

Thomas on the Problem of Evil

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In this paper we will examine Thomas' answer to question forty nine of the Summa Theologica, concerning the cause of evil. Our procedure will be as follows. First we will look briefly at earlier treatments of the problem of evil by other thinkers especially St. Augustine, next at other treatments of the problem by St. Thomas outside of the Summa Theologica, and finally we will turn to question forty nine itself and examine it in detail.

When we look at the thinkers before Augustine who sought to find a solution to the problem of evil, we find most of their solutions to be too mixed with mythology and pagan religious doctrines, to be of much philosophical value. The popular solution was a dualism, which took its most intelligible form in the belief of the Manicheans, a flourishing cult at the time of St. Augustine. Manicheism held that there are two principles of all that is: a good principle, God, and an evil principle, Satan, each responsible for his own creation--God for things of spirit and light, Satan for matter and darkness.¹

This radical dualism constituted a major intellectual problem for philosophers like Plotinus as well as for Augustine who at one time had been a Manichean, and actually approached the problem in Manichean terms as we shall see.

Before going on to Augustine, we must first mention the contribution of Aristotle. It is not common to think of him as a principle contributor to this discussion, for the question of evil seems not to have been of great concern to him. Yet what he said about matter and form and especially his concept of privation are basic in the later discussions of this subject.

It is interesting to note that Thomas quotes from him in refuting the possibility of an existing evil creator, such as the one alleged by the Manicheans.²

The thrust of Augustine's discussion of evil is a direct attack on Manicheism. Evil for him is either the absence of being or a defect in the being such that the being is not fully what it is meant or intended to be. Evil depends therefore on the good (being) for its existence. In this way we can see that it would not be possible for anything both to be wholly evil and to exist. This is not to say that evil does not exist. Defects exist, hence evil exists. In his Confessions Augustine says, "either there is an evil that we fear, or the fact that we fear is itself an evil."³

As to the Manichean claim that matter is evil, Augustine rejects this, although he does hold that in the grades of goodness, matter is the lowest of all. Still, because it is created by God it is good, for He can create nothing evil.⁴ Augustine bases his discussion of evil on Plotinus' doctrine of evil as privation, which Plotinus took over from Aristotle. This doctrine effected Augustine's release from the need for the noxious hypothesis of a creator of evil.⁵

Now everything is good in that it exists, evil when it's mutable good has been corrupted. God bestows on His creatures order, measure and form. In our own case the order is the rational adaptation to our end, namely to God. We are either in or out of this order in as much as our way of life leads us toward or away from God. Measure is an element of order, in

that it is order considered as proper to the rank of being. The measure of a being is determined by God. Form gives a being its specification, and thus relates to a beings place on the scale of beings. This is why matter (formless subject) is the lowest being on the scale of goodness.⁶

The corruption of order, measure and form in a being is evil. We can see here that evil does not have an existence apart from a good, but rather is dependent upon the being, and how it fits in well with the Christianity to which Augustine had lately converted. It cleared up the difficulty which had forced the Manicheans to feel that dualism was necessary. Doctrines of the divine Christ were less problematic when evil was viewed as the absence of proper good. Finally it makes the statement of the author of Genesis logical, for he says that after God created the world He "looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good." (Genesis 1:31a).

If we were to think that dualism as an explanation of evil was thus eliminated once and for all we would be sadly mistaken. The same error arose again in the form of Albigensianism in the 12th and 13th centuries, the time of St. Thomas. As St. Augustine had developed his discussion of the problem of evil to refute the Manicheans, so now did Thomas take up the problem, especially in his work De Malo (Concerning Evil), to refute the Albigensians.

We will now take a general look at what evil is for Thomas. His doctrine consists in the following main points, evil is dependent upon good, evil is privation, the subject of evil is good, there are degrees of evil, evil is distinct from being and

non-being, and finally there are different kinds of evil.⁷

We start this consideration of Thomas' view of evil with the notion that evil is dependent upon good. Evil exist in good, in that what is evil is good in that it has being. Evil cannot cause anything by itself but only through the agent on which its existence depends. It produces its effects through a good that is deficient, and for that reason the good's action is corrupted to the precise extent of its deficiency. In this way we see that evil has no power in itself, but rather is dependent on the power of the good. Therefore it is clear that the more powerful a good, the more powerful its evil might be. Thus for Thomas the most powerful evil doer is the fallen angel.⁸

Next we see that evil is, privation of good. This he adapts from Augustine's view. In that it is privation or absence of good it has no essence, no act of being. Yet it is not merely non-being, but rather the absence of good which a being should have.⁹ St. Thomas further makes a distinction between two kinds of privation: privation of a particular aspect of a being's perfection, (such as deafness is the privation of hearing, and death is the privation life), and the other kind a privation which is not total but leads a being away from perfection, (such as an illness which leads to total blindness or death).¹⁰

The subject of evil is good in that evil exists in a being, and being is coextensive with good. It is here that we must carefully note that this does not mean that evil is an accident of good. Accident adds a quality to its subject, whereas evil subtracts from the being. Evil is the being's remaining in

potentiality where it should be in act. We might press the question exactly what is this good which is the subject of evil. Thomas distinguishes three definitions of good: the perfection of a being, being as potentially perfect, and virtue then answers that it is good in the second sense, good being as "potentially perfect", which is the subject of evil.¹¹

Since there are degrees of goodness and since evil is relative to good, there are degrees of evil. Evil is greater or lesser in relation to the degree of good to which it is opposed. Therefore the most evil thing a being can do is sin, since this is an act in opposition to the highest good, God. This becomes important when one sees that for the Christian it is a lesser evil to accept death than to sin.

Next Thomas considers how evil is distinct from being and non-being. Evil is nearer to being than it is to non-being. Thomas quotes Dionysius' saying that non-existence is that which in no way is, but evil is, for it is in its subject, yet of itself evil is non-existent. So evil neither positively exists nor simply does not exist. It is the lack of being that should be. It is clear therefore that it is closer to being, but is not being since it has no essence of its own, and farther from non-being, that which in no way is.¹²

Finally Thomas considers the different kinds of evil, and finds three: (1) evil of nature, (2) evil of fault, and (3) evil as punishment. We will now observe each of these separately.¹³

(1) Physical evil or evil of nature is evil which involves the corruption of one being in the generation of another. We

shall say more about this when discussing Article two of Question forty-nine, later.¹⁴

(2) A second type of evil is evil of fault. This is evil which is not determined by anything other than the choice made by a rational being. Something may be chosen by the being which moves him away from his natural good or due end. This is moral evil and is basically the rejection of divine law.¹⁵

(3) Finally, there is, evil of punishment. It has three basic traits: it results from an evil of fault, it goes against the will, which is always inclined to good, and it is a suffering from some extrinsic principle. The degrees of the evil of the punishment, are dependent upon the amount of good lost because of the punishment. In this view the greatest evil of punishment is that which removes eternal happiness, (Hell). The sense in which this or any just punishment is good is it ~~it~~ ^{it}aduly opposes man's will, to seek what is other than his natural good or due end.¹⁶

Now with this historical consideration of the problem of evil as a background, let us focus the discussion of the problem in the Summa Theologica, Question 49, on the cause of evil. We can see what Thomas considers evil to be, so let us look at how he thinks evil comes to be. We will do this primarily by examining the text and secondarily by adding some clarifications from other writings of Thomas on the same subject.

Question forty-nine is divided into three articles:

(1) Can good be the cause of evil?, (2) Is the supreme good, God, the cause of evil?, finally (3) Is there a supreme evil which is the first cause of all evils?

Article one begins with the objections that good cannot be the cause of the evil. The first uses a quote from Matthew. "A good tree cannot bring forth bad fruit" (Matt 7:18). The second objection argues that nothing can be caused by its contrary and good is the contrary of evil. The third objection argues that an effect which is defective should be the result of a defective cause. From all of this we should conclude that an evil effect would have an evil cause. The final objection is based on Dionysius who claims that evil has no cause at all.¹⁷

As we have seen, Thomas' discussions on the problem of evil are largely based upon what St. Augustine had already done previously. In his general reply to the objections, Thomas quotes from Augustine, "Nothing at all was there from where evil could arise except good."¹⁸ He then goes on to explain that since evil is the absence of a good in a being which should possess it, there must be some cause which causes it not to possess it. Now for something to be a cause, it must have being, and if it has being it must be good. When we consider the definitions of the four causes we see that efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause all imply some perfection and this belongs to the notion of good. Matter also shares in this notion of good in that it is in potentiality to good.¹⁹

Thomas has already shown that good is the material cause of good, since good is the subject of evil. There is no formal cause of evil, since as we have seen evil is the privation of form. Likewise there is no final cause of evil since it is the privation of direction to a due end. So we are left with

efficient cause, and evil does have an efficient cause, one which acts indirectly.²⁰

Thomas then goes on to explain how evil is caused in the action and in its effect. In the action it is due to some deficiency in one of the active principles. He then gives two examples, one where the deficiency is in the principle, a baby's failure to walk due to an undeveloped power or a deficiency in an instrumental cause, the disability of a limb in a cripple.²¹

Then Thomas tells how evil is caused in a thing not as a proper effect of the agent but rather sometimes by the strength of the agent and sometimes because of something wanting either in itself or in the material. An example of being caused by the strength of the agent, i.e. of the form reaching out and necessitating a privation of another form is the form of fire causing the privation of the form of water or air. The more perfect the form, the more completely it will cause the privation of another form. In the case of fire it is not the primary tendency for fire to destroy the forms of water or air, but its tendency is to introduce its own and in doing so it incidentally causes the other. In this way we see the only cause that evil has is accidental, and in this way we say good is the cause of evil.²² We remember here what we have said before of how Thomas views evil as an accident of good. It is not in the normal way we think of accident since it is not for the maintenance and increase of the being's good, but rather the contrary.

Thomas then goes on to answer the objections. In reply to the first, he quotes Augustine's explanation of the Gospel verse

saying that the tree refers to a good will and in this case the objection no longer holds, for a being insofar as it is, is good, whether or not the will be good or bad.²³

To answer the second objection he agrees that nothing is caused by its contrary but says that the evil caused by the good is not its contrary but another sort of evil.²⁴

The deficient cause works differently in natural actions and voluntary actions. The natural agent produces exactly the effects which correspond to its nature, unless it is interfered with by something outside of itself, which then is the cause of its deficiency. In voluntary agents the deficient actions are the product of a perverse will, which does not submit to the Divine rule and measure.²⁵

Finally in his reply to Dionysius' objection that evil has no cause, he replies that evil has no direct cause, but that it does have an accidental or incidental cause.²⁶

In the next article he raises the interesting question, Is the highest good, God, the cause of evil? As we have seen in our discussion of Augustine, this cannot be the case, but each of three objections argues that it is.

The first one is based on Isaiah and Amos, where the prophets record God claiming to create light and darkness, and claiming to allow evil to befall a city.²⁷

The second objection argues that since a secondary cause is dependent on the first cause for its form and action, and since God is the cause of good, and good the cause of evil, God must be the cause of evil.²⁸

The third objection Thomas quotes Aristotles' claim in the Physics that "the same cause is often alleged for opposite effects, for if its presence causes one thing the opposite is laid to its account if it be absent," for example: if the presence of the captain could have prevented the shipwreck, it can also be said that his absence caused it.²⁹

In his general reply Thomas argues that the order of the universe requires that certain things be perishable, and that in willing the order of the universe, God wills whatever is required for that order. That some things perish is therefore willed by God but not their perishing for its own sake, rather their perishing for the sake of good, viz. the order of the universe. Thus God wills physical evil in as much as it is incidental to the working of good. But God does not cause any evil for itself, only that which can be said to be an accident of the good that He wills. Furthermore it cannot be said that God wills any moral evil either for itself or when the consequences it will produce might be good. This is the physical evil which we said would be spoken of in this article. It is clear that it is not evil in the full sense of the term, since the ultimate end is the perfecting of the harmony of the universe.³⁰

The prophets referred to in the first objection are not speaking of evil of fault but rather of evil of punishment, which we have already shown are different.³¹

Thomas' reply to the second objection is that a deficient secondary cause is not derived from a deficient first cause,

but rather a non-deficient cause in relation to what is real and wholly there, and not to what is defective. Therefore all that is real and active in a bad act comes from God as a cause, but not the deficiency which arises from a deficient secondary cause.³²

In reply to the third objection Thomas says it may be said that what Aristotle says about the failure of the pilot of a ship is true, yet it does not apply to God who does not fail to provide everything necessary for our salvation.³³

Finally the third article raises the question, Is there one sovereign evil which is the cause of every evil? It is clear that Thomas is here refuting the theories of dualism which the Albigensians had made prevalent in his time.

The first objection is that contrary effects have contrary causes. Ecclesiasticus is quoted as saying, "Good is set against evil, and life against death; so also the sinner against the good man" (Ecclesiasticus 33:15), thus presenting a table of contrary principles, good on one side evil on the other.³⁴

In the second objection Aristotle is referred to as saying that if one contrary belongs to the nature of things, so too does the other. Now God, the highest good is real, and He is the cause of every good. So therefore, there must be a supreme evil which is the cause of every evil.³⁵

Objection three appeals to the requirement of comparatives. Just as we find that for there to be a good and better there must be a best, so for there to be a bad and worse there must be a worst.³⁶

The fourth objection appeals to a requirement of participation. Whatever exists by participation is what it is owing to the participated essence. The evil things in our environment are evil by participation. Therefore there must be a sovereign essential evil which is the cause of every evil.³⁷

The fifth objection argues that all that exists through another comes back to what exists of itself. We say good is the cause of evil, through the influence of something else. So there must be some supreme evil which is a direct cause of evil.³⁸

The final objection is that a deficient effect must come from a deficient cause and as we cannot have an infinite causal regression, there must be one ultimate evil upon which all evils depend.³⁹

Thomas answers the question generally by saying that there is no supreme evil which is the source of all evil things. The doctrines of dualism are absurd, for there can only be one supreme being, the source of all. Also as has already been shown, the subject of evil is good, and its cause is also good in itself and only accidentally causes evil.⁴⁰

Finally for a supreme evil to exist it would have to destroy all being, in order to be supreme evil, and having destroyed all it would have destroyed itself. This Thomas takes from Aristotle.⁴¹

In reply to objection one. Thomas states that contraries come together in one class in that they share in reality, hence they can all be traced back to a common cause.⁴²

He answers the second objection by saying that possession of a form and deprivation of it both have the same subject; a being in potentiality. Since evil is privation of good it is contrary to that good which has some potentiality, but not at all to that which is pure act having no potentiality. This pure act is God, the highest good.⁴³

To answer the third objection, Thomas argues that the manner in which a thing can go from bad to worse is not the same as the manner in which it can go from good to better. In the latter case something is said to be better as it increasingly conforms to its proper nature. Thus something becomes better by advancing in a state of conformity to its essence. However, something becomes worse as it retreats from this conformity, not as the objection states by advancing toward another nature or essence.⁴⁴

In answer to the fourth objection Thomas states that never is a being evil because it shares in evil, but rather because it lacks some share of the good. Therefore the objection does not hold.⁴⁵

In reply to the fifth objection, Thomas holds that evil has only an indirect cause as he had shown in Article one. Also he argues that the physical evil we experience is only a minor part of the evil in the whole universe. This is so because the universe is predominantly spiritual. The reason physical evil is experienced more widely in humans than in any other species is because what appears to them to be good as creatures of sense is in fact not good for them as reasonable beings.⁴⁶

In response to the final objection Thomas states that there is no problem of an infinite regress in evil causes for as has been shown all evil is caused, albeit indirectly, by good.⁴⁷

In concluding this paper on Thomas' discussion of evil, we are reminded of his discussion of the existence of God in the Summa Theologica, Question 2, where in Article Three the first objection says, "If therefore God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist."⁴⁸ It is really in Question 49 that Thomas fully responds to this objection, and after studying his response with some care, his response seems to me to be sufficient.

Notes

- ¹ Glenn, Paul J.. The History of Philosophy. (St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder Book Co.. 1929.), p.147-148.
- ² Pegis, Anton C.. Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas. (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library. 1948.), p.277.
- ³ Augustine, St.. The Confessions of St. Augustine, translated by John K. Ryan. (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books. 1960.) p. 162-163.
- ⁴ Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, Socrates to Sarte. (New York, N.Y.: McGraw Hill. 1975.), p.149.
- ⁵ Copleston, Frederick, A History of Philosophy, Volume II, Mediaeval Philosophy, Part I, Augustine to Bonaventure. (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books. 1962.) p. 100.
- ⁶ Petit, Francois, The Problem of Evil. (New York, N.Y.: Hawthorn Books. 1959.) p.68.
- ⁷ Hart, Charles A.. Thomistic Metaphysics, An Inquiry Into the Act of Existing. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc.. 1959.) p.365-368.
- ⁸ Maritain, Jacques. Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil. (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press. 1942) p. 2.
- ⁹ Ibid., p.1.
- ¹⁰ Hart, p. 366.
- ¹¹ Petit, p.73.
- ¹² Hart, p.369.
- ¹³ Ibid., p.370.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p.370-371.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p.371.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p.372.
- ¹⁷ Pegis, p.272.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.272-273.

Notes (Cont'd)

²⁰Ibid., p.273.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p.274.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid. p.275.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid. p.275-276.

³¹Ibid. p.276.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid. p.276-277.

³⁷Ibid. p.277.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid. p.277-278.

⁴¹Ibid. p.278.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid. p.278-279.

⁴⁴Ibid. p.279.

Notes (Cont'd)

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid. p.24.

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- Augustine, St.. The Confessions of St. Augustine, translated by John K. Ryan. Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books. 1960.
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