

Article 5

**Is an act of willing bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken?**

It seems that an act of willing is not bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken:

**Objection 1:** As has been explained (a. 4), it is insofar as it is derived from the eternal law that reason is a rule for human acts of willing. But when reason is mistaken, it is not derived from the eternal law. Therefore, when reason is mistaken, it is not a rule for human acts of willing. Therefore, an act of willing is not bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken.

**Objection 2:** According to Augustine, the precept of a lower power does not impose an obligation (*non obligat*) if it is contrary to the precept of a higher power—as, for instance, if a proconsul commands something that the emperor forbids. But when reason is mistaken, it sometimes proposes something that is contrary to the precept of someone higher, viz., God, whose power is the highest. Therefore, when reason is mistaken, its dictate does not impose an obligation. Therefore, it is not the case that an act of willing is bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken.

**Objection 3:** Every bad act of willing is traced back to some species of badness. But if an act of willing disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken, then that act cannot be traced back to any species of badness. For instance, if reason makes a mistake by dictating that one ought to fornicate, then the act of willing of someone who does not will to fornicate cannot be traced back to any sort of badness. Therefore, an act of willing is not bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken.

**But contrary to this:** As was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 79, a. 13), conscience is nothing other than an application of knowledge to some act. But knowledge exists in reason. Therefore, an act of willing that disagrees with mistaken reason is contrary to conscience. But every such act of willing is bad; for Romans 14:23 says, “Everything that is not of faith is a sin”—that is, everything that is contrary to conscience. Therefore, an act of willing is bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken.

**I respond:** Since conscience is in some sense a dictate of reason (for, as was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 79, a. 13), conscience is a certain sort of application of knowledge to an act), it follows that asking whether an act of willing is bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken is the same as asking whether a mistaken conscience imposes an obligation.

On this matter, there are those who have distinguished three types of acts: (a) some acts are *good of their kind* (*boni ex genere*), (b) some acts are *indifferent* (*indifferentes*), and (c) some are *bad of their kind* (*mali ex genere*).

Then they claim that if reason or conscience dictates that something which is good of its kind should be done, then there is no mistake in such a case. The same holds if reason or conscience says that something which is evil of its kind should not be done; for good things are prescribed for the same reason that bad things are forbidden.

However, if reason or conscience dictates to a man that (a) he is obligated by precept to do things that are in their own right bad, or that (b) things that are in their own right good are prohibited, then reason or conscience will be mistaken. And, similarly, if reason or conscience dictates to someone that what is in its own right indifferent, e.g., picking up a leaf from the ground, is forbidden or commanded, then reason or conscience will be mistaken.

Thus, they claim that when reason or conscience is mistaken about something indifferent, either by commanding it or by forbidding it, then it imposes an obligation, with the result that an act of willing that disagrees with reason in such a case will be bad or a sin. By contrast, when reason or conscience is mistaken because it commands what is *per se* bad or because it forbids what is *per se* good and necessary

for salvation, then it does not impose an obligation. Hence, in such case an act of willing is not bad if it disagrees with reason or conscience when reason or conscience is mistaken.

But it is implausible to make these claims. For in the case of indifferent acts, if an act of willing disagrees with reason or conscience when reason or conscience is mistaken, then the act is, to be sure, in some sense bad because of its object, on which the goodness or badness of an act of willing depend. However, the act is bad not because of the object's *own nature* (*non propter obiectum secundam sui naturam*), but rather because reason apprehends the object *per accidens* as something bad to do or avoid. And since, as has been explained (a. 3), the object of an act of willing is what is proposed by reason, by the very fact that something is proposed by reason as bad, an act of willing takes on the character of something bad when it is directed toward that thing.

Moreover, this happens not only in the case of indifferent acts, but also in the case of acts that are *per se* good or *per se* bad. For it is not only what is indifferent that can take on the character of goodness or badness *per accidens*; it is likewise the case that, because of reason's apprehension, what is good can take on the character of badness and what is bad can take on the character of goodness. For instance, abstaining from fornication is a certain good, and yet the will is not directed toward this good except insofar as it is proposed by reason. Therefore, if it is proposed as something bad by reason when reason is mistaken, then an act of willing will be directed toward it under the notion of badness. Hence, the act of willing will be bad, since it wills something bad—not, to be sure, something that is bad *per se*, but something that is bad *per accidens* because of reason's apprehension. Similarly, believing in Christ is *per se* good and necessary for salvation, but an act of willing is directed toward this good only insofar as it is proposed by reason. Hence, if believing in Christ is proposed as something bad, then an act of willing will be directed toward it as something bad—not because it is bad in its own right, but because it is bad *per accidens* in light of reason's apprehension.

This is why, in *Ethics 7*, the Philosopher says, "Speaking *per se*, the incontinent man is one who does not follow correct reason; however, speaking *per accidens*, he is one who does not follow even incorrect reason." Hence, one should claim that, absolutely speaking, every act of willing that disagrees with reason—regardless of whether reason is correct or mistaken—is invariably bad.

**Reply to objection 1:** Even though, when reason is mistaken, its judgment is not derived from God, nonetheless, reason, though mistaken, proposes its judgment as true and, consequently, as derived from God, from whom all truth comes.

**Reply to objection 2:** Augustine's claim has a place when the lower power is known to be prescribing something contrary to the higher power's precept. But if someone believed that the proconsul's precept were the emperor's precept, then by disdaining the proconsul's precept he would be disdaining the emperor's precept. Similarly, if a man knew that human reason were dictating something contrary to God's precept, he would not be obligated to follow reason, but in that case reason would not be totally mistaken. On the other hand, if, though it is mistaken, reason proposes something as God's precept, then disdaining reason's dictate is the same as disdaining God's precept.

**Reply to objection 3:** When reason apprehends something as bad, it always apprehends it under some type of badness—for instance, its being contrary to God's precept, or its being scandalous, or for some other such reason. And in such a case it is to this species of badness that the bad act of willing is traced back.

## Article 6

### Is an act of willing good if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken?

It seems that an act of willing is good if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken:

**Objection 1:** Just as an act of willing that disagrees with reason tends toward what reason judges

to be bad, so an act of willing that agrees with reason tends toward what reason judges to be good. But an act of willing that disagrees with reason is bad, even when reason is mistaken. Therefore, an act of willing that agrees with reason is good, even when reason is mistaken.

**Objection 2:** It is always the case that an act of willing that agrees with God's precept and with the natural law is good. But the eternal law and God's precept are proposed to us through reason's apprehension, even when reason is mistaken. Therefore, an act of willing that agrees reason is good, even when reason is mistaken.

**Objection 3:** An act of willing is bad if it disagrees with reason when reason is mistaken. Therefore, if an act of willing is likewise bad if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken, then it seems that every act of willing that belongs to a man whose reason is mistaken is invariably bad. And so the man in question will be in a dilemma (*erit perplexus*) and will of necessity sin—which seems wrong. Therefore, an act of willing is good if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken.

**But contrary to this:** The act of willing that belonged to those who killed the Apostles was bad. But it nonetheless agreed with their mistaken reason—this according to John 16:2 (“The hour will come when everyone who kills you will think that he is rendering a service to God”). Therefore, an act of willing can be bad if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken.

**I respond:** Just as the previous question was the same as the question of whether a mistaken conscience imposes an obligation, so the present question is the same as the question of whether a mistaken conscience excuses.

Now this question depends on what was said in the question above about ignorance (q. 6, a. 8). For it was explained above that ignorance is sometimes a cause of involuntariness and sometimes not. And since, as is clear from what has gone before (a. 2), moral goodness and moral badness (*bonum et malum morale*) are found in an act insofar as it is voluntary, it is obvious that the sort of ignorance which is a cause of involuntariness removes the character of moral goodness and moral badness, whereas the sort of ignorance which is not a cause of involuntariness does not. It was also explained above (q. 6, a. 8) that ignorance which is in any sense willed, whether directly or indirectly, is not a cause of involuntariness. I call ignorance *directly voluntary* when an act of willing is directed toward it, whereas I call ignorance *indirectly voluntary* when, because of negligence, someone does not will to know what he is obligated to know—this was explained above (q. 6, a. 8).

Thus, if reason or conscience is mistaken because of a voluntary error, either directly or because of negligence, then since this involves a mistake about what one is obligated to know, it follows that such a mistake on the part of reason or conscience does not excuse an act of willing from being bad if it agrees with reason or conscience when they are mistaken in this way.

On the other hand, if the mistake in question is the sort of mistake that is a cause of involuntariness and that arises from ignorance of a circumstance without any negligence, then such a mistake on the part of reason or conscience does excuse, so that the act of willing is not bad if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken. For instance, if reason mistakenly dictates that a man is obligated to have intercourse with another man's wife, an act of willing is bad if it agrees with reason when reason is mistaken in this way; for this mistake arises from not knowing God's law, which one is obligated to know. On the other hand, if reason is mistaken in such a way that a man believes that a certain woman who submits to him is his own wife, and if he has intercourse with her when she seeks it, then his act of willing is excused as not bad, because the mistake in question arose from ignorance of a circumstance, and this sort of ignorance excuses and is a cause of involuntariness.

**Reply to objection 1:** As Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, “Goodness results from the whole cause, whereas evil is caused by any single defect.” And so in order for what the will is directed toward to be called bad, it is sufficient that it be bad by its nature or that it be apprehended as bad. But in order for it to be good, it is necessary for it to be good in both ways.

**Reply to objection 2:** The eternal law cannot be mistaken, but human reason can be mistaken. And so an act of willing that agrees with human reason is not always correct and does not always agree

with the eternal law.

**Reply to objection 3:** Just as, in syllogistic reasoning, when one incongruity is granted, other incongruities necessarily follow, so too, in moral matters, when one incongruity is posited, others follow by necessity. For instance, on the assumption that someone is seeking empty glory, he will sin regardless of whether what he is obligated to do is such that (a) he does it because of vainglory or (b) he fails to do it. Yet he is not in a dilemma, since he can abandon his bad intention.

Similarly, on the assumption that there is a mistake on the part of reason or conscience because of the sort of ignorance that does not excuse, badness will necessarily follow in the act of willing. And yet the man in question is not in a dilemma, since he can draw back from the mistake, given that his ignorance is vincible and voluntary.