

AN ARISTOTELIAN-THOMISTIC DISCUSSION OF THE DEFINITION OF LIFE

Marie George*

Department of Philosophy, St. John's University, Queens, NY 11439, USA

Abstract

Many deny or doubt that life can be defined.

Keywords

Aristotelian • aquinas • definition of life

Many deny or doubt that life can be defined. For example, biochemist W. S. Beck affirms: '[virologist Norman] Pirie is correct: "life is beyond rigorous definition."' ¹ Philosopher of science, Jean Gayon maintains: 'recognition of "life" has always been and remains primarily an intuitive process However, we should not expect, then, to be able to draw a definition from this original experience, because our cognitive apparatus has not been primarily designed for this.' ² Biology textbooks typically do not propose a general definition of life, but rather point to certain properties of living things, such as metabolism. ³ When scientists were asked what life is in a survey made in 2000, the most common answers were in terms of self-maintenance, reproduction, and the ability to evolve, sometimes proposed separately and sometimes in combination. ⁴

What I intend to do is to lay out the view of Aristotle and Aquinas. Aristotle defines life as the capacity for self-motion: 'It is impossible to say that their motion [i.e., of light and heavy bodies] is derived from themselves: this is a characteristic of life and peculiar to living things.' ⁵ Aquinas, in his commentary on this passage, agrees with Aristotle: 'to move itself belongs to the notion of life and belongs properly to the animate; for we discern the living from the non-living by motion and sensation, as is said in *De Anima*, Bk. 1.' ⁶ It is our shared experience that living things, such as squirrels, see and move themselves from one place to another, whereas non-living things, dead or other, do not. While not all living things move themselves in the obvious ways that squirrels do, they all move themselves in some manner, such as by growing. (Plants move very slowly when they grow. If one is absent for some period, however, it becomes noticeable that they've extended themselves to places where they previously were not).

An especially helpful passage in Aquinas concerning life is found in his commentary on the section of *On the Soul* where

notes that this definition was developed by NASA in 1992. Tom Waddell, 53: 'I would say matter is "living" if: -it is able to reproduce itself (even in an inexact fashion). -it is able to extract energy from its environment and use that energy for biosynthesis, motion, and/or active transport. -it is able to evolve (debatable....)'.

⁵ Aristotle. Chap 4: *Physics*. In: McKeon R. (ed.), Hare RP, Gaye RK. (Trans.) *The basic works of Aristotle*, New York: Random House; 1968. Bk. 8, 255a6–7.

⁶ Aquinas. In: Pirotta AM. (ed.) *Octo Libros de Physico Auditio Commentaria*. Naples: M. D'Auria Pontificus Editor; 1953. Bk. 8, lec. 7, no. 2158. (All translations of Aquinas are mine.)

¹ Beck WS. *Modern science and the nature of life*. New York; 1957. p.186.

² Gayon J. Defining life: synthesis and conclusions. *Origin of Life and Evolution of Biospheres*. 2010;40(2): 231.

³ See, for example, Fowler S, Roush R, and Wise J. *Concepts of biology*. 2013; web version updated, 2024, Available from: <https://openstax.org/details/books/concepts-biology>, 1: 'From its earliest beginnings, biology has wrestled with four questions: What are the shared properties that make something "alive"? ... All groups of living organisms share several key characteristics or functions: order, sensitivity or response to stimuli, reproduction, adaptation, growth and development, regulation/homeostasis, energy processing, and evolution. When viewed together, these eight characteristics serve to define life'.

⁴ See Pályi G, Zucchi C, Caglioti L. (eds.) *Fundamentals of life*. New York: Elsevier; 2002, 'Short definitions of life', p.15–56. Here are a couple of samples. Gerald Joyce, 37: 'LIFE is a self-sustained chemical system capable of undergoing Darwinian evolution'. Joyce

* Corresponding author e-mail: georgem@stjohns.edu

Aristotle defines the soul. Aristotle, in determining the soul's proper subject, sets out three divisions. In the third division he distinguishes the living from the non-living thus: 'But of natural bodies some have life and some have not; by life we mean the capacity for self-sustenance, growth, and decay.'⁷ Aquinas comments:

The third division, which is of natural bodies, is that certain have life and certain do not. Something is said to have life which through itself has nutrition, growth, and diminution. It ought to be known, however, that this explanation is more through the mode of example than through the mode of definition. For something lives not only from having growth and diminution but also from sensing and understanding and being able to exercise other works of life. Whence, in separated substances, life exists due to the fact that they have intellect and will, as is manifest from book eleven of the *Metaphysics*, although there is no growth and nutrition in them.⁸ But because in generable and corruptible things, the soul, which is in plants, to which belong nutrition and growth (as is said at the end of the first book), is the principle of life, therefore, here he expounds .having life. by way of example, as it were, as what has nutrition and growth. The proper notion of life, however, arises from the fact that something is apt to move itself, taking motion in the broad sense, according as intellectual operation is also called a certain motion. For we say that things are without life which can only move due to an exterior principle.⁹

Aristotle cannot be defining life by nutrition and growth for he both attributes life to God¹⁰ and maintains that God is an immaterial being,¹¹ one that cannot engage in nutrition or growth.¹² This why Aquinas says that in defining life, motion is to be taken 'in the broad sense,' one that embraces immaterial life activities as well as bodily ones.

7 On the Soul. Bk. 2, Chap. 1, 412a14–16 (translation of W. S. Hett in the Loeb edition). Hereafter cited as OS.

8 The correct reference is *Metaphysics*, Bk. 12, Chap. 5.

9 Angeli PF, Pirotta M. (eds.) *Aristotelis Librum De Anima Commentarium*. Italy: Marietti; 1959. Bk. 2, lec. 1, no. 219. Hereafter cited as DA.

10 See Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Bk. 12, Chap. 7, 1072b27 (translation mine): 'For the actuality of mind is life, and God is that actuality'. See *Metaphysics*. Bk. 12, Chap. 7, 1072b15 (translation of H. Tredennick in the Loeb edition): 'And its life [the life of first principle upon which depend the heavens and the world of nature] is like the best which we temporarily enjoy. It must be in that state always ... since its actuality is also pleasure'.

11 See *Metaphysics*. Bk. 12, Chap. 7, 1073a3–12.

12 Sarah Byers is mistaken in her claim that for Aristotle self-motion exclusively 'meant the capacity for self-induced alteration (qualitative movement)'. See Life as 'Self-Motion': descartes and 'the Aristotelians,' on the soul as the life of the body. *The Review of Metaphysics*. 2006;59: 723, 730, and 746.

Motion in the strict sense involves imperfection.¹³ For example, the dog walking to its food dish gets closer and closer to the dish while not being there. And the skin of a person who is tanning gets darker and darker but is not yet fully tanned. Motion in the broad sense includes acts of things insofar as the things are perfect and not lacking, as is the case when they sense and understand.¹⁴ When one senses, for example, sees yellow, one does not do so gradually, as if partly seeing and partly not seeing, but does so immediately.¹⁵ There is a motion in the sense of a change from sensing in potency to sensing in act; however, this operation does not become more perfect over time, for example, one does not see the yellow of the banana one is gazing at any better at a later moment than from the first moment one saw it. This goes hand-in-hand with the fact that unlike true motions which all involve some loss (e.g., the skin loses its whiteness in tanning), sensing and understanding involve perfection without any loss.¹⁶ Ignorance is a privation; it is not something that exists in act that is lost when one senses or learns.

Note, however, that sensing has a relation to true motion. When one opens one's eyes upon waking in a dimly lit place, one gradually discerns the features of objects, and this is due to a motion in the strict sense, namely, of one's pupils, which open wider to let in more light. This does not occur, however, when there is adequate light. That there are elements of motion in the strict sense attached to sensing is because sensing requires a physical interaction between what is able to be sensed and the sense organ, and this in turn requires determinate physical conditions.¹⁷

13 Aristotle defines motion as 'the act of the potential insofar as it is potential' (*Physics*, Bk. 3, chap 1, 201a10, translation mine). As Aquinas notes, 'since everything in potency, insofar as it is such, is imperfect, therefore motion [from contrary to contrary] is the act of the imperfect' (DA, Bk. 3, lec. 12, no. 766).

14 See OS, Bk. 3, Chap. 6, 431a5-7 and DA, Bk. 3, lec. 12, nos. 765-66.

15 *Scriptum Super Sententiis*, Bk. 4, d. 17, q. 1, a. 5, qc. 3, ad 1: 'For there is motion that is the act of the imperfect, which is a going forth from potency to act; and it is necessary that such motion be successive, as always awaiting something in the future for the perfection of its species, because part of the motion is other in kind from the whole motion ... as is obvious in alteration from the motion which is to whiteness, part of which motion is to a middle color differing in species, if taken separately. Another motion is the act of the perfect, which is rather called "activity" (operatio), which does not await some completion of its species in the future, e.g., to sense; and such a motion is not successive but sudden'. See also, DA, Bk. 3, lec. 12, no. 766.

16 See DA, Bk. 2, lec. 11, no. 369.

17 See *Super Sententiis*, Bk. 4, d. 49, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 3: 'Operation is not measured by time except according as it is connected to motion'.

Aristotle and Aquinas maintain that intellectual understanding more perfectly fits the description of a motion that is the act of the perfect, as it does not involve an organ or any physical change.¹⁸ The activity of the intellect is only called a motion in a qualified way, insofar as the intellect 'goes from understanding in potency to understanding act.'¹⁹

For our authors, life is an analogous word. Self-motion is not said univocally of plant, animal, and human.²⁰ The more a living being is in act and the less potential it is, the more alive it is.²¹ In the case of God, self-motion only applies in an extremely extended sense; all that is left of the notion of motion is act.²²

It is understandable that scientists would propose a definition of life that would be limited to material things, given the method of science involves observation. As Aquinas notes: 'Of substances, certain ones are bodies, and certain ones are not bodies. Among substances, the most manifest are

18 See OS, Bk. 3, Chap. 4, 429a29–b4.

19 DA, Bk. 1, lec. 10, no. 160.

20 Some of the scientists surveyed in *Fundamentals of Life* say things that indicate that they too see that life is an analogous word. For example, physicist Gideon Gilat observes (p.31): 'The term "life" was invented many thousands of years ago and it covers many forms and modes of life. I believe that in order to try to define them it may be first necessary to label these different modes by different terms. For example, a tree and a cat are both "living" creatures but their modes of life are very different. Do you believe that it may be possible to include them under the same definition?' And chemist David Soriano affirms (p.51): 'I would define life as the ability of an organism to formulate questions. Using this criterion, cats, dogs, etc., would not be alive'. A dog is obviously a living thing. Its mode of life, however, is radically different from that of humans.

21 See DA, Bk. 2, lec. 5, no. 283: 'There is a difference in being in these two cases. For according to material being, which is constricted by matter, each thing is only what it is, as this is rock is not something other than this rock, whereas according to immaterial being, which is more ample and in a certain manner infinite, insofar as it is not bounded by matter, a thing is not only what it is but in a certain manner is other things'. A plant is never more than a plant, whereas the animal that is sensing and the human who is understanding, in addition to being itself, is in some sense the thing sensed and understood. See also DA, Bk. 3, lec. 13, nos. 787–90 and *De veritate*, q. 2 a. 2.

22 See Aquinas, *Sententia Metaphysicae*, Bk. 12, lec. 8, n. 9 (no. 2544, Marietti edition): 'He [Aristotle] says that God is life itself. He shows this in this manner: The act of the intellect, that is understanding, is a certain life, and is the most perfect thing in life. For act, as has been shown, is more perfect than potency. Whence the intellect in act lives more perfectly than the intellect in potency, as the one awake than the one sleeping. But that first being, namely God, is act itself. For his intellect is his understanding. Otherwise, it would stand to him as potency to act. It was shown above, however, that his substance is act. Whence it remains that the very substance of God is life, and his act is the best and eternal life of himself, a life which is subsistent of itself'. Aquinas is commenting on Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. 12, Chap. 8, 1074b25–27.

bodily substances. For incorporeal substances are remote from the senses and are only investigable by reason.'²³ In so short a space, I am unable to present Aristotle and Aquinas's arguments for the unmoved mover or for the immateriality of the rational soul. Nevertheless, scientists and others who try to define life solely in terms of bodily activities need to be aware they are making a questionable assumption about the nature of life.

In addition to remaining open to the possibility that there exist life forms that do not have nutrition or some other bodily activity, the broad scope of the Aristotelian definition eliminates the concerns of those who think that a definition of life might fail to cover extraterrestrial life, if such was to be discovered. Biologist Imre Friedmann maintains: '[A] universal definition of life should help to recognize it when we find it on Mars, or elsewhere in the Universe. But we know only one kind of life, our terrestrial life, and from a single data point cannot validly extrapolate and arrive at a universal definition.'²⁴ Would Friedmann deny that lifeless things on Mars or elsewhere are going to be those that can only move due to an exterior principle, while those that are alive will move themselves in some way? It is true that it might be hard to figure out that a given being is performing a life activity. That doesn't mean that the definition of life is flawed. This is illustrated by the case of viruses. Detailed investigations are required in order to determine whether any of them *move themselves* to any activity.

Why haven't scientists adopted Aristotle's definition? There are a variety of reasons. To name some of them: Scientists often ignore or dismiss Aristotle's natural philosophy.²⁵ Some

23 DA, Bk. 2, lec. 1, no. 217. Aristotle would agree that nutrition is essential for life *in mortal beings*; see OS, Bk. 2, Chap. 2, 413a31–33: 'This power of self-nutrition can be isolated from the other powers mentioned, but not they from them – in mortal beings at least. ... This is the originative power the possession of which leads us to speak of things as *living* at all'.

24 Friedmann I. *Fundamentals of life*. 30. See also, Eirich FR, *ibid.*, 27: 'The difficulty for arriving at a comprehensive definition of life lies ... in the fact that we know only one type of life, ours. ... [W]hich type of life do we want to define? Life in general? This is obviously impossible, since we do not know, whether, and if so, which kind of life is "out there" in our Universe'.

25 See, for example, Gustaf Arrhenius, 'Life out of chaos', in *Fundamentals of Life*, 204: 'The experimental and theoretical tools needed for a deeper understanding of related problems [i.e., the definition of life and origin of life] have only been developed over the last few centuries with explosive progress in the last few decades. In contrast, the experimentally unaided human mind has for millennia been grappling with these questions, embodying and institutionalizing speculations in a variety of canonical writs. By virtue of their nature and methodology these must on many points diverge from the views of modern science. ... The objections leveled against what is often called the "reductionist" approach is that it leaves out or demystifies

espouse materialism; this closes their minds to seeing the analogous meanings of life.²⁶ Others reason that the multiple, seemingly gradual steps involved in the origin of life make defining life impossible.²⁷ Much more could be said here. I will limit myself to considering a potential scientific objection to Aristotle's definition, as doing so will further clarify the notion of self-motion.

One might object that green plants, when they photosynthesize, are activated by light, and so are not self-movers any more than the non-living streetlamp that turns itself on is a self-mover. It is true that material living things need energy to carry on their life activities. They are not self-movers in an absolute sense. However, they use some of the energy, be it light energy or from the food they eat, to modify themselves, producing new parts of themselves through their internal activity. They are not like streetlamps or other artifacts which do not use the energy powering them to produce new parts of themselves or increase the size of their existent parts.²⁸

Animals have a greater capacity for self-motion than plants, primarily due to their ability to sense, which ability is often, although not always, accompanied by the ability to move locally. Yet despite this greater capacity for self-motion, there is a reason to regard them more as moved than as self-movers,²⁹ namely, they are unable to judge their own

judgments.³⁰ A hungry shark that sees a fish cannot reflect on whether or not it should eat it the way humans can reflect on whether they should eat this fish or whether they should eat non-human animals in general. The shark is fixed by nature to desire fish when hungry and to pursue it when there is no obstacle. Whereas we humans can ask ourselves: 'Should I feel this way? Should I act on this feeling?' We can control our lives in a way the shark and other non-rational animals cannot, as we can override the desires that we have by exercising free will.

Even rational beings, endowed as they are with free will, are not self-movers without qualification. As Aquinas notes:

Some things are determined in advance [for our intellect] by nature, such as the first principles, concerning which it cannot take a different stance, and the ultimate end, which it cannot not want. Whence, granted, that as to something the intellect may move itself, it is nevertheless necessary that as to some things it is moved by another.³¹

Aristotle and Aquinas maintain that God alone is not determined in any way by some exterior principle. God is pure act; God's understanding is not other than himself.³² The self-motion in living beings other than God is never independent of some form of being moved by another.

the exceedingly complex manifestations of human neuronal activity, thought to require a non-material explanation'.

26 See *ibid.* See also Chalmers J. *Fundamentals of life*. p.23: 'Obviously this definition [a set of self-sustaining chemical reaction capable of Darwinian evolution] wouldn't satisfy a theologian, aesthetician, or metaphysician, but I would claim that consciousness, discrimination and spirituality are epiphenomena of complex nervous systems'.

27 See Hazen RM. Emergence and the origin of life. In: *Fundamentals of life*. p.283: 'Attempts to craft an absolute definition that distinguishes between non-life and life may represent a similar false dichotomy. ... The emergence of self-replicating molecules of increasing complexity and mutability led to molecular evolution through the process of natural selection To define the exact point at which such a system of gradually increasing complexity becomes alive is inherently arbitrary'.

28 Even if an artifact was to produce new parts of itself, this would not constitute a self-motion in the strict sense, as an artifact is not an 'it' in the sense of being a substance in the Aristotelian sense; rather it is a collection of substances. See Warren Murray, 'If T'were a Substance', *Philosophia Perennis*, 1, 1 (Spring 1994), 113–132. See also, George M. A very brief introduction to the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of substance and accident. In: *Plants, Animals, People, Aliens*. (forthcoming). The Catholic University of America Press.

29 Aquinas often speaks of animals as more moved than movers; see *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 2, *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 4 and *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. 2, Chap. 76. Aristotle, as well, speaks of animals being moved in the case of their waking, something he ascribes to environmental causes such as hot and cold and to internal causes

As for AI, Aristotle and Aquinas would maintain that it is not alive on the grounds that it is an artificial thing rather than a natural thing; thus, it does not even have its own tendency to move, much less to move itself. Non-living natural things tend to move in certain ways because of what they are. Iron moves towards a magnet and aluminum does not. Non-living natural things do not move on their own, however; for example, it is the force of the magnet that makes iron move. By contrast, a plant doesn't grow because the sun pulls it in some manner. Rather, the plant uses light in processes that result in the plant growing towards light. The plant not only

such as digesting food; see *Physics*, Bk. 8, Chaps. 2 and 6, along with Aquinas's commentary and *ST I-II*, q. 6, a. 1, ad 2.

30 See *ST I*, q. 18, a. 3, *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 2, and *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. 2, Chap. 47.

31 *ST I*, q. 18, a. 3. See also, *ST I-II*, q. 9, a. 4: 'Whether the will may be moved by an exterior principle'. Here Aquinas presents the argument that Aristotle gives in the *Eudemian Ethics* (Bk. 8, Chap. 2, 1248a20–28) that one cannot take counsel ad infinitum about whether one should take counsel about something, and 'whence it is necessary to posit that in the first motion of the will, the will goes forth from the impulse of some exterior mover, as Aristotle concludes'.

32 See *ST I*, q. 18, a. 3: 'That one, therefore, whose nature is its understanding itself, and to whom what it naturally has is not determined by another, this one obtains the highest grade of life. Such, however, is God'.

tends to move a certain way, as is the case of iron, but it also tends to move itself.

Artificial things, unlike natural things, do not have tendencies that are properly their own. Whatever they tend to do is a function of the tendencies that belong to the natural things that compose them. For example, the fact that a flashlight tends to produce light is only due to our arrangement of natural things whose tendencies we harness and order to this function. We arrange chemicals in the battery that tend to produce electricity. And we add a switch made of a material that tends to conduct electricity, so that the electricity can flow from the battery to the bulb, whose tungsten filament tends to glow when electricity flows through it. The case of AI is no different. Its tendencies to move are the result of the tendencies belonging to the natural things that it is made out of. Since AI has no tendency to move that belongs properly to it, it cannot possibly have life.³³ The reason some people wonder whether it is alive is because its output resembles that of human intelligence. In fact, however, AI knows nothing. AI is no more intelligent than a book, despite writing the book, so to speak. It merely mimics human intelligence. Like any other artificial thing, AI is lifeless.

I would like to close by contrasting Aquinas's understanding of Aristotle's notion of life as I have presented it with that of the contemporary Aristotelians, David Oderberg and Edward Feser. According to Oderberg: 'life is the natural capacity of an object for self-perfective immanent activity. ... Living things, unlike non-living things, exercise *immanent* causation: this is a kind of causation that begins *with* the agent and terminates *in* the agent for the sake of the agent.'³⁴ Feser, following Oderberg, holds that nutrition is an immanent activity:

The mark of a living or organic substance is that **in addition** to transeunt causation it exhibits immanent causation, in which the effect remains within the agent and perfects it. An animal's digestion of a meal would be an example insofar as it allows the animal to stay alive and grow (though there are also external or transeunt effects like the excretion of waste products).³⁵

Both thinkers misconstrue the meaning of 'immanent.' For Aristotle, an immanent activity is an activity which is perfective of the agent rather than of some product resulting from the

agent.³⁶ Immanent activities are divided against transient activities whose perfection lies in their products and not in the activities themselves.

Aristotle and Aquinas acknowledge that plants and animals, unlike non-living things, take in materials from the outside and through their own activity transform some of these materials into their own substance. The *activity* of nutrition, however, is not of itself perfective of the agent, but rather of the 'new flesh' it produces. This *product*, the 'new flesh,' perfects the organism as a whole.³⁷ Immanent activities have no product but of themselves perfect the agent.³⁸ Seeing is an immanent activity, as it perfects the agent rather than perfecting some product internal or external to the agent. Aristotle and Aquinas do not use the immanent-transient distinction when discussing life forms, because it does not suffice to separate plants from non-living natural things, for all the life activities of plants are transient, as are all the activities of non-living natural things. Whereas their own definition of life does allow them to do so.³⁹

A correct understanding of the nature of plants requires recognizing that they do not have immanent activities in the

³⁶ See *Metaphysics*, Bk. 9 where Aristotle is trying to establish that act is the end of potency. This gives him reason to distinguish two types of acts: 'Where, then, the result is something apart from the exercise, the actuality is in the thing that is being made, e.g. the act of building is in the thing that is being built and that of weaving in the things that is being woven, and similarly in all other cases, and in general the movement is in the thing that is being moved; but where there is no product apart from the actuality, the actuality is present in the agents, e.g. the act of seeing is in the seeing subject and that of theorizing in the theorizing subject and the life is in the soul (and therefore well-being also; for it is a certain kind of life)' (*Metaphysics*, Bk. 9, Chap. 8, 1050a24-b1 R McKeon (ed.), Ross WD (trans.). *The basic works of Aristotle*. New York: Random House; 1968. Aquinas, in his commentary, concurs with Aristotle.

³⁷ The activity of nutrition differs from growth in two ways. First, the activity of nutrition produces new parts of the organism to replace its worn parts, whereas the activity of growth produces new parts that increase the size of the organism. The activity of nutrition also includes converting energy (from the sun, from food, or from elsewhere) to forms that the organism can utilize to carry on its various life activities. An example of the latter is the conversion of glucose in food to ATP.

³⁸ For a thorough discussion of the transient nature of the vegetative activities, see George MI. On the meaning of 'Immanent Activity' according to Aquinas. *The Thomist*. 2014;78: 3, 537–55.

³⁹ See *Quaestio Disputata de Anima*, unicus, a. 13: 'For the action of the soul transcends the action of nature working in inanimate things; and this happens as to two things: namely, as to the manner of acting and as to what is done. It is necessary, however, that as to the manner of acting, every action of the soul transcends the operation or action of inanimate nature; for since an activity of the soul is a life activity, and the living is what moves itself to acting, it is necessary that every operation of soul be according to some intrinsic agent. But as to what is done, not every action transcends the action of inanimate nature'. See also *DA*, Bk. 2, lec. 5, nos. 281–285.

³³ For a far more extensive treatment why AI is not alive, see George M. What is at the root of erroneous claims regarding artificial intelligence (AI)? *Peripatetikos*. 2024;18: 7–34.

³⁴ Oderberg D. *Real essentialism*. New York: Routledge; 2007. p.180.

³⁵ Feser E. *Aristotle's revenge*. London: Editiones Scholasticae; 2019. p.39.

Aristotelian sense of the word. Plants maintain themselves in existence through their own activities which have an internal product and, in this way, differ from the non-living; however, they do not perform immanent activities – all of their activities have products – and in this way, plants are similar to non-living things, all of which lack immanent activities. Consequently, the Aristotelian distinction between immanent and transient activities is important for an accurate assessment of how plants differ both from the non-living and from animals and humans.⁴⁰

40 Even if one were to maintain that Aristotle and Oderberg/Feser do not disagree as to their views but only in their terminology, it still remains the case that the latter have misconstrued the

I hope to have shown that the definition of life advanced by Aristotle and Aquinas is eminently defensible. It applies to all living things – as a good definition must – albeit by analogy, and it fits our common experience of how living things differ from non-living ones.

Aristotelian distinction between immanent and transient activities and consequently have imposed a new meaning on the word 'immanent', one which only generates confusion. Henceforth, the same activity, nutrition, is said to be both transient and immanent – transient according to Aristotle's notion, and immanent according to Oderberg/Feser's notion. Moreover, as noted in the main text, when the Aristotelian notion of immanent activity is ignored, it leads to an imperfect understanding of plants and of the gradations of things.