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AGENCY IN AQUINAS

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Although St. Thomas accepts Aristotle's view that nothing divisible, i.e. no body, can move itself ("But the moving of the divisible itself, like its being, depends on its parts; it cannot therefore move itself primarily and through itself"),[1] he does not hesitate to label animals "self-movers."[2] This suggests that the label, in this instance, is just a manner of speaking on his part and that he thinks that no animal is truly or really a self-mover. This suggestion seems confirmed, moreover, by those texts in which he both speaks of a living body as a self-mover and refers to its body as its moved part and its soul as the part that moves, it mover. For example:

> . . . every self-mover is composed of two parts: one, the part that moves and is not moved; the other, the part that is moved. Now, the animal is a self-mover, and the mover in it is the soul, and the body is the moved. Therefore the soul is an unmoved mover. But no body moves without being moved, . . . Therefore, the soul is not a body.[3]

Since what moves itself must be moved by reason of itself and not by reason of a part of itself ("If something moves itself, . . . it must be moved by reason of itself, and not by reason of a part of itself, . . . "),[4] living bodies, it seems, cannot truly be self-movers, for they are moved by a "part" of themselves, namely, their souls.

Yet texts in which St. Thomas speaks of the soul of a living body as its mover and of the body as the moved should not be taken as decisive in determining what St. Thomas had in mind in speaking of living bodies as "self-movers." Such texts, after all, prove too much. In the text just quoted, the soul appears to perform an operation in which the body does not share, for it is said to move the body without being moved. But this would mean, granted the Thomistic principle, "*operatio sequitur esse*," used elsewhere to establish the subsistence of the human soul,[5] that all souls, since they operate independently of their bodies, can exist independently of their bodies, a conclusion St. Thomas would surely reject. St. Thomas

1. *CG.* I, 13, 7.
2. *Ibid.* II, 65, 5.
3. *Idem.*
4. *Ibid.* I, 13, 5.
5. *ST.* I, 75, 2.

agrees that the soul of any animal would be a subsistent being should it be the mover of its body and the following text seems also to indicate that in his mind neither the soul of an animal nor other of its parts can be its mover:

> Sed illud quod non habet esse nisi per hoc quod est in altero, non potest remanere post illud, *nec etiam potest esse motor*, quamvis possit esse principium motus, *quia movens est ens perfectum in se*; . . .[6]

Since consistency requires that we rule out the possibility that in calling animals "self-movers" St. Thomas meant to say they are moved by their parts, we are able on other grounds to exclude the possibility that St. Thomas thinks of the living body as a machine and that all the events occurring in it are produced by externally originated pullings and pushings. In St. Thomas' view such a body would not be alive:

> Primo autem dicimus animal vivere, quando incipit ex se motum habere; et tandiu iudicatur animal vivere, quandiu talis motus in eo apparet; quando vero iam ex se non habet aliquem motum, sed movetur tantum ab alio, tunc dicitur animal mortuum per defectum vitae.[7]

In speaking of living bodies as "self-movers," St. Thomas must have meant that some of the events occurring in them are produced *by them* and not by any of their parts nor by external movers. This is, after all, what "self-mover" means to him:

> If something moves itself, it must have within itself the principle of its own motion; otherwise, it is clearly moved by another. Furthermore, it must be primarily moved. *This means that it must be moved by reason of itself, and not by reason of a part of itself*, as happens when an animal is moved by the motion of its foot.[8]

Since something is an agent if the "moving" cause of some of the events occurring in it is neither a part internal to it nor a thing external to it but is itself, St. Thomas appears to have been thinking of living bodies as agents when he spoke of them as "self-movers."

We appear to have come full circle. How can St. Thomas be thinking of living bodies as agents when he speaks of them as "self-movers" and hold, as he does, that since "the moving of the divisible itself, like its being, depends on its parts, *it cannot therefore move itself primarily and through itself*"?[9]

Yet St. Thomas can hold, I think consistently, that the living body is an agent. Part of the answer to the problem we have raised lies, I suspect, in the ambiguities of the language St. Thomas found available for his philosophical and theological purposes. He recognized that the term "motion" had been used in the past to refer to very different processes. Plato had used it to speak of the "activities" of perfect beings and spoke of God as a self-moved mover, while Aristo-

6. *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 5, a. 2, arg. 5, quoted by J. Owens, "Soul as Agent in Aquinas," *The New Scholasticism*, XLVIII (Winter, 1974), pp. 40-72, p. 54, note 22. Italics mine.
7. *ST.* I, 18, 1.
8. *CG.* I, 13, 5. Italics mine.
9. *CG.* I, 13, 7. Italics mine.

tle tended to use it as a technical term to refer to what is going on in an imperfect being when it is being perfected in some way:

> It is to be noted, however, that Plato, who held that every mover is moved, understood the name 'motion' in a wider sense than did Aristotle. For Aristotle understood 'motion' strictly, according as it is the act of what exists in potency inasmuch as it is such. So understood, motion belongs only to divisible bodies, as it is proved in the *Physics*. According to Plato, however, that which moves itself is not a body. Plato understood by 'motion' any given operation, so that to understand and to judge are a kind of motion. Aristotle likewise touches upon this manner of speaking in the *De Anima*. Plato accordingly said that the first mover moves himself because he knows himself and wills or loves himself. In a way, this is not opposed to the reasons of Aristotle. *There is no difference between reaching a first being that moves himself, as understood by Plato, and reaching a first being that is absolutely unmoved, as understood by Aristotle*.[10]

In Aquinas' philosophical tradition, "motion" can refer to the processes going on in a perfect being and the processes going on in a being not yet perfect when it is being perfected. Used in this latter way, a term with a passive sense, rather than active, better captures its meaning. In this sense, it is better to say of something "moving" that it is "being moved," or, more concretely, "burned," "dried," "pulled," "pushed," or whatever. Clearly, St. Thomas is understanding "motion" in this way when he argues that everything moved is moved by another[11] and when he accepts Aristotle's view that nothing divisible, i.e. no body, can move itself.

In thinking of living bodies as "moving" things, as things in "motion," as "self-movers," St. Thomas need not be using "motion" in Aristotle's narrow and technical sense. Indeed, he, himself, tells us that what he has in mind is compatible with the wider non-technical sense:

> . . . it is clear that those things are properly living which move themselves according to some species of motion; *whether 'motion' is taken properly as when the act of the imperfect, that is, the act of something existing in potency, is called 'motion'; or 'motion' is taken commonly, as when the act of the perfect is called 'motion,' inasmuch as to understand and to sense is said to be 'motion,'* . . .[12]

In viewing living bodies as self-movers, in thinking that they, themselves, and neither their parts nor things external to them, are the "moving" cause of some of the processes occurring in them, St. Thomas is thinking of living bodies as agents and of the processes occurring in them as *actions*. Since living acts are something living things do rather than something they suffer, his view that they are self-movers is in conflict with neither the principle, "Whatever is moved is moved by another," nor the position that "the divisible . . . cannot therefore move itself primarily and through itself." These latter principles are in conflict with "self-motion" only if "motion" always means being moved. Indeed, the phrase "self-

10. *CG*. I, 13, 10. Italics mine.

11. *CG*. I, 13, 4-10.

12. *ST*. I, 18, 1. Italics mine.

motion," if "motion" means being moved, is like the phrase "square circle," for if something should be *moved* primarily and through itself, it could not in this instance be its own mover, i.e. be moving itself primarily and *per se*. Since St. Thomas has in mind agents acting when he labels animals "self-movers," he can, in this sense of the phrase, label all living things "self-movers," whether God, angels, men, animals, or plants.

St. Thomas, moreover, seems to extend the concept of agency to things other than living substances. He always opposed, for example, Avicebron's teaching that something within bodies, rather than they, themselves, is the "moving" cause of all the events occurring in them. This would mean, as St. Thomas sees it, that bodies are in motion in the sense only that they are being moved. But, for St. Thomas, to be "moving" only in the sense of "being moved," to be only moved and never a mover, is characteristic of prime matter only and of no thing:

> It must be known, however, that when Avicebron argues: there is something 'moving but not moved,' namely the first maker of things; 'therefore conversely there is something which is moved and a patient only,' that is to be conceded. But this is prime matter, which is pure potency, as God is pure act. *A body, however, is composed from potency and act; and is, therefore, both an agent and a patient.*[13]

For Aquinas, the universe of substances is a universe of agents; it is a universe of "self-movers," and as he sees it, at least one of the processes occurring in each and every thing has as its moving cause the thing itself and neither its parts nor external things.

In "moving itself" in at least one way, each thing performs an action. While St. Thomas will speak of two kinds of actions, distinguishing them along the lines of the distinction between transitive and intransitive action,[14] it is his view that the latter kind of action is the sort of action which must be present in each thing, for the former presupposes the latter—there can only be a "moving" in the sense of a moved if there first is a "moving" in the sense of a "self-motion."[15]

St. Thomas, obviously, did not find this thesis of universal agency incompatible with the view that God is a universal moving cause and the heavens a moving cause somewhat less universal,[16] for, even though God and/or the heavens should cause all things to do what they do, the fact remains that things are doing what they do. God and/or the heavens would have to cause whatever occurs in any thing to interfere with their agency and to be incompatible with the thesis of universal agency: If C should be the only thing going on in B, B is an agent even if A causes B to do C. On the other hand, B is not an agent if A causes C.[17]

St. Thomas faces, however, two problems: one is generated for him by the thesis of universal agency and the other by that thesis plus his view that there is a

13. *ST.* I, 115, 1 ad 2, Italics mine.
14. *CG.* II, 1, 2.
15. *Ibid.*, II, 1, 3.
16. In fact, he finds the thesis that there is a universal moving cause and that human agents act freely compatible.
17. *ST.* I, 105, 4 and 2: "Et sic moveri ex se non repugnat ei quod movetur ab alio."

universal mover. First of all, he faces the task of explaining how, granted all things are agents, i.e. self-movers, the self-movers that are living bodies differ from self-movers that are not alive, and, secondly, he must explain how, granted there is a universal mover, human agents sometimes have the power, which most other bodies lack, of doing or not doing something. How can it be up to them, in some instances at least, to walk or not to walk if it be the case that they are always caused to do what they do? If what we have determined so far is correct, St. Thomas cannot make the difference between living and non-living bodies lie in this that all the events going on in the latter are caused by things external to them and not by them—if that be true they are not agents, nor does it suffice to explain human freedom—though this may be the best anyone can do—to note that agency is compatible with a universal moving cause and that we deliberate because we think it is within our power sometimes to do one or the other of at least two things.