

QUESTION 48

The Distinction between Good and Evil

The next thing to consider is the diversity among things in particular: first, the distinction between good and evil (questions 48 and 49), and then the distinction between spiritual creatures and corporeal creatures (question 50). As for the former, we must inquire first into evil (question 48) and then into the cause of evil (question 49)

On the first of these topics there are six questions: (1) Is evil a sort of nature (*natura aliqua*)? (2) Is evil found in things? (3) Is the good the subject of evil? (4) Does evil totally corrupt the good? (5) Is evil divided into the evil of punishment and the evil of sin? (6) Which of the two, punishment or sin, has more of the character of evil?

Article 1

Is evil a sort of nature?

It seems that evil is a sort of nature (*natura quaedam*):

Objection 1: Every genus is a sort of nature. But evil is a genus, since according to the *Categories*, “Good and evil are not in a genus, but are instead the genera of other things.” Therefore, evil is a sort of nature.

Objection 2: Every difference that constitutes a species is a sort of nature. But evil is a constitutive difference in morals, since a bad habit (e.g., stinginess) differs in species from a good habit (e.g., generosity). Therefore, ‘evil’ signifies a sort of nature.

Objection 3: Two contraries are such that each is a sort of nature. But good and evil are opposed as contraries—and not as a habit and a privation. The Philosopher proves this in the *Categories* from the fact that there is a middle ground between good and evil, and also from the fact that a return can be made from being evil to being good. Therefore, ‘evil’ signifies a sort of nature.

Objection 4: What does not exist does not act. But evil acts, since it corrupts the good. Therefore, evil is a sort of entity and thus a sort of nature.

Objection 5: Only that which is a being and a sort of nature contributes to the perfection of the totality of things. But evil contributes to the perfection of the totality of things. For as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*, “The admirable beauty of the totality consists in everything; indeed, even that which is called evil, when it is rightly ordered and kept in its place, makes the good stand out more prominently.” Therefore, evil is a sort of nature.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “Evil is neither a being nor a good.”

I respond: One of two opposites is grasped through the other, e.g., darkness through light. Hence, one must come to understand what evil is on the basis of the notion of the good. Now we said above (q. 5, a. 1) that the good is whatever is desirable. And so, since every nature desires its own *esse* and its own perfection, one must claim that the *esse* and perfection of each nature has the character of the good. Hence, it cannot be the case that ‘evil’ signifies any sort of *esse* or form, i.e., any sort of nature. It follows that the name ‘evil’ signifies an absence of the good. Moreover, evil is said to be “neither a being nor a good” by reason of the fact that since a being as such is good, the denial of ‘being’ is the same as the denial of ‘good’.

Reply to objection 1: In the place cited, Aristotle is talking in accord with the opinion of the Pythagoreans, who thought that evil is a sort of nature and so posited good and evil as genera. For, especially in his logical books, Aristotle often used examples that in his day were plausible in the opinion

of certain philosophers.

An alternative reply, in keeping with what the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics* 10, is that “the first sort of contrariety is between a habit and its privation.” For this sort of contrariety is preserved in all pairs of contraries, since it is always the case that one of the contraries is imperfect in relation to the other—in the way that *black* is imperfect in relation to *white*, and *bitter* in relation to *sweet*. And it is in this sense that *good* and *evil* are called genera—not genera absolutely speaking, but rather genera of contraries. For just as every form has the character of the good, so too every privation as such has the character of evil.

Reply to objection 2: Good and bad are constitutive differences only in the case of morals, since moral [acts and habits] take their species from the end, which is the object of the will, on which moral matters depend. It is because the good has the character of an end that good and evil are specific differences in moral matters—the good *per se*, and evil insofar as it is the negation of a fitting end. Yet the negation of a fitting end constitutes a species in moral matters only insofar as it is accompanied by some unfit end—just as, in natural things, the privation of a substantial form is found only when it is conjoined with some other form. So, then, the evil that is a constitutive difference in morals is a certain good conjoined with the privation of some other good. For instance, the end of an intemperate man is not to lack the good of reason, but instead to have some sensual delight outside the order of reason. Hence, it is not evil *qua* evil that is a constitutive difference; rather, evil is a constitutive difference by reason of some good that is conjoined with it.

Reply to objection 3: The last reply makes clear the reply to this third objection. For in the place cited, the Philosopher is talking about good and evil insofar as they are found in morals. In this sense there is a middle ground between good and evil, since the good is that which is well-ordered and the evil is that which is not only disordered but also harmful to another. Hence, in *Ethics* 4 the Philosopher says that a spendthrift is vain, but not evil.

In addition, it is from this sort of evil, viz., moral evil—and not from just any evil—that a return can be made to the good. For there is no return to being sighted from being blind, even though blindness is a sort of evil.

Reply to objection 4: There are three ways in which something is said to act.

First, something is said to act *formally*, in the manner of speaking in which whiteness is said to make a thing white. And in this sense evil, by reason of the privation itself, is likewise said to corrupt the good because it is itself a corruption, i.e., privation, of the good.

Second, something is said to act *effectively*, in the way that a painter is said to make a wall white.

Third, something is said to act in the manner of a *final cause*, in the sense that an end is said to make something happen by moving an efficient cause.

In neither of these last two ways does evil do anything *per se*, i.e., insofar as it is a privation; rather, it acts in these two ways only insofar as some good is conjoined with it. For every action begins from some form, and everything that is desired as an end is a perfection. This is why in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that evil neither acts nor is desired except in virtue of some good that is conjoined with it, whereas by itself (*per se*) it is indeterminate (*infinitum*) and lies beyond the will and beyond intention.

Reply to objection 5: As was explained above (q. 44, a. 3), the parts of the universe are ordered to one another to the extent that (a) one acts on another and that (b) one is an end of and exemplar for another. But as has been explained, these ways of acting cannot belong to evil except by reason of some good that is conjoined with it. Hence, it is only *per accidens*, i.e., by reason of a conjoined good, that evil pertains to the perfection of the universe and is included under the order of the universe.

Article 2

Is evil found in things?

It seems that evil is not found in things:

Objection 1: Whatever is found in things is either a being or the privation of a being, i.e., a non-being. But in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that evil is far from a being (*existens*) and even further from a non-being. Therefore, there is no way in which evil is found in things.

Objection 2: *Being (ens)* and *thing (res)* are convertible. Therefore, if evil is a being in things, it follows that evil is a sort of thing—which is contrary to what was said above (a. 1).

Objection 3: As Aristotle says in *Topics* 3, “What is whiter is that which has less black mixed in with it.” Therefore, what is better is that which has less evil mixed in with it. But God—even more than nature—always makes what is better. Therefore, no evil is found in the things made by God.

But contrary to this: If these objections were correct, then there would be no prohibitions or punishments, since prohibitions and punishments have to do only with evils.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 47, a. 2), the perfection of the universe requires that there be inequality among things, so that all the grades of goodness might be filled in.

Now one grade of goodness is for a thing to be good in such a way that it can never fail with respect to its goodness, whereas another grade of goodness is for a thing to be good in such a way that it is able to fail with respect to its goodness. These two grades are found in *esse* itself. For there are some things—e.g., incorporeal things—that cannot lose their *esse*, whereas there are other things—e.g., corporeal things—that can lose their *esse*.

Therefore, just as the perfection of the totality of things requires that there be not only incorruptible entities but also corruptible entities, so too the perfection of the universe requires that there be some things that can fail with respect to their goodness—from which it follows that they sometimes do so fail. Now the notion of evil consists in something’s failing with respect to the good. Hence, it is clear that evil is found in things, in the same way that corruption is. For corruption itself is a certain sort of evil.

Reply to objection 1: Evil is far both from being, absolutely speaking, and from non-being, absolutely speaking, since it is neither a habit nor a pure negation, but is instead a privation.

Reply to objection 2: As *Metaphysics* 5 asserts, *being (ens)* is said in two ways.

In one way, it signifies the positive being (*entitas*) of a thing (*res*), as divided by the ten categories, and is thus convertible with *thing*. In this sense no privation is a being, and hence in this sense evil is not a being, either.

In the second way, *being* signifies the truth of a proposition, which consists in a composition whose characteristic mark is the verb ‘is’, and it is this sense of *being* with which one replies to the question ‘Is there ___?’. This is the sense in which we say that there is blindness in the eye—and so on for any other privation. And it is in this sense that evil is likewise called a being.

Now it is because they did not understand this distinction that certain writers, noting that some things are called evil or that there is said to be evil in things, came to believe that evil is a sort of positive thing (*res*).

Reply to objection 3: As was explained above (q. 47, a. 2), God or nature (or any other agent, for that matter) effects what is best overall, but not what is best in each part—except in the sense of what is best in its ordering to the whole. But the whole that is the totality of creatures is better and more perfect if it contains some things that are able to lose their good and do in fact sometimes lose their good when God does not prevent it. There are two reasons for this.

First, as Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, it belongs to providence to preserve

nature rather than to destroy it, and the nature of things is such that things that are able to lose their good sometimes do lose their good.

Second, as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*, God is so powerful that He is able to do well even with evil. Hence, many goods would be destroyed if God did not permit evil. For fire would not be generated if air were not corrupted; and the lion's life would not be preserved if the ass were not killed; and if there were no wickedness, then vindicating justice and long-suffering patience would not be praised.

Article 3

Does evil have what is good as its subject?

It seems that evil does not have what is good as its subject:

Objection 1: All good things are existent things (*existentia*). But in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that evil is neither an existent thing nor in an existent thing. Therefore, evil does not have what is good as its subject.

Objection 2: Evil is not a being (*ens*), whereas the good is a being. But a non-being does not require a being in which to exist as in a subject. Therefore, evil does not require a good in which to exist as in a subject.

Objection 3: One of two contraries is not the subject of the other contrary. But good and evil are contraries. Therefore, evil does not have what is good as its subject.

Objection 4: That which whiteness has as its subject is said to be white. Therefore, that which evil has as its subject is likewise evil. Therefore, if evil has what is good as its subject, it follows that what is good is evil—which is contrary to Isaiah 5:20, “Woe to you who call evil good and good evil.”

But contrary to this: In the *Enchiridion* Augustine says that evil does not exist except in what is good.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), ‘evil’ implies the negation of a good. However, not just any negation of a good is called evil. For the negation of a good can be understood either *privatively* or *negatively*.

The negation of a good, as understood *negatively*, does not have the character of evil, since otherwise it would follow that things which do not exist in any way at all are evil or, again, that each entity is evil by reason of the fact that it does not have some good that belongs to another thing—for instance, a man would be evil because he does not have the swiftness of a deer or the strength of a lion.

By contrast, the negation of a good, as understood *privatively*, is called evil in the way that the privation of sight is called blindness. Now there is one and the same subject for both the privation and the form, viz., a being in potentiality, regardless of whether it is (a) a being in potentiality absolutely speaking, viz., primary matter, which is the subject both of the substantial form and of the opposed privation, or (b) a being in potentiality relatively speaking and in actuality absolutely speaking, e.g., a transparent body, which is the subject of both darkness and light.

Now it is clear that the form through which something exists in actuality is a certain perfection and good. And so every actual entity is a certain good. Similarly, every being in potentiality is, as such, a certain good insofar as it is ordered to a good. For just as it is a being in potentiality, so too it is a good in potentiality. It follows, then, that the subject of evil is what is good.

Reply to objection 1: What Dionysius means is that evil is not in existent things either as a part of an existent thing or as a natural property of an existent thing.

Reply to objection 2: Non-being, as understood *negatively*, does not require a subject. But as *Metaphysics* 4 puts it, a *privation* is a negation-in-a-subject, and this is the sort of non-being that evil is.

Reply to objection 3: An evil has as its subject not the good that is opposed to it, but instead some other good. For instance, the subject of blindness is not the power of sight, but the animal.

As Augustine points out, however, this might seem to violate the logical rule that contraries cannot exist together. However, our meaning has to do with ‘good’ and ‘evil’ taken in general and not insofar as they are taken specifically for *this* good and *this* evil. Now contraries such as ‘white’ and ‘black’, and ‘sweet’ and ‘bitter’, are taken only in this specific way, since they are in determinate genera. By contrast, *good* encompasses all genera, and in this sense one good can exist together with the privation of another good.

Reply to objection 4: The prophet calls down woe on those who say that what is good is, as such, evil. But this does not follow from the claims made above, as is clear from the explanation that has been given.

Article 4

Does evil totally corrupt the good?

It seems that evil totally corrupts the good:

Objection 1: One of two contraries is totally corrupted by the other. But good and evil are contraries. Therefore, evil is able to corrupt the whole good.

Objection 2: In the *Enchiridion* Augustine says that an evil is harmful to the extent that it “takes away the good.” But the good is undifferentiated (*simile sibi*) and uniform. Therefore, it is totally destroyed by evil.

Objection 3: As long as an evil exists, it causes harm and takes away the good. But that from which something is always being taken away is at some point consumed, unless it is infinite—which cannot be said in the case of any created good. Therefore, evil totally consumes the good.

But contrary to this: In the *Enchiridion* Augustine says that evil cannot totally consume the good.

I respond: Evil cannot totally consume the good. To see this clearly, note that there are three sorts of goods.

One sort of good is totally destroyed by evil, and this is the good that is the opposite of a given evil. For instance, light is totally destroyed by darkness, and the power of sight is totally destroyed by blindness.

The second sort of good is neither totally destroyed nor even diminished by evil, viz., the good that serves as the subject of a given evil. For instance, nothing of the substance of the air is destroyed by darkness.

The third sort of good is diminished by evil, but not totally destroyed, viz., the good that is the subject’s capacity for some actuality. The diminishment of this sort of good should be thought of not as occurring through *subtraction*, in the way that diminishment occurs in quantities, but rather as occurring through *remission*, in the way that diminishment occurs in qualities and forms. Now the remission of this sort of capacity is to be understood as the contrary of its intensification. For a capacity of this sort is intensified through the dispositions by which the matter is prepared for the relevant actuality, so that the more these dispositions are increased in the subject, the more capable it is of receiving its perfection and form. Conversely, such a capacity is diminished through contrary dispositions, so that the more these contrary dispositions are increased in the matter and the more intense they are, the more the matter’s

potentiality for the relevant actuality is reduced.

Thus, if these contrary dispositions cannot be increased and intensified *ad infinitum*, but instead can be increased and intensified only to a set limit, then the capacity in question is not diminished or reduced *ad infinitum*. This is clear in the case of the active and passive qualities of the elements. For instance, coldness and wetness, through which the matter's capacity for the form of fire is diminished or reduced, cannot be increased *ad infinitum*.

On the other hand, if the contrary dispositions are able to be increased *ad infinitum*, then the capacity in question can likewise be diminished or reduced *ad infinitum*—and yet it is not totally destroyed, since it always remains in its root, which is the substance of the subject. For instance, if opaque bodies were interposed *ad infinitum* between the sun and the air, the air's capacity for light would be diminished *ad infinitum*, and yet it would not be totally destroyed as long as the air remained, since air by its nature is transparent. Similarly, there can be addition *ad infinitum* in the case of sins, through which the soul's capacity for grace is always being more and more diminished, so that the sins become, as it were, an obstacle interposed between God and us, in accord with Isaiah 59:2 (“Our iniquities have set up a division between us and God”). And yet the capacity for grace is not totally taken away from the soul, since it follows upon the soul's nature.

Reply to objection 1: As has been explained, the sort of good that is the opposite of a given evil is totally destroyed, but the other sorts of good are not totally destroyed.

Reply to objection 2: The sort of capacity discussed above falls in between the subject and the actuality. Hence, as far as attaining the actuality is concerned, the capacity is diminished by evil, but as far as its being rooted in the subject is concerned, the capacity remains. Therefore, even though the good is undifferentiated in itself, still, because of its relation to these diverse things, it is destroyed only in part and not totally.

Reply to objection 3: Some writers, imagining that the diminishment of the good in question is similar to the diminishment of a quantity, have claimed that just as a continuum is divided *ad infinitum* by means of a division made with the same ratio (e.g., a half of a half, or a third of third), so too it happens in the case under discussion.

However, this line of reasoning has no place in the present case. For in a division in which the same ratio is always preserved, less and less is always being subtracted, since half of a half is less than half of the whole. But a second sin does not necessarily diminish the capacity in question by less than the preceding sin. Instead, it might diminish it either equally or even more.

Therefore, one should reply that even though this capacity is a certain finite thing, it is nonetheless diminished *ad infinitum*—not *per se*, but *per accidens*, i.e., insofar as the contrary dispositions are also increased *ad infinitum* in the way that has been explained.

Article 5

Is evil adequately divided into the evil of punishment and the evil of sin?

It seems that evil is not adequately divided into the evil of punishment (*poena*) and the evil of sin (*culpa*):

Objection 1: Every defect seems to be some sort of evil. But every creature has the defect of not being able to conserve itself in *esse*, and yet this defect is neither a punishment nor a sin. Therefore, evil is not adequately divided into punishment and sin.

Objection 2: There is neither punishment nor sin in the case of non-rational creatures. But they

nonetheless have defects and corruption, which pertain to the character of evil. Therefore, not every evil is a punishment or a sin.

Objection 3: Temptation is a certain evil. Yet it is not a sin, since a temptation that is not consented to is not a sin, but is instead an occasion for exercising a virtue, according to a Gloss on 2 Corinthians 12:7. Nor is temptation a punishment, since it precedes a sin, whereas punishment follows a sin. Therefore, evil is not adequately divided into punishment and sin.

But contrary to this: The division in question is unnecessary. For as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*, something is called evil because it is harmful. But that which does harm is related to punishment (*poenale*). Therefore, every evil falls under punishment.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 3), evil is a privation of the good, which consists principally and *per se* in perfection and actuality. Now there are two sorts of actuality, viz., *first* actuality and *second* actuality. First actuality is the form and integrity of a thing, whereas second actuality is its operation. Therefore, evil occurs in two ways.

Evil occurs in the first way through the subtraction of a form or of some part that is required for the thing's integrity—in the way that blindness is an evil, or in the way that lacking an arm or a leg is an evil.

Evil occurs in the second way through the subtraction of a fitting operation, either by virtue of the fact that the operation does not exist at all or by virtue of the fact that it does not have the manner and order it ought to have.

However, since the good is, absolutely speaking, the object of the will, it follows that evil, which is a privation of the good, is found in a special way among rational creatures who have a will. Thus, in their case, the evil that occurs through the subtraction of the form or integrity of a thing has the character of punishment—especially, as was shown above (q. 22, a. 2), on the assumption that all things are subject to God's justice and providence. For it is part of the nature of punishment that it is contrary to the will. On the other hand, among voluntary beings, the evil that consists in the subtraction of a fitting operation has the character of sin. For a sin is imputed to someone when he falls short of perfection in an action over which he has dominion through his will. So, then, every evil in beings with a will (*in rebus voluntariis*) is considered either a punishment or a sin.

Reply to objection 1: Since, as was explained above (a. 3), evil is a privation of the good and not a pure negation, it follows that not every lack of good is evil, but that instead an evil is a lack of a good that is apt to be had and should be had. For instance, a lack of vision is an evil not in a rock but in an animal, since it is contrary to the rock's nature that it should have sight. Similarly, it is contrary to the nature of a creature that it should conserve itself in *esse*, since it is the same agent who both gives *esse* and conserves it. Hence, this defect is not an evil for a creature.

Reply to objection 2: Punishment and sin do not divide evil absolutely speaking. Rather, they divide the evil found in beings with a will.

Reply to objection 3: Insofar as temptation implies an incitement to evil, there is always a sinful evil (*malum culpae*) in anyone who is doing the tempting. However, in the one who is tempted there is no sin, properly speaking, except insofar as he is changed in some way, since an agent's action exists in the patient. However, to the extent that the one who is tempted is turned toward evil by the tempter, he falls into sin.

Reply to argument for the contrary: It is part of the nature of punishment that it does harm to the agent in himself. But it is part of the nature of sin that it harms the agent in his very action. And so both of them are contained under evil insofar as they both have the character of a harm.

Article 6

Does punishment have more of the character of evil than sin does?

It seems that punishment has more of the character of evil than sin does:

Objection 1: Sin is related to punishment as merit is related to reward. But reward has more of the character of the good than merit does, since it is the terminus of merit. Therefore, punishment has more of the character of evil than sin does.

Objection 2: An evil is worse to the extent that it is opposed to a greater good. But as has been explained (a. 5), punishment is opposed to the good of the agent, whereas sin is opposed to the good of the action. Therefore, since the agent is a greater good than his action, it seems that punishment is a greater evil than sin.

Objection 3: That particular privation of an end which is called the absence of the vision of God is a certain punishment. But the evil of sin stems from the privation of a fitting order to that end. Therefore, punishment is a worse evil than sin.

But contrary to this: The wise craftsman induces a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater evil. For instance, a physician amputates a limb in order that the body not be corrupted. But God's wisdom inflicts punishment in order to prevent sin. Therefore, sin is a greater evil than punishment.

I respond: Sin has more of the character of evil than punishment does—not only more than sensible punishment, which consists in being deprived of corporeal goods and which is the sort of punishment most people think of, but also more than punishment taken in the most general sense, in which being deprived of grace or of glory is a punishment. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that someone becomes evil because of the evil of sin, but not because of the evil of punishment—this according to Dionysius in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4: “It is not evil to be punished; rather, it is evil to become deserving of punishment.” The reason for this is that since the good consists, absolutely speaking, in an actuality and not in a potentiality, and since the last actuality is an operation, viz., the use of whatever things are possessed, it follows that the good of man, absolutely considered, is a good operation, viz., the good use of things that are possessed. But we use all things through our will. Hence, it is because of a good will, by which a man makes good use of the things he possesses, that a man is called good; and it is because of a bad will that he is called evil. For it is possible for someone with a bad will to make bad use even of the good which he possesses—as, for instance, if a grammarian were voluntarily to speak ungrammatically. Therefore, since sin consists in a disordered act of the will, whereas punishment consists in someone's being deprived of the things his will makes use of, it follows that sin has the character of evil in a more complete way than punishment does.

The second reason is based on the fact that God is the author of the evil of punishment, but not of the evil of sin. The reason for this is that the evil of punishment deprives a creature of some good—whether the creature's good is taken as something created, as when blindness deprives one of sight, or whether instead it is an uncreated good, as when an uncreated good is removed from a creature through the absence of the vision of God. The evil of sin, on the other hand, is properly opposed to the uncreated good itself, since it is contrary to the fulfillment of God's will, as well as contrary to the divine love by which God's good is loved for itself and not just insofar as the creature participates in it.

It is clear, then, that sin has more of the character of evil than punishment does.

Reply to objection 1: Even though a sin terminates in punishment in the way that merit terminates in a reward, the sin is nonetheless not intended for the sake of the punishment in the way that merit is intended for the sake of the reward. Just the opposite, the punishment is inflicted in order that sin might

be avoided. And so sin is worse than punishment.

Reply to objection 2: Since it is a second perfection, an action's ordering that is removed through sin is a more perfect good of the agent than is the good removed through punishment, which is a first perfection.

Reply to objection 3: Sin is not related to punishment in the way that what is ordered to an end is related to that end. For both sin and punishment can in some way involve either a privation of the end or a privation of the ordering to the end. Punishment can do this insofar as the man himself is removed by punishment either from the end or from the ordering to the end, whereas sin can do it to the extent that the relevant privation involves an action that is not ordered to a fitting end.