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ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON PROPERTIES AND THE POWERS OF THE SOUL

Richard W. FIELD

RÉSUMÉ. — Pour saint Thomas les puissances végétatives de l'âme (savoir : la nutrition, la croissance et la reproduction) sont les propriétés d'organismes vivants ; c'est-à-dire que ce sont des caractéristiques d'organismes vivants qui, tout n'étant pas des caractéristiques essentielles, peuvent néanmoins être dites de manière nécessaire et convertible d'organismes vivants. En outre, ce sont des puissances actives dans le sens de capacités d'accomplir des actions qui peuvent avoir des effets. Mais cette interprétation de saint Thomas entraîne la difficulté conceptuelle d'impliquer la possibilité d'organismes vivants non actifs (à savoir des organismes qui ne font rien). Cette difficulté peut être évitée si nous considérons au moins une des puissances végétatives comme une capacité qui est nécessairement toujours en exercice, et ce non pas en raison de ce qu'elle est, mais en raison de ce à quoi elle est reliée. Ainsi, d'après cette interprétation, tous les organismes vivants accomplissent au moins une action en vertu de leur relation nécessaire à une fin.

SUMMARY. — For Aquinas the vegetative powers of the soul (viz. nutrition, growth, and reproduction) are properties of living organisms : that is, they are characteristics of living organisms which, while not being essential characteristics, can nevertheless be predicated necessarily and convertibly of living organisms. Furthermore, they are active powers in the sense that they are capacities to perform certain actions which can have effects. But such an interpretation of Aquinas leads to the conceptual difficulty of allowing for the possibility of non-active living organisms (i.e., organisms which do nothing). This difficulty can be avoided if we consider at least one of the vegetative powers as being a capacity which is of necessity always exercised, and this not because of what it is, but because of what it is related to. Thus, on this interpretation, all living organisms perform at least one action by consequence of their necessary relation to an end.

ACCORDING to St. Thomas Aquinas the powers of the soul are properties of living things.¹ The properties of a species are necessary accidents which result from the species' essence.² It is this necessary connection between properties and essence which renders the understanding of a species' properties invaluable in any investigation. Aristotle speaks of this in his *De Anima*.

... The knowledge of the essential nature of a substance is largely promoted by an acquaintance with its properties: for, when we are able to give an account conformable to experience of all or most of the properties of a substance, we shall be in the most favourable position to say something worth saying about the essential nature of that subject...³

Accordingly, an important element in understanding the essential characteristics of animate beings in an understanding of those properties which are their functions or powers. Such an investigation reveals what is meant when we speak of something as being a « living organism ».

The focus of this paper will be concerned with those powers of the soul which come under the genera of the vegetative powers according to Aquinas.⁴ The vegetative powers are those which are proper to animate things on the whole.⁵ Thus a study of these powers reveals what Aquinas took to be the most basic and universal differences between animate and inanimate bodies. However, before we can reach an understanding of the powers of the vegetative soul, two other topics must concern us: properties and powers. To understand the powers of animate things we must first come to some understanding of what Aquinas calls proper accidents or properties; and further we must consider the various types of powers which Aquinas speaks of in his works. We can then utilize our findings concerning these Thomistic concepts in our discussion of the powers of the vegetative soul.

Properties

Properties are necessary characteristics of a species. This is the case because properties are the natural consequents of the essential nature of a species. Since the property is a result of the essential principles of a species it is commensurate or coextensive with that species — every individual of a species exhibits the properties of that species. Thus « the sum of the internal angles being equal to two right angles » is a property of the species « triangle », and all triangles exhibit this property.

Properties fall into the category of accident insofar as this category is contrasted with that of substance. For in this sense of the term « accident » there is no medium between substance and accident. As Aristotle explains in the *Categories*, « Everything

1. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *The Soul*, trans. John Patrick ROWAN (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1949), 12 ad 7 (p. 157).

2. *Ibid.*

3. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, trans. J.A. SMITH, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), i, 1, 402b15–25.

4. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), I, 78, 1.

5. *Ibid.* Also see *The Soul*, 13 (p. 166).

except primary substances is either predicable of a primary substance [i.e. essence] or present in a primary substance [i.e. accident].»⁶ Hence Aquinas often speaks of properties as « proper accidents ». However, it is important to notice that properties do not belong to their subjects *by accident*, as « white » or « musical » belong to a particular man, but rather they belong to the subject because of the nature of that subject. Thus property is distinguished from accident in Aristotle's *Topics*,⁷ and in the Porphyrian list of the five predicables (viz., Genus, Species, Differentia, Property, Accident). As Aquinas explains,

... if we take accident as one of the five universals, in this sense there is a medium between substance and accident. For the substance is all that belongs to the essence of a thing; whereas whatever is beyond the essence of a thing cannot be called accident in this sense; but only what is not caused by the essential principle of the species.⁸

From what has been said concerning properties we can discover the criteria which any predicate must meet for it to be called a property. First, since a property is of necessity coextensive with its subject it is convertible with that subject in a proposition.⁹ Thus we can say of any plane figure, A, that « If A is a triangle then the sum of its internal angles is equal to two right angles, » and conversely « If the sum of A's internal angles is equal to two right angles then it is a triangle. »

However, convertibility does not distinguish proper accidents from essential characteristics. To do this we must appeal to another characteristic of properties — viz., that they are predicated of their subjects in the second mode of *per se* predication. The first mode of *per se* predication occurs when the predicate is included in the definition of the subject term.¹⁰ In such instances the predicate is the essence or part of the essence of the subject. Thus « line » is a *per se* predicate of « triangle ». The second mode of *per se* predication occurs when the subject term appears in the definition of the predicate. In these instances the predicate is a property of the subject. As Aquinas explains,

The second mode of saying *per se* is when this preposition *per* implies a relationship of material cause, in the sense that that to which something is attributed is its proper matter and subject. For it is required, when defining an accident, to mention its proper subject in one of the oblique cases: thus when an accident is defined abstractly, we say that « aquilinity is a curvature *of a nose*, » but when it is defined concretely, the subject is put in the nominative case, so that we say that « the aquiline is a curved nose. » Now the reason for this is that since the being of an accident depends on its subject, its definition — which signifies its being — must mention that subject. Hence it is the second mode of saying *per se*, when the subject is mentioned in the definition of a predicate which is a proper accident of the subject.¹¹

6. ARISTOTLE, *Categories*, trans. E.M. EDGHILL, in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ch. 5, 2a34-35.

7. ARISTOTLE, *Topics*, trans. W.A. PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE, in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, i. 5.

8. *ST*, I, 77, 1 ad 5.

9. See *Topics*, i. 5, 102a17-24.

10. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, trans. F.R. LARCHER (Albany: Magi Books, Inc., 1970), Lecture 10 (p. 34).

11. *Ibid.* (p. 34-35).

Hence we may distinguish predicates which are essential to the subject from those which are proper accidents of the subject by nothing that the former are predicates in the first mode of perseity, whereas the latter are in the second mode of perseity.

When a property is predicated of its subject in a proposition the proposition is necessary, for «such scientifically knowable things are necessary, because it is impossible for a proper accident not to be predicated of its subject.»¹² Consequently, we cannot think of the subject of a property as being without that property, for this entails a «repugnance of concepts»; for example, that a triangle does not have three angles equal to two right angles.¹³ Thus the third criteria for any predicate to be a property of its subject is that the connection between the subject and predicate must be necessary.

We may sum up this discussion of the criteria for a predicate to be a property in this manner: P is a property of S $\equiv (x)(Sx \equiv Px)$, where «P» stands for a predicate in the second mode of *per se* predication. The modal biconditional « \equiv » indicates the necessary relation between the subject and predicate terms.

We may now consider three different types of predicates which meet our three criteria outlined above. First, there are properties which can be predicated simply or absolutely of their subjects when the predicate of the proposition only denotes one property.¹⁴ Thus we say that «man is risible,» or that «triangle has three internal angles equal to two right angles.» This first type of property can be represented as the predicate term of the following propositional form,

$$(P1) (x)(Sx \equiv Px)$$

where «P» stands for only one property of its subject which can be predicated convertibly of that subject. I shall refer to properties of this type as «simple properties».

However, there is a second type of property which occurs when «two opposites stated disjunctively are of necessity in the subject, as “straight or oblique” in line, and “odd or even” in number.»¹⁵ In this case the two predicates are said to be in the subject in the sense that only one of the predicates can obtain in any particular instance of the species denoted by the subject term, although one of the two predicates must obtain in each instance. Thus if a line is straight it cannot be oblique, and if a number is odd it cannot be even. The disjunction which Aquinas refers to is, then, an exclusive disjunction, and we can represent this second type of property as a disjunct of the propositional form,

$$(P2) (x)[Sx \equiv (Px \not\equiv Qx)]$$

where « $\not\equiv$ » stands for the exclusive disjunction. It is important to note here that it is not the disjunction which is the property of the subject, but rather it is the contrary

12. *Ibid.* (p. 36).

13. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *On Spiritual Creatures*, trans. Mary C. FITZPATRICK (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1949), 11 ad 7 (p. 133).

14. *Comm. Post. An.*, Lec. 10 (p. 36).

15. *Ibid.*

predicates of the disjunction which are properties of that subject. This can be gathered from what Aquinas says concerning aquilinity in the passage quoted above, for aquilinity is a predicate which can be predicated disjunctively of its subject in an expression of propositional form P2, every nose being either curved or straight. Moreover Aquinas, in this passage, uses aquilinity as an example of a proper accident. Consequently we must qualify our first and third criteria for properties stated above. First we must stipulate that a property is either convertible with its subject *or* is a term of a disjunction which is convertible with its subject. Secondly, the necessity of disjunctive properties only holds in an implicative relation where the presence of the property implies necessarily its proper subject. Thus for any x , it is necessary that if x is odd then x is a number. We can say more generally that expression P2 above allows us in any particular instance to infer that $Px \supset Sx$ or $Qx \supset Sx$, but not conversely $Sx \supset Px$ or $Sx \supset Qx$.¹⁶

There seems to be no logical reasons for not allowing properties of this second type to be expressed in a disjunction with any number of contrary terms as disjuncts. Thus we may amend our representation of such properties in this manner,

$$(P2a) (x)[Sx \equiv (Px \not\equiv Qx \not\equiv \dots Nx)].$$

However, there must be one restriction on all such properties expressed in terms of P2a, namely that no disjunct or group of disjuncts of an expression in the propositional form P2a can itself be a predicate which can be predicated convertibly and necessarily of the subject. If this were allowed, then this predicate would necessarily be true of its subject, and all the other disjuncts of the same disjunction would consequently be necessarily false of their subject. Thus, for example, we could not express « oddness » as a property of number disjunctively with a simple property of number (e.g., being divisible by one), for then we would have to conclude that it is necessarily the case that no number is odd, which is clearly false. However, so long as we do not violate this restriction then we can have properties which are expressed as disjuncts of an exclusive disjunction of any size. We may refer to these types of properties as « exclusive properties ».

I believe Aquinas is also committed to holding that there is a third type of property which he does not discuss in his commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. This third type of property is one which is expressed as a disjunct of an inclusive disjunction, such that an instance of the species denoted by the subject may have any one property or any combination of properties of the disjunction. This type of property can be represented as a disjunct of the following propositional form :

$$(P3) (x)[Sx \equiv (Px \vee Qx \vee \dots Nx)]$$

We may refer to any such property as an « inclusive property ». I shall discuss the reasons why I believe Aquinas is committed to holding that there are inclusive

16. It can be noted that this revision of our third criterion, that properties have a necessary relation to their subjects, is necessary, for if we do not revise this criterion in this manner then we would have to, for example, interpret oddness as a simple property expressible in propositional form P1 [$(x) (x \text{ is a number} \equiv x \text{ is odd})$] which is simply false.

properties in more detail later when I discuss the powers of the soul. Briefly stated, I believe that to make sense of the sensitive and vegetative powers of the soul as discussed in the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, we must interpret such powers as inclusive properties.

It is important to notice that the restriction which we made concerning exclusive properties is not necessary for inclusive properties. That is, it is possible in any expression of the form P3 to allow one or more of the disjuncts to be themselves predicates which are predicable convertibly and necessarily of their subject. This is the case because if any disjunct or group of disjuncts is necessarily true of the subject the inclusive disjunction does not render all the other disjuncts necessarily false of the subject. Thus there could be properties which can be represented as disjuncts of P3 with simple properties as correlative disjuncts, and there might also be properties which can only be considered as properties as members of a disjunction which includes simple properties as disjuncts. This point shall be important when we consider the vegetative powers of the soul.

It is crucial when discussing disjunctive properties, whether exclusive or inclusive, to notice the importance of our second criterion for properties, viz., that properties must be predicates in the second mode of *per se* predication. For without this criterion it might be possible to consider any accident as a property of some subject. For assuming that every substance necessarily has at least one accident, an assumption which I believe is quite tenable in Aristotelian metaphysics, we can produce a disjunction of all the possible accidents which may be found in a substance and conclude that all such accidents are properties of substance. However, such a result would blur the distinction between accidents which are «principles of the species» (i.e., proper accidents), and accidents which are «principles of the individual» (i.e., separable and inseparable accidents), of which the latter are not necessary consequents of the essence of their subject. Aquinas insists on this distinction.¹⁷ The restriction which prevents an argument of this type, and the consequent blurring of the distinction between proper accidents and other accidents, is the criterion requiring properties to be predicates in the second mode of *perseity*. Hence the importance of this criterion is evident when considering disjunctive properties.

Powers

We may say in general that a power describes the capability of suffer some action of an agent or to cause some effect to occur. As Aquinas explains: «... A power is nothing but a thing's principle of operation, whether it be an action or a passion. Indeed, a principle is not the subject acting or undergoing an action, but that by which an agent acts or a patient undergoes an action...»¹⁸ There are three different types of powers which may be distinguished: passive powers, active powers which are capacities to act, and powers which are actions.

17. *The Soul*, 12 ad 7 (p. 157).

18. *The Soul*, 12 (p. 153).

A passive power is the principle of a thing by which the thing suffers some action of an agent. Aquinas calls that which is related to a power as the agent acting on that power the « object » of the power, and describes this agent as a « principle and moving cause.»¹⁹ This agent causes something in the patient which was only potential to become actual. Thus, as Aquinas explains, « a thing is said to be passive, from the very fact that what is in potentiality to something receives that to which it was in potentiality...»²⁰ The potential which is actualized with the exercising of a passive power can either be potential for changing substantially or accidentally.²¹ Thus a patient may be moved to take on a substantial form or an accidental form. In general we may say that the exercising of a passive power involves some change of state in the patient itself effected by the activity of some agent. We may, then, characterize passive powers in the following manner: x has passive power $P \equiv$ given that certain background conditions are met²² if the appropriate agent acts on x then a certain effect E occurs such that E involves some substantial or accidental state in x .

We may describe the state in which the patient has a certain passive power as the possibility for that patient to be effected in the above manner, representing this effect by a verb in the passive voice. Thus we can alternatively give the following characterization of passive powers: x has passive power $P \equiv \diamond$ for x to be Φ ed, where Φ represents any transitive verb.²³ Thus a rock has the passive power to be cooled or heated, a sponge has the power to be depressed, and a body has the power to be moved.

It is important to interpret carefully the modal operator in the above formulation of passive powers. The possibility which is referred to is not a logical, but rather an ontological possibility. The patient has the possibility of being effected in some way by an agent due to the potential it has to take on certain substantial and accidental forms. Thus it is in the nature of the patient itself to have a certain passive power. For instance, it is not merely logically possible that a stone can be heated, but possible given the type of thing it is; and it is not simply logically possible that a man can see, but an ontological possibility given the nature of man.

Sometimes Aquinas refers to active powers as capacities to act in some way, the action of which can produce an effect. The object of an active power is the end of its corresponding action. For example, the object of my power to walk is the relocation of my body. Thus the power is defined in terms of its act, and the act is defined in terms of its end or result. Aquinas puts it this way:

19. *ST*, I, 77, 3.

20. *ST*, I, 79, 2.

21. *The Soul*, 12 (p. 154).

22. These background conditions include conditions which are necessary for the action of the object or agent to be effective on the patient. For example, an agent will not be effective in moving a body if there is some force (e.g. magnetic field) holding it in place.

23. There will be some awkwardness in finding adequate verbs to interpret certain passive powers, in particular the passive powers of living organisms. For example, what verb do we use in describing the power of an animal to see? « To be colored » suggests that the eye itself takes on color, although for Aquinas this is not the case (see *ST*, I, 78, 3). « To be sighted » carries similar inappropriate connotations. However, the adequacy of the analysis of passive powers I offer here does not turn on the facility of our language to fit the analysis in all cases.

Act, though subsequent in existence to power, is, nevertheless, prior to it in intention and logically ; as the end is with regard to the agent. And the object, although extrinsic, is, nevertheless, the principle or end of the action ; and those conditions which are intrinsic to a thing, are proportionate to its principle and end.²⁴

Now Aquinas speaks of active power as « the principle of acting upon something else,»²⁵ and further he says that, « In creatures, power is the principle not only of action, but likewise of effect.»²⁶ But we must be cautious in interpreting Aquinas here, for there is no conceptual difficulty in conceiving of an action which has no effect. I can move my hand, and in so moving it I have acted in a certain way. But this action does not necessarily entail an effect which proceeds from it. As Aquinas says, in sensible things «actions and passions, so far as these imply movement, differ from the relations which result from action and passion...»²⁷ Thus there is nothing logically or conceptually problematic with an action which has no effect. What I take Aquinas' point to be in these texts is that any action which proceeds from the active power of a subject has to be, in principle, capable of producing an effect. Thus the movement of my hand would, if certain conditions were met, produce a movement in a susceptible patient.

We may, then, characterize active powers which are capacities in the following manner : x has the capacity $P \equiv$ given that certain background conditions are met,²⁸ x may perform a certain action A , where A is an action which is capable of producing an effect. Once again, as we have seen with passive powers, we can interpret an agent's capacity as a possibility to perform action A , representing A by a verb in the active voice. Thus we might alternatively characterize active powers which are capacities in the following manner : x has the capacity $P \equiv \diamond$ for x to Φ , where Φ represents any verb denoting an action which can have an effect. Once again we must note that the modal operator does not merely represent a logical possibility, but rather an ontological possibility due to a potentiality of the agent which can be actualized.

There is, however, a second type of active power which Aquinas speaks of in connection with God. In this second sense active power is not taken to mean the principle or source of an action, but as *being* an action. Since there is nothing in God which is potential,²⁹ the power of God cannot result from potentiality. Thus the power of God must be an action. We speak of this as a power in the sense that, as with the active powers of created things, the action may be productive of an effect.³⁰

24. *ST*, I, 77, 3 ad 1.

25. *ST*, I, 25, 1.

26. *ST*, I, 25, 1 ad 3.

27. *ST*, I, 41, 1 ad 2.

28. Again, the background conditions include conditions necessary for the agent to act in accordance with its capacity. If these conditions are not met it would in no way entail that the agent does not have the capacity in question. For example, if a certain person had a leg in a cast and could not move the limb this would not drive us to say that the person lacks the capacity to move the leg, but simply that there is a temporary restraint on such movement.

29. *ST*, I, 25, 1 ad 1.

30. *ST*, I, 25, 1 ad 3.

We may characterize active powers in this sense as follows: x has active power $P \equiv x$ performs action A , where A is an action capable of producing an effect; or alternatively: x has active power $P \equiv x\Phi$'s, where Φ represents any verb denoting an action which can have an effect.

Powers of the Soul

For Aquinas the powers of the soul are properties. This allows him to deny that such powers are either the essence of the soul, a status reserved for the powers of God,³¹ or purely accidental to the living organism. Rather the powers of the soul are necessary accidents which are the principles by which a living organism acts. Aquinas puts it this way: «It is evident that the essence of the soul is not the immediate principle of its operations, but that it operates through accidental principles. Consequently the powers of the soul are not the essence itself of the soul, but are properties of it.»³²

As I have indicated earlier, I believe that in order to make sense of the sensitive and vegetative powers we must postulate that I have called inclusive properties. This is clearly the case with the powers of the sensitive soul, for all animals have some sensation, but not all animals have all five of the senses. The only sense which is common to all animals, according to Aquinas, is touch.³³ Thus it is only touch which is convertible with the subject «animal» and is, therefore, a simple property. Consequently the powers of the sensitive soul, which include the five exterior and four interior senses,³⁴ must be inclusive properties expressible in the propositional form P3 above. This expression, in the case of the sensitive powers, includes one power, namely touch, which is also a simple property of animals, but, as we have seen, this is possible for inclusive properties, while it is not possible for exclusive properties.

The vegetative powers also must be considered inclusive properties. Aquinas includes three powers under the genera of the vegetative: nutrition, augmentation or growth, and generation.³⁵ These powers are active powers,³⁶ and, as we shall see shortly, they are active powers in the sense of being capacities for action. Now, if these powers were simple properties then we should be able to infer from the fact that any body is living that it has the capacity to grow and generate its own kind. But surely not all animals have the capacity to grow and generate offspring their entire lives. For instance, there appears to be no meaningful sense in which we can say of an adult human being that he or she can grow. Furthermore, there are some animals

31. *ST*, I, 77, 1.

32. *The Soul*, 12 (p. 155).

33. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, in *Aristotle's De Anima in the Version of William of Moerbeke and the Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Kenelm FOSTER and Sylvester HUMPHRIES (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), ii. 3, 260 (p. 185).

34. *ST*, I, 78, 3-4.

35. *ST*, I, 78, 2.

36. *ST*, I, 79, 2 ad 3.

which never have a capacity to generate their own kind — in the case of sterilization, for example, or as is the case with mules. These cases demonstrate that we cannot consider the augmentative and generative powers to be simple properties.

However, we must consider the nutritive power to be a simple property, for the exercise of this power is necessary for the exercising of the other two vegetative powers.³⁷ Hence, whereas it is possible for a living thing to lack the capacities for growth and reproduction, while having the capacity for nutrition, the converse is not possible.³⁸ Now, to be called « living » a body must have at least one of the vegetative capacities. Consequently, nutrition is a capacity which all living organisms must have, for if any being lacks this capacity it cannot have the other two vegetative powers.

We may summarize this discussion of the vegetative powers by expressing these powers in the following manner: $(x)\{x \text{ is a living body} \equiv [\rightarrow(\text{for } x \text{ to « nutrate » } \vee \text{ for } x \text{ to grow } \vee \text{ for } x \text{ to reproduce}) \cdot \rightarrow \text{ for } x \text{ to « nutrate »}]\}$. It is important to note here that the second conjunct of the predicate in this formulation is not redundant, since this conjunct expresses the fact that nutrition is a simple property of living bodies. Furthermore, nutrition must be included among the disjunctive properties of the vegetative soul since the other two disjuncts cannot be predicated convertibly and necessarily of living bodies either alone or as a disjunction. Consequently, we find in the vegetative powers of the soul an instance of inclusive properties which can only be considered as such as members of a disjunction which includes a simple property as one of the disjuncts, a possibility which has been mentioned above in the discussion of inclusive properties.

However, this characterization of the vegetative powers presents a conceptual difficulty. The question can be raised: Can a living organism exist which performs no actions?³⁹ Based on our characterization above this seems not only to be a logical possibility, but indeed an ontological possibility (given the interpretation of the modal symbol « \rightarrow » specified above). In other words, there is nothing in the essential nature of living organisms which necessitates that they perform any action. All that the above discussion implies is that all living organisms must have the capacity to nourish themselves. Consequently, the question concerning whether or not a living organism performs actions is left up to the determination of empirical science.

One way to avoid this consequence is to interpret one of the powers of the vegetative soul as not an active power in the sense of a capacity, but an active power in the sense of an action which can have an effect. From what has been said above concerning the vegetative powers it seems that the only possible candidate for such a

37. *The Soul*, 13 ad 15 (p. 173).

38. This point relies on what I take to be a fairly obvious and common sensical notion, viz., that if one's having any capacity relies on one's having some other capacity, the lack of the latter capacity suffices for the lack of the former. For instance, my capacity to take a walk relies on my capacity to move my legs, and if I cannot move my legs then surely I lack the capacity to take a walk.

39. It should be noted that this question is not empirical. In other words, we are not asking how often an organism needs to act, and what actions it must perform, to insure its survival. Rather we are asking whether or not the nature of animate bodies involves some kind of necessary action.

reinterpretation would be the nutritive power, since this is the only power which is necessary for all living organisms. Accordingly we could say that $(x)(x \text{ is a living body} \equiv x \text{ « nutrites »})$. Consequently nothing can be called a living organism unless it at least maintains itself through nutrition.

However, I think that it is clear that this was not the opinion of Aquinas. In connection with his arguments against the opinion that the powers of the soul constitute the soul's essence Aquinas says, « Now we observe that what has a soul is not always actual with respect to its vital operations... »⁴⁰ Furthermore, in Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* he speaks of nutrition in this way in connection with Aristotle's discussion of this power: « it is simply that faculty by which a living being is able to maintain itself as such; while *food is the condition of this faculty's activity*, that by means of which it maintains its subject » (my emphasis).⁴¹ This passage suggests that in the absence of food nutrition ceases, and in conjunction with the quote above it suggests that the cessation of nutritive activity does not necessarily result in the death of the individual, though empirically we may discover that such cessation of nutritive activity cannot be prolonged indefinitely if an organism is to survive. Consequently, it seems that for Aquinas only the nutritive capacity, and not nutritive activity, is a necessary property of an organism.

I believe we can see in Aquinas' work a theological reason for his reluctance to consider nutritive activity as a property of living organisms. For a power which is an activity, as opposed to a capacity, does not involve a reduction of potency to act. Now clearly, for Aquinas, God's activity is not the product of potency, for God is wholly actual and devoid of potency. Consequently God's power cannot be a capacity. But I believe that it is equally clear that for Aquinas the power of created things is always a potency which must be reduced to act by some agency. In this sense power is in created things an intermediary between a substance and its activity, and is distinct from both.⁴² Hence created things are not capable of having powers which are activities, for such a power does not have the intermediary function which potency plays in created substances.

We are, then, left with the position, as stated earlier, that there is no action which living bodies, *qua* living bodies, necessarily perform, and indeed that living organisms do not necessarily do anything at all. But although we have seen evidence to show that this was Aquinas' position, this position does not seem to be consistent with the teleological conception of the universe that we find in the Aristotelian tradition. According to this understanding of the universe all things in some way move or act towards an end, whether they be self-moving, as rational creatures are, or moved by another, as is the case with irrational or non-apprehending creatures. As Aquinas explains,

... it is proper to the rational nature to tend to an end, as directing and leading itself to the end: whereas it is proper to the irrational nature to tend to an end, as

40. *ST*, I, 77, 1.

41. *Comm. De Anima*, ii, 9, 345 (p. 230).

42. *On Spiritual Creatures*, 11, iv (p. 129).

directed or led by another, whether it apprehend the end, as do irrational animals, or do not apprehend it, as is the case of those things which are altogether void of knowledge.⁴³

Furthermore Aquinas refers to the tending of a thing towards its end as an « action » or « movement ».⁴⁴ This passage suggests that there is at least one action which all things perform, viz. the activity of moving towards their end. It also suggests that this action is different for essentially different substances. That is, rational creatures are self-moved towards an apprehended end, irrational animals apprehend their end but are not self-moved, and the activity of non-living substances is not elicited through apprehension of an end at all. Consequently, the conclusion that this passage points toward is this : that there must be in all animate things an action or activity of moving toward an end, and that this action or activity must be one which is characteristic of living bodies *qua* living bodies.

One way we can speak of an activity which is always present in a thing but not a property of that thing is to speak of a capacity for action which is always exercised. Aquinas speaks of this type of capacity as « a potentiality which is always perfected by its act. »⁴⁵ Accordingly, we would not speak of the activity of an organism as itself a property of living beings, but as an activity which results from a certain capacity which is always exercised. Furthermore, we can say that this capacity is necessarily exercised because of a living organism's necessary relation to a certain end. Consequently we can say that living organisms necessarily perform a certain action (e.g. « nutriting ») not because of what they are, but because they are related to something else as their end. It is important to see the distinction between this position and the one considered above. We are not saying here that $(x)(x \text{ is a living body} \equiv x \Phi)$ s). The predicate in this proposition is a power which is an action. Rather we are saying that $(x) [(x \text{ is a living body} \cdot x \text{ is related to } Q \text{ as its end}) \equiv x \Phi]$ s), and furthermore $(x)(x \text{ is a living body} \supset x \text{ is related to } Q \text{ as its end})$. The latter expression is a direct implication of the teleological understanding of the universe found in Thomistic philosophy. All things are necessarily related in some way to an end by consequence of their nature and the order of the universe as a whole. The former expression makes it clear that the action of x is not a consequence only of what x is (as is the case with actions which are properties), but is a consequence also of the relation x has to its end.⁴⁶

In Aquinas' terminology we would say that a necessary activity of a living organism is not necessary in the sense of natural or absolute necessity, but can only

43. *ST*, I-II, 1, 2.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *ST*, I, 79, 2.

46. It is worthwhile to note that this solution to the problem of the activity of living organisms only works if we suppose that relations are external, that is, non-essential. I believe this is a doctrine common to all substance metaphysics. If we were to hold to a doctrine that relations are internal, and thus essential to the nature of individual substances, then to describe a thing's essence would be to describe, in some way, its relations. Consequently it would be an essential characteristic of a living organism that it is related to something as its end, and any action which is a necessary consequence of this relation would be a property of living bodies.

be necessary in relation to a particular end. Aquinas explains this distinction in this manner.

... That a thing must be may belong to it by an intrinsic principle: — either material, as when we say that everything composed of contraries is of necessity corruptible; — or formal, as when we say that it is necessary for the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right angles. And this is *natural* and *absolute necessity*. In another way, that a thing must be, belongs to it by reason of something extrinsic... On the part of the end, as when without it the end is not to be attained or so well attained: for instance, food is said to be necessary for life, and a horse is necessary for a journey. This is called *necessity of end*, and sometimes also *utility*.⁴⁷

Our former proposal concerning necessary activity in living organisms postulated an activity that was necessary in the natural or absolute sense, that is, an activity which was a property of living organisms, and was a natural consequence of the essence or nature of living organisms. But we found in Aquinas' writings reason to reject this possibility for created things. Our second proposal is that no activity is necessary in this sense in living organisms, but that some activity or action is necessary by consequence of the end that all organisms have. The most plausible suggestion as to the type of activity this might be is nutrition. For, as we have seen, nutrition is, according to Aquinas, the most basic power which a living organism possesses. But this suggestion does necessitate a denial of Aquinas' assertion that living organisms are not always in act in regards to their vital actions, since nutrition is a vital activity of a living organism.

To conclude, we find that Aquinas, in conceiving of a universe which is teleologically ordered, must hold that animate things have a power which is of necessity always exercised; and this is the case not because of the essential nature of animate things, but rather because of the end which all animate things have. On this basis we can say that there is an action which all living bodies, *qua* living bodies, perform, and consequently that all animate bodies must do something. We then avoid the conceptual difficulties involved in allowing the possibility of non-active living organisms.⁴⁸

47. *ST*, I, 82, 1.

48. I would like to thank Dr. Matthew J. Kelly for his helpful criticism during the formulation of this paper and on its initial drafts.