

Aquinas and the Question of Being, Order, Evil, and Privation

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To fully understand the approach to evil in general and, specifically, moral evil in the Thomistic tradition, one must examine several ideas in the writings of Saint Thomas in sequence as each builds on the previous principle. Saint Thomas was careful and precise as he developed these ideas and propositions to avoid the ideas that God somehow desires evil or that He is impotent to stop it or that some creative force outside of God in the universe creates evil as such. The ideas that will be followed in this discussion are the transcendental nature of being, God's relationship to creation, the nature of evil as a privation, human appetite and free will, and, finally, the question of moral evil as it is understood in the light of each of these. From this approach, it is clear that moral evil does not come from God's desire, as such, nor is it created by God, per se, but rather represents a privation of due being resulting from the intervention of human will and freedom to thwart man's achievement of his second act in God's providential design. It is absolutely necessary that this be understood by one going into pastoral ministry since these questions will arise, and, if the answer available is always, "it was God's will" or "God wanted it this way," the faithful will be hurt and likely leave the Church seeking more satisfying answers.

Firstly, it is necessary to understand the notion of being as it is used in Thomas' writings and his notion of the transcendental nature of being. To arrive at that end, one must start with the understanding that being is the one thing that is in common in everything that is. That is to say, anything that does not have being is, by that very fact, nothing. This common mode of being transcends any categorical distinction, so it applies to anything at all insofar as it participates in the act of existence. To Aquinas, there are three Transendentals that are shared by all that exists: one, true, and good. The transcendental of beauty is often added, but, to Thomas, it is not included in this list; it is, however, generally

accepted by the Thomistic tradition thereafter. Aquinas' three Transendentals are attained by examining being taken under a certain aspect of affirmation, negation, or relation. By affirmation, one can assert that anything that exists is a thing and, as such, has an essence which delimits its being into one of Aristotle's ten categories.<sup>1</sup> As such, one can, by negation, consider that any thing with an essence delimiting it is, taken as such, undivided and individual, that is, one. By taking being as it relates to other things, being is taken as 'something' or '*aliquid*' rather than a thing to provide it individuation. Taken in this regard, anything with being and existence can be related to the reason of intelligent beings. In this way, when something is related to the intellect, it is seen to be true, and when something is related to the will, it is seen to be desirable, and, therefore, good. This last transcendental is most important in fully understanding moral acts. Firstly, good, in this sense, must be understood as a transcendental aspect of being itself rather than a division of being; if good is taken as a division of being, then the problem is created that either God actively created evil or not all things are good insofar as they are. However, since the will naturally desires perfection of being, that is, the perfection of second act, the will naturally desires the good. Aquinas points this out in his definition of the good in which he notes "a good is something that perfects something else by being its goal."<sup>2</sup>

Next, one must undertake to understand properly God's relationship to creation. God is the infinite act of existence, and the only being whose essence is existence itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, God is not considered a thing, per se, but rather the infinite act of existence itself. Therefore, God is the fullest possessor of being and Aquinas' three Transcendentals of Oneness, Truth, and Goodness. However, a complete discussion of those aspects in God would fall outside the scope of this discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 63.

Aquinas shows that both of these understandings of God are necessary since there must be some necessary being whose essence is existence itself in order for existence to be imparted onto any contingent being. That is to say, since contingent beings receive existence separately from their essence they must receive the act of existence from something that is already in act. That provider of the act of existence must either receive its act of existence from an outside source or have an essence of existence itself. At some point it is necessary to reach a being with an essence of existence itself since that being would be the first cause of all that possesses the act of existence. Aquinas further states that, for that to be the case, there can be only one being whose essence is existence since it is the nature of an essence to differentiate beings in a given genus. Hence, the one being to whom all owe existence is God, and God is necessarily unique. God gives, as first cause, existence to everything that is, and, at the same time, He imparts in the essences that serve to limit participation in the act of existence potency to perfection of their own being in second act. So, from this it can be said that God, in giving everything that is its first act, existence itself, God imparts good into everything that is. In this way, God's act of creation is an act of sharing his goodness as a transcendental aspect of being. Creation itself, then, "is really nothing other than a relatedness to God consequent on starting to be."<sup>3</sup> God both creates and holds the universe in existence by imparting a share in His own infinite act of existence. Aquinas goes on to explain that, in creating, God orders the universe to a certain end. Specifically, He orders each creature to its own perfection of second act appropriate to its own essence. It must be understood that given creatures do not equally participate in being; some have greater participation as they more resemble God than others, and, as

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 261.

such, perfection of species and individuals is ordered by their natures. This is expressed in the axiom action follows from being, which is found throughout the Thomistic tradition. For example, since man, as an intellectual being, more closely resembles God, who is the perfection of understanding and intellect, his perfection of being in second act is found in perfecting this highest faculty. Aristotle already hinted this long before the Christian era, and Thomas takes Aristotle's claim and weaves it elegantly into the Christian understanding of God as creator *ex nihilo*. This approach allows God's will to be understood as desiring to share His own goodness, and, in that, order individual creatures to their own perfection in that goodness. His will is not, however, alien from reason, nor are events predetermined in the way proposed by determinists like Calvin, but rather, all creation is ordered by divine providence, and this is the ordering of creation to the perfection of the universe first and foremost. Furthermore, it must be understood that this does not imply God acting as a supernatural or divine puppet master. It is necessary to understand that secondary causes in the order of creation are, indeed, real causes, but their activity itself finds its origin in God insofar as any act necessarily finds its origin in God as the first cause of all act, however remote it may be to the proximate act and cause in question.<sup>4</sup> Up to this point, therefore, it is shown that good, taken as a transcendental property of being itself, can be said of anything that exists insofar as it does have being. God, as creator and the only actor in the infinite act of existence, imparts being, and thereby good, on creation, and He wills and orders all creation to perfection, and this is what is meant by divine providence ordering creation.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

Given all of this understanding, the problem arises from whence evil comes. The common course of that challenge is that, since God creates and orders all of creation, evil must be a part of God's creation. In order to understand this challenge to the Thomistic understanding of the universe, it is necessary to make a few distinctions and corrections to the understanding of evil. First of all, rather than having existence of itself, evil is a privation of the due good in any thing. That is to say, that evil is not a thing, but it is a privation of some quality that should be in a thing. Because existence itself is convertible with good, anything that exists, taken only in the fact that it has existence, is a good, but insofar as anything is not what it should be, it is evil. The evil of anything is parasitic on its good. Furthermore, nothing is sought as an evil, but, rather as some perceived good, which will be discussed as a part of the discussion of moral evil below. Next, the distinction between natural or physical evil and moral evil must be understood. Physical evil, *malum in corruption rerum*, is that evil which is natural in the inequality of creation or in the corruption of things. This also includes the evil that is experienced in a thing when it is in some way harmed by another seeking its due good in the order of providence. A traditional example of this is the case of a lion eating another animal. The lion, in fulfilling its second act, is ordered to eat other animals. The lion experiences an objective good, in surviving and actualizing its potentiality to second act while the other animal experiences the evil of being killed and eaten. Natural evil finds its origin in God since His providence is ordered to the perfection of the universe as a whole rather than to the perfection of each individual creature. Moral evil or evil of sin, *malum culpae*, on the other hand, is the result of human

will and action failing to seek to the perfection of being. This evil does not find its origin in God, but rather in the will of man.<sup>5</sup>

To understand moral evil, it is necessary first to understand the meaning of free will in man. Some would have it that man lacks free will in any meaningful way. This theory can be seen in both scientific and materialistic reductionism and theological approaches like that of Calvin. Aquinas, however, distinguishes that, while God retains order and control over the universe, he wills that events therein can occur necessarily, contingently, or freely. By this, man has the exalted role of willfully participating with God in the perfection of the universe. When an effect is included in the nature of a cause, God wills that effect necessarily; for example, fire necessarily causes heat. When an effect is contingent on some non-intellectual being, for example, a squirrel building a nest in any given tree, God wills that effect contingently. When the freedom of man is considered as part of this process, that is to say, the question of if a man will act rightly or evilly, God wills an effect freely relying on the man in question. Aquinas notes that man, even in his free will, never seeks evil qua evil. Instead, man, in his natural inclination to the perfection of his being, seeks some good that may be a lesser good or only an apparent good, but any action is precipitated by the appearance of good that incites man's will to desire it.<sup>6</sup> If it is a lesser good than he should desire, that deficiency is evil; if it is only an apparent good, that privation of the good that he should perform is evil. All of this is to say that secondary causes are real causes in

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<sup>5</sup> William E. Addis and Thomas Arnold, *A Catholic Dictionary*, Sixth Edition, With Additions (New York: The Catholic Publication Society Co., 1887), 325-27.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 288-289.

creation, and not simply the result of deterministic behavior or apparent causes that mask God's direct action.

Finally, these understandings lead to the question of if evil, as such, can be attributed to God. Aquinas, in his *De Malo* answers this question in two parts. First, he addresses the question of if God causes evil itself, then, he addresses if God causes evil acts. Aquinas' first question is further divided into whether God does evil and whether God causes others to do evil; the former addresses the challenges from Manichaeism, and the latter addresses the claims of Calvin and others. Both have pastoral application in the modern world. To answer the former, Aquinas observes that such failures are caused by either failing to discern and will the highest and most appropriate good or lacking the power to actualize it. Thomas notes that these are both impossible since, in the *Summa Theologiae*, he demonstrated that God's will and intellect are united and infinite, so would fail in neither respect. The other possibility that Thomas addresses is the possibility that God causes others to do evil. Thomas answers this by noting that every created thing seeks to create that which is like unto itself. Since it is reasonable to posit the same of God, and it was previously shown that God is infinitely good, it is impossible that God directly wills man to do evil.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas then takes up the question of if God causes actions that are evil. To explain this, he uses an analogy of a lame leg. If an animal has a lame leg and wills to walk, but does so with a limp, it cannot be said that the animal's will to walk caused the limp directly; instead, the ability of the leg to act on the animal's will to walk is the cause flowing from the axiom that which is received is received according to the mode of the receiver. At the same time, as the first cause, insofar as any act is an act, per se, even an evil act, it finds

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 291-292.



its origin in God as the source of all act. The distinction must be maintained, however, that “the flaw in the action results from the agent precisely as not rightly ordered to its first mover.” And “what there is of action can be traced to God’s causality but what there is of disorder and deformity does not have God as cause but our free choice.”<sup>8</sup> In short, “God is responsible for sinful actions but not for sins.”<sup>9</sup>

From this discussion, it is clear that, a proper understanding of the goodness of being will allow a person to assert the goodness of all of creation as such. An understanding of God’s order in and providence over the universe will lend to an understanding of God as first cause, but proximate causes as real second causes. An understanding of the nature of evil as privation will lead to a proper understanding that evil cannot be a cause unto itself, nor is it a *res* or thing in the universe. Acceptance of man’s free will as serving as a true cause of evil allows an understanding of moral evil for what it is. Finally, an understanding of the relationship of God to moral evil provides a way for Christians to understand the world as it is experienced without positing that God directly wills evil, pain, and suffering, nor that God is incapable of stopping them, nor of positing that their source is a secondary deformed or evil deity.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 295-296.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.