

QUESTION 165

The Temptation of the First Parents

Next we have to consider the temptation of the first parents. And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Was it appropriate for the human being to be tempted by the devil? (2) What of the mode and ordering of that temptation?

Article 1

Was it appropriate for the human being to be tempted by the devil?

It seems that it was not appropriate for the human being to be tempted by the devil:

Objection 1: The same final punishment is owed for the sin of the angel and the sin of the human being—this according to Matthew 25:41 (“Go, you accursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels”). But the first sin of an angel did not come from any exterior temptation. Therefore, neither should the first sin of the human being have come from any exterior temptation.

Objection 2: Foreknowing future things, God knew that the human being would fall into sin because of the demon’s temptation, and so He knew full well that it was not expedient for him to be tempted. Therefore, it seems that it was not appropriate for God to permit him to be tempted.

Objection 3: The fact that an individual has an attacker seems to be a punishment (*ad poenam pertinere videtur*), just as, contrariwise, it seems to be a reward (*ad praemium pertinere videtur*) for an attack to be withdrawn—this according to Proverbs 16:7 (“When the ways of man are pleasing to the Lord, He will convert even his enemies to peace”). Therefore, it was inappropriate for the human being to be tempted before he had sinned.

But contrary to this: Ecclesiasticus 34:9 says, “What does he know who has not been tempted?”

I respond: As Wisdom 8:1 says, “God’s wisdom orders all things sweetly,” insofar as by His providence He gives to each thing what is appropriate for it by its nature. For as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, “It belongs to providence to preserve nature and not to corrupt it.”

Now it belongs to the condition of human nature that it can be helped or hindered by other creatures. Hence, as regards the human being in the state of innocence, it was appropriate for God both (a) to permit him to be tempted by the bad angels and (b) to bring it about that he was assisted by the good angels. Now it was granted to him by a special benefit of grace that no exterior creature could harm him against his will, and, again, by that will he was able to resist the demon’s temptation.

Reply to objection 1: Above human nature there is a nature in which the evil of sin can be found, but there is no such nature above angelic nature. Now to tempt an individual by inducing him toward evil is something that belongs only to one who has already been corrupted by sin. And so it was appropriate that the human being be tempted to sin by the bad angel—just as, in keeping with the order of nature, the human is also moved forward toward perfection by the good angel. On the other hand, the angel was able to be perfected in the good by his own superior, viz., by God, but he was unable to be induced to sin by God, since, as James 1:13 says, “God does not tempt anyone toward evil.”

Reply to objection 2: Just as God knew that the human being was going to fall into sin because of the temptation, so, too, He knew that the human being was able to resist the tempter through free choice (*per liberum arbitrium*). Now the condition of his nature required that he be left to his own will—this according to Ecclesiasticus 15:14 (“God left man in the hand of his own counsel”). Hence, in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 11 Augustine says, “It does not seem to me that the human being would have garnered much praise if he had been able to live in a good way just because no one was urging him to live in an evil way; for he was able in his nature, and had it within his power, to will not to consent to the one who was urging him on.”

Reply to objection 3: An attack that is difficult to resist is a punishment. But in the state of

innocence the human being was able to resist temptation without any difficulty. And so the attack of the tempter was not a punishment.

Article 2

Were the mode and ordering that belonged to the first temptation appropriate?

It seems that the mode and ordering that belonged to the first temptation were not appropriate:

Objection 1: Just as the angel was higher in the order of nature than the human being, so, too, the man was more perfect than the woman. But sin came to the human being from the angel. Therefore, by parity of reasoning, the sin should have come to the woman from the man, i.e., in such a way that the woman would be tempted by the man, and not vice versa.

Objection 2: The temptation of the first parents came by way of a suggestion. Now the devil can make a suggestion to a man even in the absence of any sort of exterior sensible creature. Therefore, since the first parents were endowed with a spiritual mind and adhered less to sensible things than to intelligible things, it would have been more appropriate for man to be tempted solely by a spiritual temptation rather than by an exterior temptation [as well].

Objection 3: An individual cannot appropriately suggest something evil except by appeal to something that appears good. But many other animals have a greater appearance of goodness than a serpent does. Therefore, it was not appropriate for the human being to have been tempted by the devil through a serpent.

Objection 4: A serpent is a non-rational animal. But neither wisdom nor speech nor punishment befits a non-rational animal. Therefore, it is inappropriate for the serpent to be introduced as “more subtle than any of the beasts of the earth” or, in another translation, as “the most prudent of all beasts.” It was likewise inappropriate for the serpent to be represented as having spoken to the woman or as having been punished by God.

But contrary to this: What is first in a given genus should be proportionate to what follows in the same genus. But as Augustine explains in *De Trinitate* 12, in every sin one finds the ordering that belonged to the first temptation, viz., insofar as (a), first, the *desire to sin* occurs in the *sentient appetite* (*in sensualitate*), which is signified by *the serpent*, and (b), next, *delight* [*at the thought of sinning*] occurs in the *lower reason* (*in ratione inferiori*), which is signified by *the woman*, and (c), next, *consent to the sin* occurs in the *higher reason* (*in ratione superiori*), which is signified by *the man*. Therefore, the ordering of the first temptation was suitable.

I respond: A human being is composed of a twofold nature, viz., intellective and sentient. And so in tempting the human being the devil made use of incitements to sin in two ways:

First, *on the part of the intellect*, insofar as he promised likeness to God through the acquisition of knowledge, which the human being naturally desires,

Second, *on the part of the senses*. And on this score he made use of sensible things that have the greatest affinity to the human being—in part *within the same species*, by tempting the man through the woman; in part *within the same genus*, by tempting the woman through the serpent; and in part *from a nearby genus*, by proposing that they eat the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Reply to objection 1: In the act of tempting the devil was, as it were, the principal agent, whereas the woman was used as a sort of instrument of temptation for bringing down the man—both because the woman was weaker than the man and thus better able to be seduced, and also because the devil was especially able to seduce the man through the woman because of her connection to the man.

Now the character of a principal agent is not the same as the character of an instrument. For the

principal agent has to be more powerful [than the effect], whereas this is not required in an instrumental agent.

Reply to objection 2: A suggestion by which the devil suggests something to a human being *spiritually* shows that the devil has more power over the human being than an *exterior* suggestion does; for through an interior suggestion what is changed by the devil is at least the human being's imagination, whereas through an exterior suggestion what is changed is only an exterior creature. Now before the sin the devil had minimal power over the human being and so he was able to tempt him only by an exterior suggestion and not by an interior suggestion.

Reply to objection 3: As Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 11, "We should not think that the devil chose for himself the serpent whereby he carried out his temptation. Instead, since there was a strong desire to deceive within the serpent, the devil was able to carry out his temptation only through that animal through whom he was allowed to be able to carry it out."

Reply to objection 4: As Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 11, "The serpent is called astute or subtle or prudent because of the devil's astuteness, which worked its deception in the serpent—just as a tongue is described as prudent or astute because a prudent or astute individual moves it in order to argue for something in a prudent or astute way. Nor did the serpent understand the sounds of the words which came forth from it to the woman—since, again, its soul should not be thought of as having been changed into a rational nature. For even men themselves, whose nature is rational, do not know what they are saying when a demon is speaking in them. So, then, the serpent spoke to the human being in the same way that the ass which Balaam was sitting on spoke to him—except that the former was the work of a demon, whereas the latter was the work of an angel. Hence, the serpent was not asked why it had done this, since it had not done this itself in its own nature, but rather the devil, who had already been destined to the everlasting fire because of his own sin, had done it in the serpent. Instead, what was said to the serpent was referred to him who had operated through the serpent."

Moreover, as Augustine says in *Super Genesim contra Manichaeos*, "His punishment, which is pronounced at this point"—that is, the devil's punishment—"is a punishment by which he is to be guarded against by us and not a punishment that is reserved for the last judgment. For when it is said to him, 'You are cursed among all the cattle and beasts of the earth', the cattle are set above him not in power, but in the preservation of their nature, since the cattle have not lost any heavenly beatitude, which they never had, but continue to live their life in the nature that they have received."

It is also said to him—according to another version [the Septuagint]—"Upon your breast and belly shall you creep'. Here the name 'breast' signifies *pride*, since the impetus of the soul is dominant in the breast, whereas the name 'belly' signifies *carnal desire*, since this part is sensed as softer in the body. Upon these things he creeps toward those whom he wants to deceive."

"There are two possible ways to understand the words, 'Earth shall you eat all the days of your life': (a) 'The ones who will belong to you are those whom you will deceive with earthly lust, i.e., sinners who are signified by the name 'earth'; or (b) what is signified by these words is a third kind of temptation, viz., *curiosity*; for those who 'eat earth' look into things that are deep and dark."

As for the enmity that is put between him and the woman: "What is hereby shown is that we cannot be tempted by the devil except through that animal part of us which reflects the image of a woman in a human being. Now the seed of the devil is perverse suggestion, whereas the seed of the woman is the fruit of the good work that resists the perverse suggestion. And so the serpent observes the woman's heel, so that if it slips at any time into what is illicit, pleasure might seize her, whereas the woman observes the serpent's head, so that she might shut him out at the very beginning of his evil urgings."