

ETHICS 1

I. INTRODUCTION

Theme 2: *The levels of life*

a) Inanimate (non-living) objects

- Objects that have no life. What do we observe about them? How do we distinguish them from living beings?
- They do not move
- They do not grow
- They do not reproduce
- They do not feel and react
- They do not know or want
- They EXIST = are real
- They have a particular way of being = they are something: a stone, a car, etc...

b) What is life?

- We can understand the concept of life by observing the activity of living things and comparing it with the behaviour of non living things;
- For Aristotle, a living thing is characterized by self-nutrition, growth and decay;
- St. Thomas Aquinas adds: some living things can sense and think; they can move themselves and they can reproduce or procreate
- Another feature: unlike purely material things, a living being is an organized being; it is made up of different parts which are orderly arranged among themselves
 - ✓ For example: a thorn tree has roots, stem (stalk), leaves and branches;
 - ✓ The whole diversified structure gives rise to a harmonious group of functions which operate making the thing be perfect
- We still need to go deeper into what separates a living thing from a non-living thing. A superficial look at living things shows that they have a certain spontaneity or interiority not found in other things.

- ✓ For example: an animal moves from place to place by its own initiative or power; if a stone moves, it is because it is being pushed from outside by someone or something else;
- ✓ So we can say that the power to move itself, by itself, distinguishes the living being from the non-living thing;
- ✓ Here we understand “movement” in very broad terms
- “Life is essentially that by which a thing is able to move itself, taking the word ‘movement’ in a wide sense, so that even the operation of the intellect can be called ‘movement’. For those things that can be moved only by an exterior principle are said to be without life” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *In II De Anima*, lect. 1, no. 219)
- A living thing can move itself. What does this mean?
 - ✓ It suggests that there is some inner impulse that characterizes living things; it has the principle or source of its activity within itself
 - ✓ When the living thing is stimulated by its external surroundings, it reacts by its own initiative and power to act in an ever more individual and personal way according to the type of activity it carries out
 - ✓ When we say that the living being ‘moves itself’, we also mean that it is the object and term of its own activity; that is, the thing moves or acts (source), for its own advantage, seeking to sustain its being and to develop more fully (goal, object, term)
 - ✓ In some way, their activity remains within them; it leaves a mark on them and this is referred to as ‘immanence’
- When Thomas Aquinas deals with this matter, he tends to determine the kinds of life according to the degree of immanence found in the different operations of life, or the greater or lesser degree of interiority underlying the activity of the living being
 - ✓ That is, the extent to which the activity of the living thing remains within it or leaves a “mark” on the thing that acts
- It is commonly agreed that there are three basic kinds of living things found in nature: vegetables, animals and humans
 - ✓ These give rise to a threefold degree of life (three degrees of life): vegetative life in plants, sensitive life in animals and intellectual life in man

- ✓ The lower degrees of this hierarchy are contained in the higher (animal life includes vegetative life: human life includes vegetative and animal life)
- This brings us to the problem of the soul. Man has always been struck by the fact that certain beings in nature distinguish themselves from others by an organization that is remarkably unified and by a behaviour that is original and utterly unlike that of other beings
 - ✓ Naturally, man wondered what was the source of this unity. Could these qualities be explained by such beings having an intrinsic, invisible principle, a soul?
- In general, the term soul means a principle of life; here we use the word soul in its broadest sense; in this context, it means or refers to the first, innermost principle of life
 - ✓ We are not just looking at evident elements that form part of living beings, such as the heart or the intellect; we are trying to reach the ultimate, intrinsic explanation of the dynamic force and energy that characterize living things;
 - ✓ “To seek the nature of the soul, we must premise that the soul is defined as the first principle of life in those things which live” (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 75, a. 1)
 - ✓ Here we will be speaking about the soul in the most general sense as a principle common to all living beings: plants, animals and man
- c) Vegetative life: these beings, by their very nature, have in themselves the form (type) and end of their movement; they act as mere instruments of execution in terms of movement
 - ✓ They move according to the way they are made: a plant can be blown by the wind; a tree can grow upwards;
 - ✓ But the plant or tree cannot move itself at “will”; based on their nature, they can only grow and decay
- The more perfect a nature, the more interior will be whatever originates from it; that is, what comes from within the thing, will also remain within it
 - ✓ In the case of plants, there is some emanation; that is, there is something which has its origin within the plant however, it does not remain within the plant;

- ✓ The plant produces a seed; however, eventually the seed that come out of the plant will become entirely separate from the parent plant and exist on its own, no longer within the original plant;
- ✓ It may also be said that the original source of this emanation is external; it comes thanks to the nourishment that the plant receives through its roots from the earth
- Vegetative life is the lowest degree of life; it manifests itself in birth, self-nourishment, growth, generation and decay; these can be resumed as nutrition, growth and generation
- Nutrition: this is necessary for living things, plants, to continue to live, otherwise, they will die
 - ✓ The immediate purpose of nutrition is preservation of life; it also further permits growth and generation;
 - ✓ Nutrition involves the conversion of food into the substance of the plant;
 - ✓ So the plant, living being, assimilates and makes its own another substance and so the plant preserves its own being and is able to exercise other activities; so the food is actually transformed into the plant in the digestive process
 - ✓ And this process of digestion is immanent; it remains within the plant
- Growth: living things do not reach their full development in one stroke; their natural height, for example, does not appear at once; they grow and increase in height by degrees until they reach a maximum point that seems to correspond to their complete development
 - ✓ What actually grows is the quantity of the living thing; it grows in size or quantity of material and, at the same time, acquires its full size and the full development of its powers;
 - ✓ This process of growth is immanent; it has its principle or source and its goal or end in the living plant itself.
- Generation: as well as self-nourishment and the attainment of their full development, living things also have the power to generate; that is, to produce another being of their own specific kind
 - ✓ In one sense, generation is the end point or term of the other operations of vegetative life: nourishment and growth; they prepare the way for generation;

- ✓ Generation is a perfection in that it involves transmitting one's being, to give oneself, to another similar being;
 - ✓ Generation also permits the continuation of the species, which endures although the individual plant cannot live forever;
 - ✓ To remedy this imperfection and survive by proxy, the individual plant imparts its nature to others that will continue its survival;
 - ✓ "Generation signifies the origin of a living being from a conjoined living principle by way of similitude in the same specific nature" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 27, a. 2.)
 - ✓ A new living plant comes from the union between two pre-existing plants, being similar and having the same nature
- In summary: nutrition is the basic function, presupposed by the other two. Growth completes nutrition and the end of both is generation, in which vegetative life receives its culmination
- d) Animal life (sensitive life):** these beings do not determine their own end (that is given by nature); they acquire through themselves the forms governing their activities; these forms are the sensible representations that cause them to move themselves
- ✓ The principle of movement here is not only written on their nature; they can also move as a response to what they can sense or feel;
 - ✓ "Yet although animals sense the form that is the principle of their movement, nevertheless they cannot of themselves propose to themselves the end of their operations or movements (their goal); for this has been implanted in them by nature; and by natural instinct they are moved to any action through the form apprehended by the sense" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 18, 3)
- Thanks to their higher degree of life, due to the sensitive soul, some of the emanation from the animal remains really immanent (inside it)
- ✓ For example, the sensory form impressed on the external senses proceeds to the imagination, from where it is conveyed to and stored in the memory;
 - ✓ However, the source of the sensation (external senses) is distinct from the end (internal senses; memory) because the senses cannot reflect on themselves

- In terms of nutrition, the animal also nourishes itself through the assimilation of food;
- Growth: the animal also grows in size and quantity; it involves material or physical development or increase of matter
- Generation: animal reproduction involves the same principles as vegetative generation => a new living being proceeding from the union of two previous living beings, with a similar nature
- The source of life in the animals is the sensitive soul; observation of this type of life shows the existence of three basic types of faculties in this soul: sense knowledge; sense appetite and the faculty of locomotion
- Sense knowledge or sensation: this arises due to the immediate contact of material objects with the senses
 - ✓ The external senses are moved directly by material, sensible objects: for example, putting one's hand in the fire, you can feel, sense through the sense of touch, the heat of the fire as your hand gets burned;
 - ✓ The internal senses are moved by, can sense through, the information supplied to them by the external senses: for example, I can imagine a car based on the information I receive about it through the eyes, the ears, the sense of touch, etc.
 - ✓ So sense knowledge, or sensation, is a consequence of some object acting on an internal or external sense which is somehow passive;
 - ✓ As a result of sensation, that sense is altered either materially or in a non-material manner; this alteration involves the reception by the sense organ of information about what it has entered into contact with; this sensation therefore gives rise to "knowledge"
- Sense appetite: as well as acts of knowledge (acquiring information), animals also experience a great variety of acts and responses that belong to another order: desires, feelings, inclinations, etc.
 - ✓ This brings us to understand that, over and above the knowing faculties, there are other faculties which we can call appetitive and affective;
 - ✓ The term "appetitive" expresses the fact that these faculties involve the act of tending towards something (a sense object);
 - ✓ The term "affective" reflects how the appetite reacts to the object; either by approaching it (tending towards it) or by rejecting it (retreating from it)

- ✓ We can distinguish appetites that are moved by simple sense knowledge through activating any of the external or internal senses (sensitive appetites) and those that are moved by intellectual knowledge through concepts or ideas formed by the intellect (intellectual appetite)
- ✓ The activation of these appetites can give rise to different types of acts that, in general, we may call feelings, desires, passions, or wanting, etc.
- ✓ So, for example, a dog that is beaten will sense the stick falling on him with force and he will react by making a noise (yelping, barking) and perhaps by attacking the person or object causing the pain
- ✓ All this will be discussed in more detail in the context of human life
- The Faculty of Locomotion: Some animals move about spontaneously. Can this movement be explained by the vegetative or sensory powers that we have studied?
 - ✓ We can dismiss the vegetative powers because not even the nutritive power in itself can explain this movement in itself;
 - ✓ The local movement of animals from place to place seems to be the result of an awareness of the end;
 - ✓ This awareness of the end (why it is moving), presupposes the intervention of certain sensory experiences, representations and desires; these are not to be found in plants and this is partly the reason why they cannot move themselves from one place to another;
 - ✓ Sensation (be it caused by the external or internal senses or the appetites) may resolve the issue up to a certain point in animals at least
 - ✓ There can be movement as a reaction to heat, to an image or to a feeling or a desire; however, these are not enough to explain movement; to actually be able to move based on these sensations (and or ideas in the case of man), there needs to be some special potency located in the motor structures of the organism
 - ✓ A paralytic (or a wounded animal), in whom this potency is disabled, finds it impossible to move from place to place, though his desire may be as strong and his motor images as vivid as in any other person's (or animal's) case
 - ✓ "If the animal is to move itself locally, it not only needs to be directed by these higher faculties, such as knowledge and appetite, but it also needs to

have and to actuate a special organic power that is the direct instrument of initiating such movements in the members as will result in a change of place” (H.D. Gardeil, *Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. III. Psychology*, p. 85).

e) Human life:

- As we mentioned before, each level of life includes the previous or lower level of life.
- In the case of man, we find vegetative life which involves nutrition, growth and reproduction
- We also find sensitive life or animal life which involves sense knowledge (sensation) and sense appetites (desiring, etc.) as well as the capacity of locomotion
- However, over and above vegetative and sensitive life and activity, man also possesses a still higher degree of life that, in general terms, may be described as intellectual life
- At the intellectual level, there are two basic kinds of activity: similar to the activity involving knowledge and appetite at the level of sensitive life;
- The two great kinds of activity at the intellectual level of life are those of knowing and wanting which are rooted in man’s two spiritual faculties: the intellect (knowledge) and the will (wanting or loving)
- As the intellect and the will are spiritual (non-material) and give rise to spiritual activities (knowing and loving), the principle of human life is called not just the soul (general life-giving principle), but rather, the spiritual soul which is the source of the higher, more perfect level of life that we find in the human being
- The human being, due to his intellect and will, is capable of determining his end and wanting it, thereby moving himself to obtain that goal moved by love