

Remarks on *God, Reason and Reality*

Edward Feser

I would like to thank Fr. Ramelow for editing a fine anthology, and both Fr. Ramelow and Fr. Dodds for the invitation to comment on it here. Though there is a great deal of interesting material in the book and much that could be said about it, given time constraints I am going to confine myself to commenting on Fr. Ramelow's essay on God and miracles and Fr. Dodds' essay on God and the nature of life. I found both papers to be very rich and thought-provoking, and I hope that what I have to say will also provoke thought. I also expect and hope that it will not be too *provocative*, since I am essentially in agreement with both papers. Still, I suppose I would not be a Thomist if I did not have quibbles about this or that way of putting things, or did not prefer to emphasize particular aspects of an issue or suggest further areas for exploration. So while what follows is for the most part along the lines of sympathetic supplementation, there is also a little constructive criticism. (I realize, of course, that that my own remarks might invite a *lot* of constructive criticism!)

Ramelow on God and miracles

Let me comment first on Fr. Ramelow's paper "The God of Miracles." I want to address three sets of issues raised by the paper. First, what is a miracle? Second, why is the evidence for miracles not more overwhelming than it is, and why are

miracles not more common? These are two different questions, of course, but I want to discuss them together because the answers might, I think, be closely interrelated. Third, can an appeal to miracles form the basis for an independent argument for the existence of God, or do we need first to know God exists in order to establish the occurrence of a miracle? Let's take these questions in order.

Since the time of David Hume, a "miracle" has often been characterized as a violation of a law of nature. The idea, roughly, is that when there is a regular or "law-like" correlation between, say, causes of kind A and effects of kind B, a failure of some particular instance of A to be followed by B would constitute a miracle. This conception underlies skeptical arguments to the effect that the notion of a miracle is incoherent, insofar as evidence that some purported violation of a law occurred would really just be evidence that the purported law in question wasn't really a *law* in the first place, so that there was no true violation and thus no miracle.

But from the point of view of the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysician, this characterization of miracles is problematic, for reasons indicated by Fr. Ramelow. On the standard Aristotelian account, a law of nature is a description of the tendencies or dispositions a thing will exhibit given its nature or essence. For example, if it is a law of nature that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, then what this involves is just water's having, by virtue of its essence or nature, a tendency or disposition to freeze at that temperature. As it happens, this example is oversimplified, since liquid water can in unusual circumstances exist at cooler temperatures. But that only reinforces the point that when we talk about laws we are really talking about

tendencies or dispositions, and a tendency or disposition can be blocked, or manifest only when certain conditions obtain. As Fr. Ramelow writes:

Laws of nature... are really about the dispositional properties of things, based on the kinds of things they are: things of kind A have a disposition to manifest quality F in conditions C, in virtue of being of nature N. For Aquinas, laws of nature are not strictly *universal* generalizations, but descriptive of what happens *normally*, i.e. according to the nature of things; exceptions are quite compatible with such laws. (2014b, p. 314)

So, one problem with characterizations of miracles as violations of laws of nature is that they often reflect too crude an understanding of how laws work. If a law describes a thing's natural dispositions and a disposition can really be present yet still fail to manifest -- either if the manifestation is blocked, or if the triggering conditions are not present -- then such a failure to manifest will not *as such* constitute a violation of the law. Hence it will not as such count either as evidence of a miracle or, for that matter, as evidence that the purported law was not after all a true law.

There is another problem with characterizing miracles as violations of laws of nature. As David Oderberg sums up the Aristotelian-Thomistic view of laws in his book *Real Essentialism*:

[T]he laws of nature are the laws of natures. For natures just are abstract essences in concrete operation. Nature is the collection of all the natures of

things. So to say the laws are *of nature* is to say that they are *of the natures* of things. (2007, p. 144)

An implication of this, emphasized by Oderberg, is that the laws of nature are not, as Hume and his followers suppose, contingent. The Humean view is that something could be just the thing it is -- water, or fire, or an acorn, or a dog -- while governed by different laws and thus entering into entirely different causal relations. Hence water might turn into chocolate mousse at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, fire might cause water to freeze rather than boil, an acorn might grow into a dog, a dog might be able to fly by wagging its tail, and so forth, if only the laws of nature were different. But from an Aristotelian point of view this makes no sense. Since laws of nature are the laws of the natures of things, if the laws were different the natures would be different and thus the things would be different. Anything that reliably turned to chocolate mousse at 32 degrees Fahrenheit just wouldn't *be* water in the first place, anything that reliably grew into a dog just wouldn't *be* an acorn, and so on. Since laws of nature reflect the natures or essences of things, they are *metaphysically necessary*. To be sure, there could have been a world without water, fire, acorns, or dogs in it in the first place, but which did have entities which in certain superficial ways resembled these things. In that sense the laws of nature that actually obtain need not have obtained. But there couldn't have been a world which really had water, fire, acorns, and dogs in it but where these things did not naturally behave in the ways they in fact do behave.

Now if laws of nature are metaphysically necessary, then violations are impossible. Of course, the manifestation of a disposition might still either be blocked or lack the requisite triggers, but if the triggers are present and no blocks are present, the manifestation will follow.

What, then, is a miracle if not a violation of the laws of nature, and how could miracles occur if laws are metaphysically necessary? Fr. Ramelow suggests the following answer:

What defines a miracle is not merely that it is an exception to what is natural (which would be true for defects as well), but that it elevates the nature of a thing to a power that cannot be accounted for by this nature. Unlike said defects, miracles are exceptions that are *super*-natural rather than *sub*-natural. As such, then, miracles are not violations of the laws of nature. Even though they would have to be called “physically impossible,” yet they are not *contrary* to nature; rather, they are *beyond* nature... in the sense of elevating it to a higher power. (2014b, pp. 314-15; cf. pp. 348-9)

As Fr. Ramelow goes on to note, *qua supernatural*, miracles can only have a divine cause and must not be confused with the extraordinary but still merely preternatural effects an angel might produce. Finite spirits are still part of the natural order, as Thomists understand the natural order. (2014b, pp. 316-17)

Now, all of this seems to me not only correct but extremely important. Properly understood, miracles are in no way comparable to magic, nor to a kind of advanced technology. For God is not merely an especially powerful cause alongside

other natural and preternatural causes. Rather, he is altogether outside the order of natural and preternatural causes, as the metaphysical precondition of there being any causal power at all. You might say that he does not merely *have* causal power but that he just *is* Causal Power Itself, just as he is Goodness Itself and Being Itself. Just as he does not merely participate in being or goodness but is rather precisely that in which those things which have goodness and being participate, so too is he that in which things which have causal power participate. That is the manner in which he is the First Cause -- “first” in the sense of primary or fundamental, that from which all other, merely secondary causes derive their causal power.

Hence it would be a sheer mistake to think that the difference between ordinary events and miracles is that whereas the former happen on their own, God causes the latter. The world is not like an airplane on autopilot, with God interfering from time to time to perform a course correction. The Thomist utterly rejects this essentially deistic conception of God. God is the ultimate cause of *all* things, the natural and preternatural as much as the miraculous. Indeed, it is the *ordinary* course of things, and not miracles, which is for a classical theist like Aquinas the most direct evidence of God’s existence and action as First Cause. As Brian Davies writes:

Some people would say that God can intervene so as to bring it about that changes occur in the world. On the classical theist's account, however, such changes cannot be literally thought of as divine interventions since they and what preceded them are equally the creative work of God. (2004, p. 4)

Davies goes on to quote Herbert McCabe, who says:

It is clear that God cannot *interfere* in the universe, not because he has not the power but because, so to speak, he has too much. To interfere you have to be an alternative to, or alongside, what you are interfering with. If God is the cause of everything, there is nothing that he is alongside. (2000, p. 199)

Davies adds: “You cannot intervene in what you are doing yourself. And, say classical theists, God cannot literally intervene in his own created order” (2004, p. 4).

Like the term “violation,” the term “intervention” wrongly suggests that a miracle is a kind of *violent* motion, as if God has to force things to go in a certain direction. That would be a fitting characterization if the world were a machine and God a machinist who occasionally steps in to fine-tune it, but it is highly misleading given a classical theist conception of God and his relationship to the world. A better analogy might be to think of the world as music and God as the musician who is playing the music. Divine conservation of the ordinary, natural course of things is comparable to the musician’s playing the music according to the written score as he has it before his mind. God’s causing a miracle is comparable to the musician temporarily departing from the score, as in the sort of improvisation characteristic of jazz. The musician hardly has to *force* the music to go in some way it wasn’t already going; *every* note, including the written ones that precede and follow the improvised ones, is produced by him. Still, the improvisation definitely adds to the score something that wasn’t already there, just as, in Fr. Ramelow’s words, a miracle goes “*beyond* nature” and “elevat[es] it to a higher power.” (Classical theists have long

had a fondness for Bach, but perhaps they should switch to John Coltrane or Thelonious Monk!)

Or we might think of the world as a movie and God as the director. The natural order of things, considered just by itself, is like the movie in the version originally released to theaters. The natural order of things together with miracles is like the “director’s cut” of the movie later released on DVD. Both versions are the work of the director, just like the natural order and miracles are both the work of God. But the “director’s cut” includes new material, perhaps even subplots and other scenes that dramatically alter the film, just as miracles dramatically alter the natural order of things. Or, to suggest one more analogy, the world might be compared to a story and God to the author of the story. The ordinary, natural course of things is like the story as it originally appeared, and miracles are like additions to the story made when it is republished in a second edition. If you’ll forgive my adding a science fiction example to my jazz example, we might say that the natural order is like Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* series as it originally appeared serially in *Astounding* magazine, and the natural order together with miracles is like the series as it appeared in the later book version, with new material added to the existing stories and followed up by various sequels and prequels which provide further context that dramatically alters the way we perceive the events that occurred in the original stories.

Now, in all of these examples -- a musical score as originally written, a movie in its original theatrical release version, a story as originally published -- we have artistic productions that are complete and perfect as far as they go. Just as adding

an improvisation, a new scene, or a new chapter is not necessarily a matter of correcting a defect in a piece of music, a film, or a novel, neither is a miracle essentially a matter of correcting some defect in nature. It is rather a matter of taking something that is already good and complete as far as it goes and raising it to an even higher level, just as a jazz improvisation, a director's cut, or a second edition of a book might take something that was already good and complete and make it even better. Again, this dovetails with Fr. Ramelow's description of a miracle as something that is "not *contrary* to nature [but] rather... *beyond* nature... in the sense of elevating it to a higher power."

Having said that, it does seem to me that, in light of my proposed analogies, one of Fr. Ramelow's own analogies is perhaps not entirely apt. At one point in his essay he writes:

Thus, encountering the miracle of the Resurrection is like finding the lost chapter of a novel that finally makes the plot meaningful, giving it unexpected significance and thereby showing itself to be part of the novel. (2014b, p. 350)

The trouble with this analogy, it seems to me, is that it suggests that nature by itself is imperfect or incomplete and that a miracle is the correction of a defect (though in fairness to Fr. Ramelow, he may not have intended to imply that). If that were the case, then a miracle would not really be "beyond" nature or "elevate" it to something higher, as Fr. Ramelow elsewhere says it does. Rather, it would merely bring nature up to the level it should already have been at from the start, as it were, by adding a missing piece. Nature would not be like a complete score to which an

improvisation is added, but like a score which is missing a page; it would not be like the theatrical release of a movie, but rather like a defective print of the original theatrical release which is missing scenes and is thus incoherent; it would not be like the first edition of a book which is complete as far as it goes, but rather like a defective copy of the book which is missing pages. Miracles would not be *supernatural* but would merely remedy certain privations in nature. So, it seems to me that the correct thing to say is, not that a miracle like the Resurrection “finally makes the plot meaningful” -- which makes it sound like the plot was otherwise incoherent or unintelligible -- but rather that while the plot was already meaningful as far as it went, a miracle like the Resurrection adds layers of meaning to the original plot that could not otherwise have been discerned.

In another respect too, it seems to me that Fr. Ramelow’s characterization of what a miracle is might be revised, or at least supplemented. Whether he is speaking of a miracle as something which is “not *contrary* to... [but] *beyond*” nature and “elevat[es]” it, or characterizing it as comparable to a “lost chapter,” Fr. Ramelow gives the impression that a miracle is always a matter of God’s *adding something to* nature, and never a matter of *taking something away*. But that does not seem to be correct. To be sure, the final cause of miracles, qua *supernatural*, is certainly to add something to the natural order. But the *means* by which a miracle does this need not involve an addition but could involve a subtraction. Hence, while the Resurrection certainly added something to the natural course of things, as do miracles like the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, a miracle like the one involving Daniel’s friends in the fiery furnace seems to involve a mere subtraction from the natural

order. It is what does *not* happen to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that is significant. They are not burnt, as they would have been had nature taken its course.

Now, how can this be if, as both Fr. Ramelow and I emphasize, a miracle is not a violation of a law of nature -- and indeed if, as I have said, such violations are metaphysically impossible? Doesn't the failure of the fire to burn Daniel's friends constitute just such a violation? It does not. As Oderberg argues, a miracle is properly construed not as a "breach" or violation of a law of nature, but rather as a "suspension" of such a law (2007, pp. 148-49). He draws an analogy with human positive law. God's bringing about a breach or violation of a law of nature would be comparable to a government leaving a law on the books but refraining from investigating or punishing violations of that law. A miracle is not like that. It is rather like a government's temporarily revoking a law, taking it off the books so that actions that would otherwise count as violations no longer so count.

To put the point in terms of the analogies proposed earlier, we might say that while a miracle like the Resurrection is like a musician adding something to the written score in an improvisation, a miracle like Daniel's friends failure to be burned by the fire is like the musician refraining from playing certain notes that were originally in the score. Or we might say it is like a director leaving out a key scene from the theatrical release from a movie, or a novelist leaving out a key passage that was originally intended for the book. Keep in mind that for the Thomist, a thing can operate at any instant only insofar as God conserves it in being at that instant and also concurs with its causal activity with it at that instant, imparting to it the causal

power by which it acts according to its nature. The sort of miracle that involves subtracting something from the natural order rather than adding something to it involves, not God *acting* in a special way but rather his *refraining from acting* as a conserving and concurring cause. In the case at hand, it is not that God conserves fire in being together with its preconditions (oxygen, etc.) and concurs with their causal activity, yet somehow causes this collection of factors to act in a way that is contrary to their natures. That would be a violation of a law of nature. Rather, he *refrains from* conserving in being and/or in concurring in the activity of some or all of the factors, so that the normal effect does not follow. That is a *suspension* rather than a violation of the natural order. It is not a case of God violently interfering with what he has brought about, but rather a case of his not bringing certain things about in the first place.

So, that is how I would propose supplementing Fr. Ramelow's account of what a miracle is. In light of what has been said so far, let me now more briefly address the other issues I raised at the beginning. Why is the evidence for miracles not more overwhelming, and why are miracles not more common? Fr. Ramelow suggests an answer to the first question when he writes:

No religion claims miracles more than Christianity... It is... better confirmed by its evidence than other religions; yet neither can and does God make this too manifest, because we would otherwise lose the challenge to *believe*. (2014b, p. 335, note 88)

Similarly, he suggests that God does not “make[e] the evidence *too* strong“ possibly because he “does not want to overpower our free response” (p. 358, note 152).

I think this is a common view of the matter, but it seems to me potentially problematic (though in fairness to Fr. Ramelow, his remarks are very brief and I want to be careful not to read too much into them). One problem with it is that there are some people, such as eyewitnesses to miracles, whose evidential situation prevents them from seriously doubting that a miracle really has occurred. Even Thomas, who doubted Christ’s Resurrection at first, could hardly have continued to doubt when he actually met the risen Christ in the flesh and put his fingers into the holes in Christ’s hands. For another thing, since we can know that a divine revelation really has occurred only if it is backed by miracles, we have to be able to know with certainty that the relevant miracles really have occurred. Otherwise the rational justification of the Faith will stand in jeopardy. The First Vatican Council seems to have had just this concern when it declared, in very strong language:

If anyone says...that miracles can never be known with certainty, nor can the divine origin of the Christian religion be proved from them: let him be anathema.

Mind you, I am not flinging an anathema at Fr. Ramelow, who I am sure agrees with this statement of the council! The point is rather just to emphasize that while I think he is correct to say that God always leaves room for us freely to respond to him, that freedom must be compatible with a very high degree of certainty about the occurrence of miracles.

I would propose that the reason the evidence for miracles is not more overwhelming is simply that miracles are not very common. Unlike the phenomena studied in the natural sciences, miracles don't involve regular and repeatable patterns, hypotheses about which may be tested via observation and experiment. Indeed, by their very nature they involve *deviations from* regular patterns. Naturally, then, they are not going to be knowable with the *kind* of certainty we get from well-confirmed theories in the natural sciences or general truths of metaphysics.

Now, that just raises the question of why miracles do not occur more frequently. Here I would propose that the reason is precisely so that their *supernatural* character is not obscured. Suppose miracles were as common as rain. Then the distinction between the miraculous and the natural course of things would be difficult or impossible for us to see. We might conclude that *everything* is a kind of miracle and adopt an essentially occasionalist view of God's relationship to the world, with all of its theological dangers, such as a tendency toward pantheism. Or we might instead conclude from the lack of regularity in the world that there is no rhyme or reason to it, which might lead us to a kind of Humean skepticism or even atheism. Either way, that there is a *natural order* of things would no longer be evident, and as a consequence, that there is a *supernatural* order of things would also no longer be evident. Either *everything* would seem to be supernatural or *nothing* would. A much greater frequency of miracles would, in short and to borrow a phrase used by Pope Pius XII in a very different context, "destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order" (*Humani Generis* 26). Thus, to preserve the clarity of the distinction of the natural and the supernatural, God must not cause miracles too

frequently, and therefore we must not be surprised that the kind of certainty we can have that they do sometimes occur is not the kind we can have vis-à-vis scientific findings.

Finally, can an appeal to miracles form the basis for an independent argument for the existence of God? Or do we need first to know that God exists in order to establish the occurrence of a miracle? Fr. Ramelow briefly touches on this issue (2014b, p. 342), and seems to leave the matter open. Now, it is of course possible that someone in fact happens to come to believe in the existence of God on the basis of a miracle, especially if it is one that he has himself witnessed. I don't deny that that can occur and that it can be rational. But could a true *demonstration* of God's existence -- that is to say, an argument with the kind of force Aquinas intends his Five Ways to have -- proceed from considerations about purported miracles that have happened in the past? For example, could the contemporary Christian apologist plausibly make of Christ's Resurrection a standalone argument for the existence of God, suitable for convincing the philosophically sophisticated but open-minded atheist reader to change his mind?

Here I am inclined to be very skeptical. The problem is not that a great deal of metaphysical background work would have to be done in order to make an argument from miracles plausible. That is true, but it is also true of what I think are the best arguments for God's existence. For instance, adequately to defend Aquinas's Five Ways requires, in my view, that one also set out and defend the Aristotelian theory of act and potency, hylemorphism, the reality of final causality, and so forth. The

problem is rather that to make an argument from miracles plausible, a great deal of *specifically theological* background work has to be done. One has to give an account of what a miracle is, and to do that properly requires an understanding of the Scholastic notions of divine conservation and concurrence, which in turn requires an understanding of the notions of causality operative in arguments like the First Way and the Second Way. One has to make it plausible that God would cause a miracle in the first place, which requires an account of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural and of divine providence. One has to make it plausible that, even given all this background, it is overwhelmingly more likely that the explanation of a purported bizarre historical event is that it was a miracle caused by God rather than that the witnesses got things wrong, or the story has been fabricated, or what have you. Now, it seems to me that to do all this background work will in effect require setting out all the key ingredients for arguments like the First, Second, and Fifth Ways, and perhaps even the arguments themselves. Most of the work required to argue for God's existence will already have been done before one even gets to the miracle claim. In that case the miracle claim does not add much if anything to the argument for God's existence. (Of course, it adds a great deal to an argument for *Christianity*, specifically, but that's a different matter.)

This is no doubt why, in some older Neo-Scholastic works on natural theology, the treatment of miracles comes only after the arguments for God's existence and attributes, the nature of divine conservation and concurrence, the notion of divine providence, and so on, have already been laid out. (See e.g. McCormick 1943.) Appeals to miracles are crucial for specifically *Christian* apologetics -- they are the

bridge from natural theology to specifically Christian theology -- but, it seems to me, they are not suitable for purposes of general natural theology itself.

Dodds on God and life

Let me now turn to Fr. Dodds' paper "The God of Life, the Science of Life, and the Problem of Language." Fr. Dodds discusses, among other things, the various attempts made by modern scientists to provide a definition of life, and the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity illuminates the idea that there is life in God. One suggestion I would like to make is that the Scholastic metaphysical distinction between the *essence* of a thing and a thing's *properties* helps to illuminate both of these issues. I will also remark upon the question, briefly touched on by Fr. Dodds, 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.

First, let me elaborate upon the Aristotelian notion of life as entailing a kind of self-movement. By "motion" or "movement," of course, the Aristotelian does not have in mind change of spatial location (or "local motion"), at least not exclusively or even primarily. Any actualization of a potency counts as motion, and in the Aristotelian tradition this includes not just local motion but qualitative and quantitative change and, at least in an extended sense of "motion," changes of substance. Now, it might seem that this definition of life is too broad. For don't certain kinds of machines that we would not want to count as alive move or change

themselves? (Think of an automatic coffee maker which will turn itself on at a certain time in the morning, or a computer which automatically downloads program updates.)

To understand what is wrong with this objection it is useful to keep in mind that for Aristotelians, the self-motion characteristic of living things is to be understood in terms of the distinction between *immanent* causation and *transient* (or “transeunt”) causation, to which Fr. Dodds makes reference in his paper (2014, p. 222). A transient causal process is one that terminates in something other than the agent. A loose boulder’s rolling down a hill and knocking into another boulder, which in turn knocks into a parked car and dents it, would be an example of such a causal process. An immanent causal process is one that terminates within the agent and tends toward the agent’s flourishing or perfection. A snake’s digesting a mouse it has eaten would be an example of such a causal process. Both living and non-living things exhibit transient causation, but only living things also exhibit immanent causal processes (Koren 1955, pp. 18-20; Donceel 1961, pp. 26-28).

Indeed, the irreducibility of immanent causal processes to transient causal processes marks, on the Aristotelian view, the fundamental difference between the organic and the inorganic, and is the key to defining life. (David Oderberg has recently defended this traditional definition of life and the irreducibility of immanent to transient causation. Cf. Oderberg 2007, chapter 8, and 2013.) When we add to this account the Aristotelian distinction between substantial form and accidental form, we can see how machines differ from living things. Coffee makers, computers,

and the like have merely accidental rather than substantial forms. That entails that their distinctive teleological features, including any tendency toward self-perfective behavior, are not intrinsic to them but are imposed from outside by human artificers. *In themselves* they are nothing more than aggregates of parts exhibiting purely transient causation, and the immanent causation they appear to exhibit is entirely observer-relative, deriving from the purposes to which the artificers and users of these devices happen to put them. Plants, animals, and human beings, by contrast, have substantial forms rather than merely accidental forms. Their characteristic teleological features, including their tendencies toward the self-perfective behavior definitive of immanent causation and thus of life, are *intrinsic* to them rather than observer-relative or mere appearance. Hence they are truly alive, whereas machines of the sort in question merely behave as if they were alive.

Now, the Aristotelian tradition goes on to propose that there are in the material world three irreducibly different forms of life. First there is vegetative or plant life, which is characterized by the capacities for nutrition, growth, and reproduction. Second, there is animal life, which like vegetative life involves nutrition, growth, and reproduction but adds to these its own distinctive capacities, namely sensation, appetite, and locomotion. Finally, there is human life, which includes all the basic capacities of vegetative and animal life -- nutrition, growth, reproduction, sensation, appetite, and locomotion -- and adds to them the distinctive human capacities for intellectual activity and volitional action.

Like every other substance, plants, animals, and human beings each have an essence, and on the standard Scholastic view, the essence of a thing is to be distinguished from its properties. A “property,” as that term is used in Scholastic metaphysics, is a “proper accident” of a thing, an accident that *flows* or follows from its essence. For example, the essence of a human being is to be a rational animal, and a capacity for language is a property of rational animals. A capacity for language is *not* the *essence* or even *part of* the essence of rational animals; rather, it *follows upon* being a rational animal. It is possible that the exercise of that capacity might be frustrated in some particular human being -- by brain damage, for example -- but that wouldn't make him any less a rational animal. It would just mean that one of the properties that would normally flow from his rational animality has been blocked, as a dam blocks the flow of a river. (See Feser 2014, pp. 23-35 for more detailed discussion of this distinction.)

Now one of the ways the distinction between essence and properties might be applied to the issues raised in Fr. Dodds' paper concerns the attempts contemporary scientists have made to define life. As Fr. Dodds recounts, the variety of proposed definitions is very wide, and there is not only a lack of consensus on any proposed definition, but even skepticism among many that an adequate definition is even possible. Reproduction, the capacity to evolve, enclosure within some kind of membrane, being constituted of elements such as water and carbon, metabolism, and other features or combinations of features have all been proposed as definitive of life. I would suggest that a problem with such definitions, and one reason why agreement about any of them has been so hard to achieve, is that they all overlook

the distinction between essence and properties. They focus on features that are indeed closely related to the essence of living things because they flow from that essence, but which are not themselves the essence. In particular, they focus on features that follow from a thing's being capable of immanent causation. Since there are many such features, it can falsely come to seem that any attempt to define the essence of life would have to include an unwieldy and inelegant conjunction of features; since the manifestation of a feature can sometimes be blocked, it can falsely come to seem that the feature has nothing to do with the essence of life after all. If it were realized that these are *properties* of life in the technical Scholastic sense, then both sorts of conclusion would be avoidable. It would be clear how finding a simple and elegant characterization of the essence of life is compatible with there being so many features common to diverse kinds of living thing, and it would be clear how such features could be so closely related to the essence even if they are not in every case manifested.

There is also the problem, though, that the properties contemporary scientists focus on are really properties not even of life *as such*, but rather of life as it exists in material substances. An immaterial or angelic substance whose characteristic activities were purely intellectual would also thereby exhibit immanent or self-perfective causation, and it would accordingly be alive, even though it would not be composed of water and carbon, or be enclosed within a membrane, or have a metabolism, or what have you. Even the vegetative functions common to plants, animals, and human beings are not really essential to life as such, but rather only to corporeal forms of life.

Another possible application of the distinction between essence and properties to our subject concerns the attribution of life to God. As Fr. Dodds emphasizes, if we can attribute life to God, as the Thomist says that we can, then we have to understand such language in an *analogical* rather than univocal way, since God has neither the corporeal nor even the angelic limitations that other living things have. But it might seem that life cannot be attributed to God even analogically. For in what sense could the self-motion definitive of life exist in God? Fr. Dodds emphasizes the way in which the procession of divine Persons within the Trinity can illuminate the sense in which there is something like self-motion in God. But this raises the question of whether life is a divine attribute which can be known only via revelation rather than natural reason. For God's Trinitarian nature is knowable only through revelation. So if God's having life is intelligible only in terms of the Trinity, then it would seem that his having life is knowable only via revelation and cannot be part of natural theology. Yet Aquinas and Thomists following him *have* regarded life as an attribute of God knowable through natural reason via purely philosophical arguments. For we can know via such arguments that there is something analogous to intellect and will in God, and intellect and will involve the self-perfective movement that is definitive of life.

Perhaps the distinction between essence and properties can help us understand what is going on here. To be sure, it cannot be said that there is a real distinction between essence and properties in God, given that God is absolutely simple or non-composite. But 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. Since intellect and will are properties of a certain kind of life, the philosophical arguments tell us *that* life is of the essence of God. But revelation alone can tell us something of *what* that life consists in.

There is still the question of how the self-motion or self-perfection definitive of life, whether we think of it in Trinitarian terms or not, could exist in God given that he is the *unmoved* mover and *uncaused* cause. For God is pure actuality devoid of potentiality. So how could there be in him anything even analogous to self-movement or self-perfective immanent causation? Wouldn't these entail the actualization of potential, and thus be impossible to attribute to him? Mustn't we think of a purely actual unmovable mover as lifeless?

In fact this does not follow, any more than it follows from the fact that infinity is not a number that it is less than the number one. If life involves the self-perfective actualization of potencies, then something lifeless would be something with *unactualized* potencies, *imperefection*. What is "always already" purely actual and thus infinitely perfect is hardly that. On the contrary, it would be supremely alive, as Fr. Dodds notes (2014, p. 223, note 62). As pure actuality, God is not passive or in repose, as something lifeless or dead might be said to be, but precisely the opposite, supremely *active*. When we say he does not have life in the same sense we do but in an analogous sense, we don't mean that he has *less* than what we have in having life, but rather that he has something that is *more* than what we have.

So, those are some ways in which I would suggest revising and extending what Fr. Ramelow and Fr. Dodds have had to say in their fine and stimulating papers. I will now brace myself for their suggestions about how I might revise or extend what I have had to say!

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