

5. Evil and Suffering

The specifically *modern* problem of evil was, of course, unknown to Aquinas. This does not mean that evil did not pose an intellectual problem for him, but rather that the nature of the problem was not the need to provide a rational justification for belief in God's goodness in the face of evil through either theodicy or logical defense.¹ Aquinas instead began with a strong doctrine of divine providence and sought to show how that providence encompassed and defeated evil. In reply to the argument that the reality of evil is incompatible with infinite divine goodness, he invokes the fundamental Augustinian axiom that governs his entire treatment: "*God, since he is maximally good, would not have allowed any evil into his work unless he were so omnipotent and good that he could even make good come out of evil.*" Hence it pertains to the infinite goodness of God that evil be permitted so that he might bring good out of it."² Thus rather than impugning or thwarting the goodness and omnipotence of God, evil instead provides the opportunity for God to display these attributes more clearly by making it the occasion for the introduction of an even a greater good than that which evil originally threatened. The root of this claim is decidedly theological since it presupposes the doctrines of original sin and redemption: in response to the evil introduced into creation by the sinful misuse of freedom, God has sent his Son as Savior so that human beings might reach a state of divinisation higher than that which preceded the Fall.³

As this opening outline indicates, it is impossible to give an adequate account of evil from the Thomistic perspective without recourse to specifically theological doctrines. Ultimately, the "answer" to the problem of evil lies in Christ; more specifically, it lies not in doctrines about Christ, but rather in the believer's lived experience of union with Christ in the midst of suffering and evil. Hence any attempt to provide a purely philosophical theodicy is necessarily incomplete and, if the truth be told, unsatisfying. Yet within the framework of a philosophy of religion approach, something akin to a Thomistic philosophical theodicy has been

¹ This point is made by Timothy Jackson at the opening of his "Must Job Live Forever? A Reply to Aquinas on Providence," *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 1-3.

² ST I, 2, 3 ad 1. The Augustine quotation is from *Enchiridion*, chapter 11.

³ This is the intuition behind the Easter *Exultet*'s claim: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam that won for us so great a redeemer."

extracted and articulated; as will be seen, however, the coherence of such a theodicy ultimately presupposes some theological background assumptions.⁴

The first part of this chapter will outline the classical Thomistic approach to the problem of evil as that was developed mainly by French Thomists. The definitive synthesis of this viewpoint is Charles Journet's *The Meaning of Evil*.⁵ This approach is a broadly Augustinian-style theodicy with the main themes being a general account of evil as privation, created free will as the cause of all human misery, the possibility of loving union with God as the greater good justifying the human capacity for evil, and the innocence of God's will from causally originating evil. The second part of the chapter will survey contemporary modifications of the classic doctrine by Thomists, both theologians and philosophers of religion, who either disagree with its approach or desire to engage the contemporary problematic more directly.

I. THE CLASSICAL APPROACH

A. *The General Meaning of Evil in the Created Order*

Following St. Augustine, Aquinas denies that evil has any independent metaphysical reality. So even though we cannot help but reify evil in speaking about it, it is not a thing or a substance in its own right. It is rather an absence or lack in a being of some perfection which ought to be there; this is the meaning of evil as privation. A mere absence of a perfection is not an evil, but rather it must be the lack of something that ought to be present in a being precisely because its nature demands it. For example, it is not a privation or evil for a post to be deaf because the capacity to hear is not a constitutive feature of a post. But for a human being to be deaf (as a post) is an evil or privation because it prevents the person from experiencing the full range of sensations that make for optimal human functioning. The judgment that something is afflicted by evil is always indexed against the standard set by the optimally functioning nature of the thing. Evil does not mean the same thing in all its usages; it is not a property having a single or univocal meaning (like blue). Indeed, it is not a property in the normal sense at all, but rather a predicate expressing a judgment that the subject in question is not what it is supposed to be as a flourishing instance of its kind. Evil is thus metaphysically and logically parasitic upon the good: it is a privation in some subject with some goodness insofar as it is, but lacking the full measure of being and goodness that ought to belong to it.

Since evil can only exist in the good and be understood against the intelligibility of the good, it is necessary to understand Aquinas's doctrine of the good in order to understand his doctrine of evil. In Aquinas's metaphysics, anything that exists is *ipso facto* good. Goodness is a transcendental or universal property of being, expressing the relationship that each being has to its own existence precisely as perfective and so desirable.⁶ The desirableness ingredient in the notion of good

⁴ For an approach that tries to stay philosophical along these lines, see Georges Van Riet, "Le problème du mal dans la philosophie de la religion de saint Thomas," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 71 (1973): 5-45.

⁵ Trans. Michael Barry (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1963).

⁶ On good as a transcendental property, see Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: J. Brill, 1997), 290-334.

involves the correlative notion of appetite. All beings are said to have an appetite or desire for their own perfection in the sense that they have a dynamic tendency toward their own perfection as an end; the "desire" in question here is not conscious and should not be anthropomorphized. To say, as Aquinas does, that all things desire the good does not mean that they all desire the same thing, for every being desires the good appropriate to its nature. Every being has a dynamic tendency to achieve the actuality (ultimately rooted in *esse* or existence) that would complete its nature. Because God is perfect actuality by nature, there is no appetitive striving in God but rather only a resting in or enjoyment of the infinite goodness that belongs to God by nature. For any created being, however, its complete goodness is something that is achieved by action rather than given in its nature; all creatures must progress from being potentially good to actually good. While any created being is good in a qualified sense simply in virtue of enjoying substantial existence, it only becomes fully good through the kinds of actions that achieve the goods constitutive of its natural flourishing.⁷ Evil occurs when a being loses or lacks what is necessary for it to be considered a fully functioning instance of its kind or fails to achieve its appropriate end through self-perfective actions. Hence the basic notion of evil is lack of order to a due end (*privatio ordinis ad debitum finem*). Because evil is a privation, it does not have a direct cause; there is no first evil causing all other evil.⁸ Only what has some positive reality or goodness can be a direct cause; evil comes about when there is a disordered pursuit of the good by some being. Because no being ever directly acts for the sake of evil, but rather for the sake of some objective that it takes to be good or perfective, evil is only brought about accidentally or indirectly.⁹ So evil is also causally parasitic upon good, meaning that it is more powerful where the possibility of goodness is greater.

If we apply this general metaphysical account to the natural order, the first point to be made is that one being's pursuit of its proper good often results in the infliction of evil on another being. When a wolf kills a sheep, the action is evil for the sheep, since it deprives it of being, but it is good for the wolf because it is perfective of its being. Killing a sheep does not make a wolf evil, even though it results in an evil for the sheep. Thus within the context of the order of nature, what can appear to be evil from one perspective (the carnivore's victim) is really not evil when considered from the perspective of the being that is acting so as to become a flourishing instance of its kind. This account presupposes that the order of nature as a whole is a good that justifies the internal losses that it entails; to put the matter another way, it presupposes that a universe with carnivores and parasites is better than one without. In justifying this claim, Aquinas appeals to the Neoplatonic principle of plenitude: God's goodness is more fully manifested in an order of

⁷ ST I, 5, 1 ad 1 makes this important distinction between *bonum secundum quid* and *bonum simpliciter*.

⁸ ST I, 49, 1. Fallen angels in general and Satan in particular do not function as ultimate causes of evil. The story of their fall and their role in God's providence is not a topic that will be addressed in this chapter.

⁹ An interesting discussion of the claim that evil is never directly intended is Carlos Steel, "Does Evil Have a Cause? Augustine's Perplexity and Thomas's Answer," *Review of Metaphysics* 48 (1994): 251-273.

creation that involves variety, multiplicity, and differing degrees of reality than in one containing only one or few beings (presumably the best kind, i.e. angels). Aquinas asserts:

Since the divine goodness cannot be sufficiently represented through one creature, God produced many and diverse creatures so that what was lacking to one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplemented by another. For while goodness in God is simple and one, goodness in creatures is multiple and divided. Hence the total universe more perfectly represents and participates in God's goodness than any one creature could.¹⁰

God's goodness therefore requires that there be inequality of form – that there be all different kinds of beings, from angels to amoebas: "The divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction and inequality of things in the universe for the sake of the perfection of the universe; for it would not be a perfect universe if only one grade of goodness were found in things."¹¹ If there are different kinds of beings, then it is inevitable that their self-perfective activities will sometimes be at cross-purposes, and this is good for the universe insofar as its ultimate purpose is to manifest God's goodness. This also means that since it is good that there be material beings, it does not detract from the goodness of the universe that these are corruptible, perishable, and inherently prone not to achieve their full measure of perfection. In a material created world, beings will inevitably corrupt and become defective in their actions so that many individual beings will not achieve their ends. But these failures in individual parts do not detract from the good of the order of the whole:

God and nature, indeed any agent, does what is best for the whole, but not what is best for any part except as ordered to the whole (as already noted). This whole which is the universe of creatures is better and more perfect insofar as there are creatures which can sometimes fail to achieve their good with God not interfering. This is both because (as Dionysius teaches in the fourth chapter of *On Divine Names*) divine providence respects nature rather than destroys it, so that when it belongs to the very nature of things that they could possibly fail they sometimes will, and because, as Augustine said in his *Enchiridion*, God is so powerful that he can bring good out of evil. Hence many goods would be lost if God did not permit some evils. For no fire would be kindled if air were not corrupted, nor would the life of the lion be preserved if the ass were not killed, nor would vindicating justice or patient endurance be praised if there were no iniquity.¹²

In these lines are some of the central themes in Thomistic theodicy: a universe of creatures with varying degrees of perfection manifests God's goodness most fittingly; there is an order of such creatures wherein some will fall short of goodness by virtue of their corruptibility, while others will fall short because they

¹⁰ ST I, 47, 1.

¹¹ ST I, 47, 2.

¹² ST I, 48, 2 ad 1.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0078-2>

The Thomist Tradition

Shanley, B.J.

2002, XIV, 240 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0078-2