

The God of Life  
Response to: "Remarks *God Reason and Reality*," by Edward Feser  
Book launch for *God Reason and Reality*, by Anselm Ramelow, OP  
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First, I want to thank Professor Edward Feser for joining us today. Before responding to his comments on my chapter in the book, I'd like to say a word that chapter, especially for those who have perhaps not yet had the opportunity to commit it to memory. The chapter is titled: "The God of Life, the Science of Life, and the Problem of Language."

I begin by noting that, throughout the Bible, God is referred to as "the God of Life." There seems to be no theological problem here. Of course, if we follow Aquinas, the very word "God" itself might be problematic since, as he teaches, "we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not."<sup>1</sup> Even if we refuse to be sidetracked by that consideration, however, a second problem arises with the word "life." Of course, we all recognize life when we see it and can easily tell when the pet goldfish dies. But we become somewhat tongue-tied when we try to give a definition of the word "life" or to say exactly what the word means.

We might think that biologists, as experts on the study of life, should be able to tell us what it is. When it comes to defining life, however, they seem to give up. As biologist Pier Luigi Luisi confesses, "I have observed--and am resigned to--the fact that it is practically impossible to bring physicists, chemists, and biologists to an agreement on what life is."<sup>2</sup>

When asked what life is, the best they can do is make a list of characteristics that they see as essential aspects of living things. Some begin by noting the material components of life, such as carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur, and phosphorus. Others point out that living things must have some sort of membrane to contain these chemicals. (I'm reminded on one Star Trek episode where some aliens refer to the human beings as "ugly carbon bags of mostly water." The "container" is an essential part of the description.)

Beyond this, biologists note certain activities that are essential to life, especially metabolism (the process by which some substances are broken down to yield energy for vital processes while other substances, necessary for life, are synthesized). Living things are also characterized by nourishment, growth, and reproduction. In addition, many biologists add evolution as an essential feature of life.

Edouard Machery sums up the scientific attempt to define life in the title of one of his articles: "Why I Stopped Worrying About the Definition of Life ... and Why You Should As Well."<sup>3</sup>

Philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas, define life more broadly in terms of self-motion. Aquinas notes: "We say that an animal begins to live when it begins to move of itself, and it is considered to be alive so long as such movement appears in it."<sup>4</sup>

If these notions apply to life as we find it in creatures, which of them should we keep when we talk about God's life? God is not made of carbon or hydrogen, and has no membrane to keep such chemicals together. Nor do we attribute nourishment, growth, reproduction or evolution to God.

So the question arises: Does God's life have anything in common with the life of creatures? The simple answer is "no." God utterly transcends the kind of life we find in creatures. Does that mean we can say nothing about divine life? Again, the answer is "no." There is much we can say, but as we speak, we must always remember that God is not like creatures. Although creatures are in some way like God, since God created them, and an effect is in some way like its cause, God is not like creatures.<sup>5</sup>

To talk about God's life, perhaps we can go back to Aquinas' idea of the self-motion that characterizes living things. Though God does not grow or move from place to place, God does know and love-- and these activities can also be considered kinds of motion. Thinking of divine life in this way brings us to the very center of the mystery of God, the life of the Trinity of persons, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Aquinas and St. Augustine use the motions of knowing and loving to describe the dynamic processions and intimate union of God's Trinitarian life.

I turn now to Professor Feser's remarks.

He takes up the question of "how God can be said to have life if, as the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition holds, life involves a kind of self-motion, whereas God is said within that tradition to be immutable or unmoving." He notes that in the Aristotelian tradition "any actualization of a potency counts as motion, and ... this includes not just local motion but qualitative and quantitative change and, at least in an extended sense of motion, changes of substance."

This certainly points out the dilemma: if motion always involves the actualization of a potency, then motion can never be predicated of God. But if motion can in no way be predicated of God, and life always implies some kind of motion, it is hard to see how life can be predicated of God.

Professor Feser point out that we can be saved from this dilemma by reviewing the distinction between what he calls immanent and transient causation. I prefer to use the term "motion" here, rather than "causation", and I will explain why in a moment. Transient motion includes activities such as heating water over a fire. Such actions always involve potency: the potency or possibility of the water to be heated becomes actualized. The act of heating is conceived as "passing" from the fire (which is actually hot) to the water (which is potentially hot). Hence, the term "transient" motion. Immanent motion is quite different. It is exemplified in activities such as knowing and loving. Transient motion always implies potency. The water which is "potentially" hot becomes actually hot through such motion. Potency is so central to this kind of motion that it has been defined by Aristotle and Aquinas as "the act of being in potency insofar as it is in potency," Immanent motion, on the contrary, need not imply potency. Activities such as knowing and loving are examples of immanent motion. An activity such as knowing something ( $2 + 2 = 4$ ) or loving someone is simply the act of a being capable of knowing or loving. In itself, it implies no passage from potency or possibility to act, but is simply the act (and so also the perfection) of a being capable of such activity.

Since transient motion implies potency and so also imperfection, it may be applied to God only metaphorically, as happens in scripture: "Draw near to God and he will draw near to

you" (James 4: 8). Since immanent motion does not necessarily imply potency, but only the actuality of the agent, it may be applied to God analogously.

I think such an attribution is possible if the notions of "transient" and "immanent" are applied to the idea of "motion", but not if they are applied to the idea of "causality", as Professor Feser does in his remarks. "Causality" always implies dependency, as Aquinas explains: "Those things are called causes upon which things depend for their existence or their coming to be."<sup>6</sup> To speak of an immanent causality in God would imply some kind of dependency, which is contrary to the notion of God pure actuality and First Cause. So, Aquinas is careful to speak of the Father as the "principle" of the Son (since this implies only order of procession), but not the "cause" of the Son (since this would imply dependency).<sup>7</sup>

Professor Feser offers a helpful distinction between the essence of a thing and the properties that flow from that essence.

I have to say, I'm not quite sure where he is going when he applies the distinction between essence and properties to the life of God. He says: "I would, tentatively, suggest that we might speak in a loose sense of the philosophical arguments for God's having intellect and will as showing us the properties of the divine life, and of the doctrine of the Trinity as giving us a glimpse into the very essence of the divine life." Given divine simplicity, even philosophically speaking, God's intellect, will, and life, are one with the divine essence (since all that is in God is God). So, I don't think that philosophy can get us only as far as divine properties and that we have to wait for theology (the doctrine of the Trinity) to get us to the "very essence of divine life" (though theology certainly tells us more about the life of God than we could ever come to know by reason alone).

The distinction that Professor Feser makes between the essence of a thing and the properties that flow from that essence may be quite helpful for scientists who are struggling to define life by enumerating the properties of living beings. Dr. Feser suggests that we should consider the essence of the living being from which such properties flow (rather than simply concentrate on the properties themselves) if we are trying to find a definition of life.

I think that Professor Feser's distinction between essence and properties can be very

helpful in this discussion. The challenge for Thomists, however, would then be to communicate to the scientific community exactly what we mean by "essence" as a feature of organisms distinct from their properties. Empirical science can study properties (observe how an organism eats, grows, reproduces, and so forth), since all of these are measurable and experimentally observable. But empirical science cannot observe an "essence" or a "substantial form". So, how do we Thomists let the scientific community know what we're talking about when we use such terms-- and, more fundamentally, how do we convince them that we are really talking about anything at all-- that we are pointing to a real aspect of the natural world that somehow escapes the methodology of empirical science? But perhaps that is a topic for another day.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946), I, 3, prologue.

<sup>2</sup> Luisi, Pier Luigi *The Emergence of Life: from Chemical Origins to Synthetic Biology*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Edouard Machery, "Why I Stopped Worrying About the Definition of Life ... and Why You Should As Well, (2006) (online manuscript) <http://www.pitt.edu/~machery/papers/Definition%20of%20life%20Synthese%20machery.pdf>, (accessed 1 August 2011).

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologica* I, 18, 1, co.

<sup>5</sup> "Although it may be admitted that creatures are in some sort like God, it must nowise be admitted that God is like creatures" (*Summa Theologica* I, 4, 3, ad 4).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, tr. Richard Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirlkel (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), Book I, lect. 1, no. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologica* I, 27, 1.