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*Why Does God Permit Evil?*



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# Why Does God Permit Evil?

In the preceding talks we saw that God creates so as to freely communicate goodness outside of Himself. And being infinite goodness, He wills to communicate goodness in a way that maximizes the goodness communicated. Thus God wills to create a universe that maximizes goodness by creating all—or at least very, very many—different levels of goodness.

This maximizing of goodness has various consequences. We have seen that one consequence is the hierarchical structure of creation: some things are higher than others and have a role of headship with regard to lower things. Thus there is a multi-layered inequality in creation. Things are not all equal, but graded in a great many ways.

Another consequence of the maximization of goodness is complementarity. No one creature perfectly manifests God, and so He creates a universe in which opposite or contrasting gifts are given to different creatures, so that the harmony of the whole is a better mirror of God's goodness.

Let us go on to explore another consequence of the maximization of good, which, paradoxically, is the existence of evil. There is evil in the world precisely because God wills to create all the levels of goodness and be maximally liberal with His gifts.

In creating all the levels of goodness, God creates goods that can lose their goodness (perishable things), and goods that must be freely chosen, such as self-giving love. The failure of such goods gives rise to evil: physical evil in the material world and moral evil in the spiritual realm. As we shall see, the great good of God's covenant with man, to which the creature must freely adhere, presupposes the possibility of moral evil.

Here we shall follow St. Thomas Aquinas' treatment of evil in his treatise on creation and St. Augustine in the *Confessions*.

## What Is Evil?

First we must attempt a definition of evil. Some have supposed evil to be a kind of being. Gnostics and Manichees thought that matter is the source of all evil. However, evil is not a particular *kind* of being, but rather a *lack* of being—the lack of what ought to be.

We saw in the first talk that everything that is, insofar as it is, is good. This is manifested by the fact that everything desires to preserve, develop and reproduce its own being. This shows us that being is naturally desirable. The being of things is good. What is evil is their failing to be, or failing to be what they ought to be. Something is evil only insofar as it is not what it ought to be.

St. Thomas gives a succinct definition of evil in *De malo*, q. 1, a. 2: “Evil is nothing other than the privation of a perfection that is due.” In the *Summa of Theology*, I, q. 49, a. 1, he defines it as: “the absence of the good, which is natural and due to a thing.”

In this definition we have two elements. Evil is not simply a lack of being; it is the lack of the being that *ought* to be present according to the nature of a thing. St. Thomas writes:

As was said above, evil implies the absence of good. But not every absence of good is evil. For absence of good can be taken in a *privative* and in a *negative* sense. Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else; for instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is called blindness.<sup>1</sup>

Evil is not simply *non-being*. It is not a simple negation and nothing more. If that were the case, the nothing that existed before creation would be an evil, and all beings would be evil insofar as they *are not* other things, but only what they are.

It can be seen from this that evil can only be present in a thing whose nature is good, and with respect to which the evil is a deformity by lacking what ought to be present.<sup>2</sup>

Given that evil is the lack of good, St. Thomas distinguishes between two ways that something can be lacking: as a negation, and as a *privation*. Every privation lies in a subject that remains essentially good. For example, the lack of sight in a blind man is a privation in a good subject. The lack of good will in a grave sinner is a privation in one whose humanity remains very good.

## Evil Is Known Through Good

Since evil is essentially the lack of a due good, it follows that evil can only be known by contrast with the good that ought to be there. We can only recognize the presence of evil by recognizing the lack of goodness that ought to be in a thing, and we can only recognize the gravity of evil by seeing the value of the goodness that ought to be there. St. Thomas writes: “One opposite is known through the other,

<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 48, a. 3. Whether evil is in the good as in a subject?

<sup>2</sup> It follows that evil is not a real entity. All real beings are either substances or accidents. Evil is a privation, which is an entity of reason.

as darkness is known through light. Hence also what evil is must be known from the nature of good.”<sup>3</sup>

St. Thomas observes that evil cannot be known directly in itself. It is only known through knowledge of goodness, which is recognized to be lacking. There are many important implications of this principle. It is crucial for evangelization, as Pope Francis has emphasized in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Joy in the Gospel*. He says that one should not focus first on negative moral norms, but rather on the great good that underlies the moral norm, whose purpose is to defend that great good.<sup>4</sup> For example, it is the great good of innocent human life made in the image and likeness of God, that underlies the commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” Pope Francis writes:

As for the moral component of catechesis, which promotes growth in fidelity to the Gospel way of life, it is helpful to stress again and again the attractiveness and the ideal of a life of wisdom, self-fulfilment and enrichment. *In the light of that positive message, our rejection of the evils which endanger that life can be better understood.* Rather than experts in dire predictions, dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation, we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel.”

It also follows that sin is essentially murky. We speak of sin as being “dark” whereas good is light. This is because only goodness is intelligible and illuminates the mind. Sin is only intelligible through the fact that something good in some way is sought in it.

### **Why Is There Evil in Things?**

In *STI*, q. 48, a. 2, St. Thomas asks a rather silly question: “Whether evil is found in things?” His reply, however, is profound. He does not simply state the obvious fact that there is evil in the world, but he explains why God permits there to be evil in the world. This purpose is precisely to make possible the fullest perfection of the universe:

<sup>3</sup> *STI*, q. 48, a. 1 (Whether evil is a certain nature?).

<sup>4</sup> See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 168 (my italics). See also *EG* 159: “Another feature of a good homily is that it is positive. It is not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn’t be done, but with suggesting what we can do better. In any case, if it does draw attention to something negative, it will also attempt to point to a positive and attractive value, lest it remain mired in complaints, laments, criticisms and reproaches. Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity. How good it is when priests, deacons and the laity gather periodically to discover resources which can make preaching more attractive!” See also *EG* 39: “Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk.”

I answer that as was said above (47, 1,2), the perfection of the universe requires that there should be inequality in things, so that every grade of goodness may be realized. Now, one grade of goodness is that of the good which cannot fail. Another grade of goodness is that of the good which can fail in goodness, and both grades are found to exist; for there are some things which cannot lose their existence as incorruptible things, while some there are which can lose it, as things corruptible.

As, therefore, the perfection of the universe requires that there should be not only incorruptible, but also corruptible beings; so the perfection of the universe requires that there should be some which can fail in goodness, and thence it follows that sometimes they do fail. Now it is in this that evil consists, namely, in the fact that a thing fails in goodness. Hence it is clear that evil is found in things, as corruption also is found; for corruption is itself a certain kind of evil.

Although corruption of a thing is an evil for the thing that is corrupted, its existence as a corruptible being is itself good, both in itself and for the sake of the order of the whole universe.

### **The contribution of St. Augustine**

A principal source that St. Thomas uses in relation to the problem of evil is St. Augustine. In the *Confessions*, he relates that before his conversion he could not explain the problem of the origin of evil, and followed the Manichees, who tried to resolve the problem of the existence of evil by asserting that it is caused by matter. All evil, according to them, is caused by an eternal material principle of evil, identified more or less with the grossness of corporeal matter, in which the soul had become imprisoned by some primordial battle between good and evil.

This doctrine has a very significant consequence with regard to culpability for sin. According to this view, the ultimate responsibility for sin is not attributed to free will (which is more or less denied), but ascribed instead to the influence of the evil material principle, which works sin in us, more or less necessarily. The result is that we are not personally responsible for sin. Obviously such a notion is flattering to our pride, for it takes away our culpability. At the same time, such a doctrine makes a true and sincere act of contrition for sin impossible. Thus such a doctrine is a tremendous obstacle to conversion.

What happened to St. Augustine 1,600 years ago continues to happen today, although explained perhaps in different words. Modern thought works to take away personal responsibility and to destroy the very notion of personal sin. It has been said that the great sin of the contemporary world is the loss of the notion of sin. The dominant schools of modern psychology tend to deny personal responsibility and sin, attributing all “inappropriate behavior” (for the very word “sin” has been banished from the terminology of psychology) to the influence of the environment, or to our genes.

Finally, shortly before his conversion, St. Augustine saw that corporeal and corruptible nature cannot be an evil in itself, but must in fact be good, for otherwise harm or evil could not happen to it by its corruption. The fact that corruption is a loss of some good in a thing shows that the being of corruptible things is good, and loss or corruption is evil because it takes away some of its good. Thus St. Augustine affirms the real equality between being and good. In book 7 of the *Confessions*, he says:

It was obvious to me that things which are liable to corruption are good. If they were the supreme goods, or if they were not good at all, they could not be corrupted. For if they were supreme goods, they would be incorruptible. If there were no good in them, there would be nothing capable of being corrupted. Corruption does harm and unless it diminishes the good, no harm would be done. Therefore either corruption does not harm, which cannot be the case, or (which is wholly certain) all things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good. If they were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all. If they were to exist and to be immune from corruption, they would be superior because they would be permanently incorruptible. What could be more absurd than to say that by losing all good, things are made better? So then, if they are deprived of all good, they will be nothing at all. Therefore as long as they exist, they are good. According, whatever things exist are good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance,<sup>5</sup> for if it were a substance, it would be good. Either it would be an incorruptible substance, a great good indeed, or a corruptible substance, which could be corrupted only if it were good. Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make.<sup>6</sup> As you did not make all things equal, all things are good in the sense that taken individually they are good, and all things taken together are very good. For our God has made “all things very good” (Gen 1:31).<sup>7</sup> . . . But in the parts of the universe, there are certain elements which are thought evil because of a conflict of interest. These elements are congruous with other elements and as such are good, and are also good in themselves.<sup>8</sup>

### Evil Is Permitted for the Sake of the Common Good of the Universe

In this passage of the *Confessions*, St. Augustine comes to see that God permits evil to happen to one or another part of the universe for the sake of the common good of the entire universe which requires the complementary presence of all the levels of goodness, including corruptible goods, whose corruption is an evil. St. Thomas makes the same point in the *Summa of Theology* I, q. 48, a. 2, ad 3:

<sup>5</sup> That is, evil is not a certain nature, as the Manicheans thought.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Manicheans, material and corruptible things are not the product of God, but of an Evil Principle.

<sup>7</sup> The order of the whole universe is a greater good than the sum of its parts. St. Augustine sees this principle in Genesis 1:31: “And God saw *all* the things that He had made, and they were *very good*.”

<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.12–13.18–19, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 124–125.

God and nature and any other agent make what is best in the whole, but not what is best in every single part, except in order to the whole, as was said above (q. 47, a. 2). And the whole itself, which is the universe of creatures, is all the better and more perfect if some things in it can fail in goodness, and do sometimes fail, God not preventing this. This happens, firstly, because ‘it belongs to Providence not to destroy, but to save nature,’ as Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* iv); but it belongs to nature that what may fail should sometimes fail; secondly, because, as Augustine says (*Enchir.* 11), ‘God is so powerful that He can even make good out of evil.’ Hence many good things would be taken away if God permitted no evil to exist; for fire would not be generated if air was not corrupted, nor would the life of a lion be preserved unless the ass were killed. Neither would avenging justice nor the patience of a sufferer be praised if there were no injustice.

Many people think that all inequality in the universe and in society is an evil. This is the position of socialism and communism. However, that is obviously not the case. Inequality in creatures permits the good of a hierarchical order, which is composed of unequal levels. This order of the universe, according to Aristotle, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, is precisely the common good of the universe, which is what God primarily aims at in creation. This order requires that in addition to incorruptible goods, there also be corruptible goods, whose corruption is an evil. God does not desire evil and death, etc., directly in themselves, but He does desire the existence of corruptible and contingent goods. And this naturally involves the existence of evil. That is why St. Thomas says that many goods would be suppressed if God did not permit any evil.

Evil can contribute to the order of the universe only in an accidental way, because of the good that it accompanies. For example, the moral evil of those who persecute the Christians makes it possible for martyrs to practice constancy and gain their crown; and the death of some animals (a physical evil) provides for the alimentation of others, etc.

### Physical and Moral Evil

We can better understand St. Thomas’ argument here by distinguishing two kinds of evil: physical and moral evil. *Physical evil* is the corruption of the natural perfections of material things. Physical evil is the natural consequence of the fact that material things are inherently temporal and subject to change, development, and corruption by their very nature. Material things have a level of goodness that is intrinsically temporary. Hence they are goods that will naturally fail in goodness so as to make room for other good things.

Moral evil is a very particular lack of goodness. It is the lack of the fullness of goodness that ought to be present in a free human act. What goodness ought to be present? Above all, the goodness of order. A free human act is made possible by reason and its ability to order particular means

to universal ends. Most fundamentally, a human act should be ordered by reason to the true final end of human life. If it is rightly so ordered, then it will have the fullness of being that it ought to have and will be good. An act will be evil if it is contrary to the order that right reason should establish in the act. Moral evil therefore is the corruption of the order that should reign between the free and voluntary acts of the rational creature and the dictates of reason. Moral evil is another name for sin.

Sin and vice, for example, consist in a lack of right order and charity in human acts. In particular, this lack of right order lies in the lack of conformity with first moral principles, which themselves are a participation of the eternal law of God by which free acts are ordered to their true final end. Every sin is a lack of conformity with reason and its first principles.

Although God never desires moral evil, it is made possible by the great good of free will. Free will is such a great level of goodness because it makes possible a participation of the creature in God's providence, and enables the creature to freely give himself back to God and neighbor in charity. It makes possible the very greatest goods that are present in creation: acts of love.

### ***God Is Not the Direct Cause of Evil***

On the basis of what we have seen, we can now pose the question which is the title of this talk. Is God the first cause of evil? Why does God permit evil? St. Thomas poses this question in the *Summa of Theology*, I, q. 49, a. 2, which is a masterpiece. He poses three objections:

Objection 1: It would seem that the supreme good, God, is the cause of evil. For it is said (Is. 45:5, 7): "I am the Lord, and there is no other God, forming the light, and creating darkness, making peace, and creating evil." And Amos 3:6, "Shall there be evil in a city, which the Lord hath not done?"

Objection 2: Further, the effect of the secondary cause is reduced to the first cause. But good is the cause of evil, as was said above (a. 1). Therefore, since God is the cause of every good, as was shown above, it follows that also every evil is from God.

Objection 3: Further, as is said by the Philosopher in *Physics* 2, the cause of both safety and danger of the ship is the same. But God is the cause of the safety of all things. Therefore He is the cause of all perdition and of all evil.

To show that God is not the direct cause of evil, St. Thomas cites St. Augustine, who says that "God is not the author of evil because He is not the cause of tending to not-being."

He then begins his explanation of the origin of evil by distinguishing moral evil, physical evil, and the evil that is a penalty for sin. Moral evil consists in free actions that are voluntarily disordered, deviating from the divine law and not ordered to our true final end. This disorder is not due to God in any way, but only to the creature who freely

fails to consider the divine law and charity, preferring some private good to which he is culpably attached:

I answer that, as appears from what was said (a. 1), the evil which consists in the defect of action is always caused by the defect of the agent. But in God there is no defect, but the highest perfection, as was shown above (q. 4, a. 1). Hence, the evil which consists in defect of action, or which is caused by defect of the agent, is not reduced to God as to its cause.

The other two kinds of evil: physical evil and penalty, are indirectly attributed to God, because is the Author of the order of the world of which such evils are a part, even though they are not willed for their own sake, but only for the sake of the common good of the whole:

But the evil which consists in the corruption of some things is reduced to God as the cause. And this appears as regards both natural things and voluntary things. For it was said (1) that some agent inasmuch as it produces by its power a form to which follows corruption and defect, causes by its power that corruption and defect. But it is *manifest that the form which God chiefly intends in things created is the good of the order of the universe*. Now, the order of the universe requires, as was said above (22, 2, ad 2; 48, 2), that there should be some things that can, and do sometimes, fail. And thus *God, by causing in things the good of the order of the universe, consequently and as it were by accident, causes the corruptions of things*, according to 1 Kings 2:6: "The Lord killeth and maketh alive." But when we read that "God hath not made death" (Wisdom 1:13), the sense is that *God does not will death for its own sake*. Nevertheless the order of justice belongs to the order of the universe; and this requires that penalty should be dealt out to sinners. And so *God is the author of the evil which is penalty, but not of the evil which is fault*, by reason of what is said above.

St. Thomas then returns to answer the objections. With regard to the first objection, he explains that the texts from Scripture cited "refer to the evil of penalty, and not to the evil of fault."

In response to the second objection, he writes:

The effect of the deficient secondary cause is reduced to the first non-deficient cause as regards what it has of being and perfection, but not as regards what it has of defect; just as whatever there is of motion in the act of limping is caused by the motive power, whereas what there is of obliqueness in it does not come from the motive power, but from the curvature of the leg. And, likewise, whatever there is of being and action in a bad action, is reduced to God as the cause; whereas whatever defect is in it is not caused by God, but by the deficient secondary cause.

In every sin, God maintains the sinner and his rational nature which is very good, although it is through it that the sinner is able to sin.

This is an illustration of a fundamental principle that we shall return to in the following talks on the covenants that God has established with man: God is faithful to the order He has established, even though His rational creatures are

frequently unfaithful to it and voluntarily fall away from that order. St. Paul writes to Timothy: “If we endure, we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:12–13).

Philosophers use a principle: “Abuse should not be allowed to take away right use.” God does not allow the abuse of freedom on our part, foreseen from all eternity, to take away its right use. On the contrary, He maintains us in being even in our sin, so that we can have an opportunity for repentance.

In response to the third objection, St. Thomas writes:

The sinking of a ship is attributed to the sailor as the cause, from the fact that he does not fulfil what the safety of the ship requires; but God does not fail in doing what is necessary for the safety of all. Hence there is no parity.

If a sailor neglects his duty, the sinking of the ship is attributed to his negligence. However, God is not negligent for He gives sufficient grace to all to be saved. Thus any misuse of His grace must be attributed to the creature who fails to correspond to the graces given to him abundantly by God.

### **Why Does God Permit Moral Evil?**

Sin is never God’s fault, for it comes about through the voluntary defect of the free will of the creature who chooses a lesser good over a higher good in violation of the Law of God. However, God wills to permit it, to uphold the natural moral order He has created which includes the *freedom of the human will* which can fall away from goodness through its own fault, if it so chooses. Ben Sirach 15:11–20 magnificently summarizes this doctrine:

Do not say, “Because of the Lord I left the right way”; for he will not do what he hates.<sup>12</sup> Do not say, “It was he who led me astray”; for he had no need of a sinful man.<sup>13</sup> The Lord hates all abominations, and they are not loved by those who fear him.<sup>14</sup> It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination.<sup>15</sup> If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.<sup>16</sup> He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish.<sup>17</sup> Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him. . . . He has not commanded any one to be ungodly, and he has not given any one permission to sin.

Furthermore, the existence of moral evils accidentally creates opportunities for the greater exercise of moral and supernatural virtues. The moral evil of persecution (such as that of Nero, Stalin, Hitler, etc.) provides an opportunity for the martyrs to achieve a level of courage, faith and pardon, perseverance, charity, and merit which otherwise they would not have attained. If no one ever gave us a hard time in any way, where would be the merit of our patience and charity? How could we show to God that we truly love Him above all things, if we had nothing

to suffer for His sake? How could we grow in virtue, if our neighbors displayed no moral evils, in which virtue is tested and proven?

For example, if God had not permitted St. Augustine to stray miserably from the faith and from purity for eleven years, the world would have been deprived of the supernatural merit of the tears of St. Monica, which won from God the gift of her son’s conversion. We can apply the same reasoning to the sufferings of all parents, spouses, or friends for their straying children or loved ones.

The *true end of Creation is the possession of supernatural charity*, and so God permits sin and evil so that charity may be given further impetus and scope. If our neighbor had no spiritual or physical ills, how could we learn in charity to sacrifice ourselves for his welfare and salvation?

The perfection of a work is to be judged by the end for which it is made. God made man for a moral purpose: to learn to grow freely in love for God and neighbor, and to develop moral character and virtue. For this end, freedom of the will is necessary, as well as the opportunity to develop our character and prove our love through hardships, which at times can be very trying indeed. Nevertheless, we can be certain that God never tries us beyond our strength.

The Bible is full of tremendous examples: Job on the dung heap, Tobit, Abraham who was asked to sacrifice his own son, St. Joseph when he saw that Mary was with child, Our Lady at the foot of the Cross, and finally, our Lord on Calvary. In all of these cases, the trial was obviously permitted for a greater good: to provide an opportunity for greater merit and for the greater manifestation of faith, hope, and charity. (Obviously, the case of Christ is absolutely special, for He did not grow in love through suffering, as the rest of us are called to do, but suffered rather to manifest the fullness of His love and so redeem man.)

The necessity of suffering for spiritual growth can be formulated as an axiom: The greater the perfection of charity we hope to achieve, the more we shall have to participate in the Cross of Christ.

Finally, let us ask why God permitted the sin of Adam. For God could have given to Adam and Eve a fullness of grace such as was given to the Virgin. Why did He not do so? The liturgy of the Church gives us a hint here, for in the Easter Vigil Mass, the Church sings the words, *felix culpa*: “O happy fault of Adam which merited us such a Savior.” God permitted the sin of Adam with all the tremendous evils that it brought in its wake, so as to remedy that sin with the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, which is the greatest manifestation of God’s glory that can be conceived.

In summary, God permits sin for the sake of a greater good. What is this greater good? There is a twofold greater good. The first of these is free will itself and the world order that depends on it. The second is to make possible

certain goods that wouldn't otherwise be able to exist, such fidelity in trial, patience in martyrdom, redemptive suffering, heroic forgiveness, compassion and mercy, intercessory prayer, heroic love manifested through will to endure great suffering for the beloved, and especially the redemptive love of Jesus Christ.