Some Notes on Self-Motion

by Richard J. Connell

AGENT OR efficient causality is most manifest to us in the physical order, for those agents that produce material works are the ones in which we first recognize this species of cause. However, we also speak of agency apropos of immanent operation, that kind of activity that does not pass out of the power in which it occurs—for example, seeing and thinking; for in regard to such operation we say that we reduce ourselves from first act to second act. But here a question arises: how do we reduce ourselves from first act to second act? How is this brought about, and in what does such a reduction consist? Or to put it another way, in what manner are we able to "produce," as it were, second act from first act? In short, how does this operation come into being? It is hoped that the remarks which follows will shed some light on this point and the notion of self-motion upon which it depends.[1] Let me begin by recalling in the following paragraph a few points with which the reader is thoroughly familiar.

Strictly understood motion is an act of a being in potency; it is the gradual, successive reduction of a subject from potency to act, and this subject is called the *mobile.* But in addition to a subject, motion requires a being in act which is the origin or source from which proceeds the reduction from potency to act, and this origin is called the *agent.* According to our first

[1] Reference should be made to F. Nugent, "Immanent Action in St. Thomas and Aristotle," THE NEW SCHOLASTICISM, XXXVII (1963) 164-187. The present essay in no way duplicates Nugent's work, nor is it intended to voice a difference of view. Rather, it seeks to develop a point that illuminates transitive and immanent activity by considering them under another aspect. Such an aim is essentially complementary to Nugent's other and more basic consideration.

notion of it, then, an agent is a being which can communicate to a recipient an actuality that it, the recipient, does not possess. For example, when one body warms another heat is "transferred" (the physicist says) from the hot body to the cold one. Plainly, therefore, actuality is formal to the agent, whereas potentiality is formal to the mobile. Furthermore, given the distinction of these formalities, it follows that the agent must be exterior to the recipient; and as is well known, this holds even in living things, for in the latter, one part acts on another exterior to itself. Consequently, when motion and action are each taken strictly one does not occur without the other. Thus, action —transitive action— implies an object acted upon, and without such an object the action does not exist. If the sun were the only body in existence it would not do any heating, since the action of heating implies an object which is being heated. Of course, the sun would possess its active quality —that from which it is designated hot— but in the absence of a recipient there would be no heating. Let me repeat, therefore, that both agent and recipient are necessary for activity. Consequently —and this is the point toward which we have been moving— action implies the application of a form (active quality) or power to an object.

Now given that action implies the application of a form or power to an object, it also follows that whatever is responsible for the application of a form to an object is responsible for the action,[2] and is therefore entitled to be called an agent cause of the motion which comes about. It is for this reason that we say that *we* heat the water when we put a kettle on the stove. Although we do not possess the active quality or power —since we are not what is hot— we consider ourselves to be the agent

[2] ". . . dicitur una res esse causa actionis alterius in quantum movet eam ad agendum; in quo non intelligitur collatio aut conservatio virtutis activae, sed applicatio virtutis ad actionem; sicut homo est causa incisionis cultelli ex hoc ipso quod applicat acumen cultelli ad incidendum movendo ipsum." *De Pot.*, III, 7.

precisely because we *are* responsible for the application of the form or power to an object. And this leads us to a statement of the fundamental notion from which these remarks on self-motion will be developed: an agent is self-moving if by reason of an intrinsic principle it can apply a form it possesses to an object.

If one reflects a bit, he will see that a living being which possesses only vegetative life applies, in its action, some active quality —chemical or physical property— to a matter, thereby bringing about a movement; and for this reason the being is said to move itself. Or to put the same point in the language of Ralph Lillie,[3] living things organize relatively homogeneous materials into heterogeneous structures, an effort which requires work. Work in turn demands energy; and this tells us what a living being does insofar as it possesses vegetative life: the organism, by reason of a principle it possesses, directs within itself the application of free energy to the doing of work. The latter term, of course, implies motion in the strict sense.[4] To state the same point a bit differently, the living being employs the attributes of the inanimate order —that is, the active and passive physical and chemical properties that are found in inanimate entities or substances—as instruments in achieving its own goals.[5] In brief, then, and returning to Aristotelian

[3] *General Biology and Philosophy of Organism* (Chicago, 1945) ch. 2. See especially pp. 32-33.

[4] "Work" is a mechanical notion, and a typical college physics book defines it as follows: "The work done by a force acting on a body while the body undergoes a displacement is defined as the product of the magnitude of the displacement and the component of the force in the direction of the displacement." Shortley and Williams, *Physics* (New York, 1950) I, 149.

It is interesting to note that the same text speaks of energy as follows: "The energy of a body is a measure of the capacity or ability of the body to perform work. . . ." Now despite the fact that as energy is formally considered by the physicist (and the same is true of work), it is a measurable quantity, one cannot, nonetheless, abstract it completely from the notion of an active principle. It is always related to the notion of agency when it is considered in relation to work.

[5] Lillie puts in modern terminology a point already understood by Aristotle and St. Thomas. See *De Spirit. Creat.*, II.

terminology, such living beings move themselves insofar as they apply an active quality or form to matter, thereby effecting motion, which is equivalent to saying that to move or not to move in some measure arises from within them.

On the other hand, immanent action, which is *operation* in the strict sense but *action* only in a broad sense, does not entail the same kind of self-movement that vegetative activities do, despite the fact that immanent actions are vital operations.[6] To be sure, these operations, like actions, do imply an object; for there is no seeing, thinking, wanting, etc., without a something seen, thought about, or wanted. However, this kind of activity does not affect an exterior object but remains wholly within the operating power. Furthermore, cognitive immanent action does not entail motion in the strict sense.[7] Consequently, when an animal sees or hears, etc., it may be thought of as moving itself only insofar as it applies an operational power to its object and not because it reduces matter from potency to act.

Furthermore, through experience we discover that we, and other animals, can apply our sensory powers to various objects as we wish, sensing first this and then that; but as has been said, such an application of the power to its object does not result in motion properly speaking. For this reason it is more accurate to say that in sensing, animals "move themselves to operation," [8] rather than saying in an unqualified manner that they "move themselves." Or if this latter phrase is used apropos of sensory activity, it must be understood as equivalent to "movement to operation." In summary then, it is plain that animals which potentially sense reduce themselves to actually sensing by applying a power or form to an object. (The sense power exists in first act by reason of the form which constitutes it.)

[6] See St. Thomas, *In I De Anima*, 10, nn. 157-8.

[7] St. Thomas, *ibid.*

[8] ". . . viventia dicuntur quaecumque se agunt ad motum, vel operationem aliquam; . . ." St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, I, 18, 1; 2.

Of course, there are some limitations to an animal's ability to move itself in this way. We see or do not see by removing or interposing an opaque medium, the lid, between the eye and its object. If the lid were fixed in an open position, and if there were an illumined object, we would be obliged to see the object, provided we faced in its direction. Of course, we would have a certain freedom, depending upon the limitations imposed by the environment, to turn from this thing to that, but we would be unable to prevent the act of seeing except by substituting something else for the lid. The same is true of the other senses. We cover our ears, hold our noses, etc., to prevent the operations from occurring; or if things are bad enough, we move from one place to another to escape the unpleasant object altogether. In other words, *as long as power and object are united the activity must occur.* (In this respect both kinds of activity, transitive and immanent, are alike.) As a consequence, we move ourselves to sensory operations only in a very limited way, since we do not control objects that confront us, which means that as animals we are only imperfectly self-moving. Furthermore, it becomes plain why St. Thomas speaks of second act as a *use.*[9]

Now the intellect, it must be noted, is more under our control than are the senses precisely because it is not applied directly to the physical object as they are. Rather, the intellect terminates at the object as the latter exists intentionally and not as it exists physically; and for this reason we are free to apply the intellective power to whatever object we wish, not just those which the environment immediately provides. Of course, intense sensory experiences tend to hold the intellect's attention to a particular object, thereby making it difficult for us to consider other things, and this is to be expected in an intelligence that derives its concepts from sense impressions. However, despite such difficulties we are much more the agent cause of our intel-

[9] St. Thomas, *De Pot.*, I, 4, c.

lectual activity than we are our sense operations precisely because we more completely control the application of the intellectual power to its object. "We consider things when we will," is much more properly said of the intellect than the senses.

In regard to this, however, one more point must be made. In the act of reasoning, through which the intellect is perfected, we are able to apply the mind perfectly to its object only if it possesses a habit. Indeed, to say that a substance can move itself to operation is to imply that its powers are in first act, which means that the power must possess a form which can be used. But obviously the intellect, unlike the senses, cannot be applied to a consideration of some object at the first moment of its, the intellect's, existence. On the contrary, the mind must first acquire a habit which is for it a first act. A sense is perfectly disposed by nature —by the form which makes it a power— for the employment of its sensory species, and for this reason the sense is in first act through its substance. The intellect, on the other hand, is not perfectly disposed by nature for the employment of its intelligible species or concepts. The rectification of the use of these is through a habit rather than through the substance of the power itself. Hence, in this respect the intellect is less perfect than the sense. But once the intelligence has been disposed by a habit for the use of its intelligible species, we are more the principle of our own operation than we are in the sensory order, and therefore the intellect is, absolutely considered, more perfect than the sense powers. In other words, when self-motion is understood as a reduction from potential to actual operation, the intellectual creature is obviously more self-moving than the animal. Furthermore, a separated substance, since its intellect does not require a habit by reason of being perfectly disposed by nature for the use of its intelligible species, moves itself more perfectly than we do. Indeed, the higher the being is in that category the more perfect is its self-motion. God, who is the extrinsic term of such an upward

progression, in one act applies Himself to all that He knows and does.

In summary, then, the ability to move oneself implies the presence of an intrinsic principle through which a form or power is applied to an object. In the domain of the lowest living things —those that have only vegetative operations— this application results in a reduction from potency to act which is motion strictly speaking. On the animal level the external senses, although they are not the seat of transitive activity, are applied to an object which is physically present, either through itself or through a physical medium such as air in the case of sound or quanta in the case of an incandescent body, and which, with regard to its presence, is not under the control of the sense. Intellectual operation, however, unites an operative power to an object according to an intentional existence. This enables the knower to apply the power to any object, present or absent, as he wills. In other words, the presence or absence of the object itself is under his control, and he is able to operate or not by applying the power to the object. (In all cases, however, from vegetative operation to intellection, as long as power and object are united operation or action occurs.) Hence, an intellectual creature is more perfectly a principle of his own activity than are inferior beings and " self-motion " exists more perfectly in this kind of entity than it does in lower substances. However, an intellectual substance does not " move himself " in the first meaning of the term, but only in the sense of " movement to operation." In short, *operation* cannot be better described than as the use of a form.

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