life does not befit God:

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 1), the things that are said to live are those that move themselves. But it does not belong to God to be moved. Therefore, neither does it belong to Him to live.

Objection 2: In all things that are living, there is some principle of life; hence, *De Anima* 2 says, “The soul is the cause and principle of a living body.” But God does not have any principle. Therefore, it does not belong to God to live.

Objection 3: The principle of life in the living things that surround us is the vegetative soul, which exists only in corporeal things. Therefore, it does not belong to incorporeal things to live.

But contrary to this: Psalm 83:3 says, “My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God.”

I respond: Life exists in God in an especially proper way.

To see this clearly, consider that things are said to have life insofar as they operate by themselves and not as moved by others. The more perfectly this characteristic belongs to a thing, the more perfectly is life found in it.

Now among the things that move and are moved we find three elements in the following order: First, there is the *end* that moves the agent, whereas a principal agent is one that acts through its own *form*; and a principal agent sometimes acts through an instrument, which does not act by the power of its own form but instead acts by the power of the principal agent, so that it is only the *execution* of the action that belongs to the instrument.

Thus, there are some agents that move themselves, but not with respect to either the *form* or the *end*, which exist in them by nature. Rather, they move themselves only with respect to the *execution* of the action, whereas the form through which they act and the end for the sake of which they act are determined for them by their nature. Plants are agents of this sort. Given the form imparted to them by nature, they move themselves with respect to growth and diminution.

There are some agents that move themselves in a further way, not only with respect to the *execution* of the motion, but also with respect to the *form* that is the principle of the motion; for they acquire this form by themselves. Animals are agents of this sort. Their principle of motion is a form that is received through the senses rather than imparted to them by nature. Hence, the more perfect their sensory powers are, the more perfectly they move themselves. For animals that have only the sense of touch, e.g., oysters, move themselves only by motions of reaching out and drawing back, hardly surpassing the motion of a plant. On the other hand, animals that have a complete sentient power to know not only things conjoined to and touching them, but also things at a distance from them, move themselves to remote places by a progressive motion. However, even though animals of this sort receive through the senses the *form* that is the principle of action, they nonetheless do not determine for themselves the *end* of their action or motion; instead, this end is imparted to them by nature, so that it is through natural instinct that they are moved to do something by the form apprehended through their senses.

Hence, in addition to such animals, there are other animals that move themselves even with respect to the *end*, which they determine for themselves. This happens only through reason and understanding, whose function it is to know the relation between the end and the means to that end and to order the one to the other. Hence, a more perfect mode of living belongs to those animals that have understanding, since they move themselves in a more perfect way. An indication of this is that in one and the same man the intellective power moves the sentient powers, and the sentient powers by their command move the organs that execute the motion—just as, in the case of crafts, we see that the craft which makes use of a ship, viz., the navigational craft, directs the craft that designs the ship, and the latter directs the craft that executes just the task of assembling the materials.

However, even though our intellect moves itself with respect to some things, there are nonetheless other things that are determined for it by its nature—e.g., its *first principles*, with respect to which it cannot alter itself, and the *ultimate end*, which it is unable not to will. Hence, even though our intellect can move itself with respect to some things, it must nonetheless be moved by another with respect to other things.

Therefore, the highest grade of life is had by that which by its nature is its very act of understanding and which is such that what it has by nature is not determined by another. But God is such a being. Hence, life exists especially in God. Thus, in *Metaphysics* 12 the Philosopher, having shown that God is intelligent, concludes that He has the most perfect and everlasting life, since His intellect is the most

perfect and is always in act.

Reply to objection 1: As *Metaphysics* 9 says, there are two types of actions, one of which passes into an exterior matter, e.g., heating and cutting, and the other of which remains within the agent, e.g., understanding, sensing, and willing. The difference between them is that the first type of action is a perfection of the thing that is moved and not of the agent that effects the motion, whereas the second type of action is a perfection of the agent.

Hence, since a motion is an act of a movable thing, this second type of action, insofar as it is an act of the agent's, is called the agent's motion on the basis of a likeness. For just as a motion is an act of a movable thing, so an action of the second type is an act of the agent's—even though, as *De Anima* 3 says, motion is the act of something imperfect, viz., something that exists in potentiality, whereas an action of the second type is the act of something perfect, i.e., something that exists in actuality.

Therefore, given this sense in which an act of understanding is a motion, that which understands itself is said to move itself. And it is in this sense that Plato claimed that God moves Himself—and not in the sense in which motion is the act of something imperfect.

Reply to objection 2: Just as God is His own *esse* itself and His own act of understanding, so too He is His own life. And because of this, He is alive in such a way that He has no principle of living.

Reply to objection 3: Among lower things life is received in a corruptible nature that requires generation for the conservation of the species and nourishment for the conservation of the individual. Because of this, in lower things one does not find life without a vegetative soul. But this does not hold for the case of incorruptible things.

Article 4

Are all things the life in God?

It seems that it is not the case that all things are the life in God:

Objection 1: Acts 17:28 says, “In Him we live and move and have our being.” But it is not the case that all things are motion in God. Therefore, it is not the case that all things are life in God.

Objection 2: All things exist in God as in a first exemplar. But the exemplifiers should be conformed to their exemplar. Therefore, since it is not the case that all things are alive in themselves, it seems that it is not the case that all things are the life in God.

Objection 3: In *De Vera Religione* Augustine says that a living substance is better than any non-living substance. Therefore, if things that are not alive in themselves are the life in God, then it seems that things exist more truly in God than in themselves. But this seems to be false, since in themselves they exist in actuality, whereas in God they exist in potentiality.

Objection 4: Just as God knows goods as well as the things that are made at some time or other, so too He knows evils as well as things that He is able to make and yet are never made. Therefore, if all things are life in God insofar as they are known by Him, then it seems that even evils and things that are never made are life in God insofar as they are known by Him. But this seems absurd.

But contrary to this: John 1:3-4 says: “What was made was life in Him.” But all things other than God were made. Therefore, all things are the life in Him.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 3), God's life is His act of understanding. But the intellect, what is understood, and the very act of understanding are all the same in God. Hence, whatever exists in God as something understood is His very living or life. Hence, since all the things that have been made by God exist in Him as things that are understood, it follows that all the things in Him are the very life of

God.

Reply to objection 1: There are two ways in which things are said to exist in God.

In the first way, they exist in God insofar as they are contained in and conserved by God's power—just as we say that we 'have it in us' when something is within our power. And so creatures are said to exist in God even insofar as they exist in their proper natures. And this is the way to understand the words of the Apostle when he says, "In Him we live and move and have our being." For our life, and our being, and our motion are all caused by God.

In the second way, things are said to exist in God as in a knower. And in this sense they exist in God through their proper conceptions (*rationes*), which in God are nothing other than the divine essence. Hence, insofar as they exist in God in this way, they are the divine essence. And since God's essence is life but not motion, it follows that, in this manner of speaking, things are the life in God, but they are not motion in Him.

Reply to objection 2: The exemplifiers should be conformed to their exemplar with respect to its form but not with respect to its mode of being. For sometimes the form in the exemplar and the form in the exemplifier have different modes of being. For instance, the form of a house has immaterial and intelligible *esse* in the craftsman's mind, but it has material and sensible *esse* in the house that exists outside the soul. So, too, the natures of things that are not alive in themselves are the life in God's mind, since in God's mind they have divine *esse*.

Reply to objection 3: If matter were not part of the nature of natural things, but only form were, then natural things would in all respects exist in a truer mode through their ideas in God's mind than they do in themselves. This is why Plato claimed that the separated Man was a true man, whereas a material man is a man through participation.

However, since matter is part of the nature of natural things, one must say that (a) natural things have *esse* more truly, absolutely speaking, in God's mind than in themselves—for in God's mind they have uncreated *esse*, whereas in themselves they have created *esse*, but that (b) they have *this particular esse* (e.g., the *esse* of a man or a horse) more truly in their proper natures than in God's mind. For material *esse*, which they do not have in God's mind, pertains to the truth of man [or a horse]. In the same way, a house has *esse* in a more noble way in the craftsman's mind than in matter, but, nonetheless, the house which exists in matter is more truly called a house than the house which exists in the craftsman's mind. For the former is a house in actuality, whereas the latter is a house in potentiality.

Reply to objection 4: Even though evils exist in God's knowledge insofar as they are included in God's knowledge, they nonetheless do not exist in God either as created by God and conserved by Him or as having a conception in God. For God knows them through the conceptions of things that are good. Hence, it cannot be claimed that evils are the life in God.

As for things which do not exist at any time, they can be said to be the life in God insofar as 'life' names only the act of understanding by which God understands them, but not insofar as 'life' implies a principle of action.