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The Goodness of Creation and the Problem of Evil in Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This thesis explores Aquinas's answers to two questions that were – and still are – of central importance for many human beings. What is the reality of evil in a universe created by God and, as such, fundamentally good? And how can such a divinely created universe be perfect? Expanding from the Neoplatonists to the crucial contributions of Aristotle and grounding his reasoning on Augustine's authority, Aquinas conceives the original sin – the privation of original justice – as the root of evil. Furthermore, Aquinas's conception of evil as *malum est privatio boni*, complemented with the notion of *due* good, implies the affirmation that “every evil is founded in some good”. He distinguishes between natural evil and moral evil but denies the possibility of pure evil. In examining the nature of the good, Aquinas establishes its foundations: good and being are identical but good adds a degree of desirability, carrying the nature of a final cause because every substance desires its own perfection. Aquinas's conclusion is astonishing: this universe would be less perfect without defective things because its perfection is grounded on the heterogeneity and diversity of beings, which better represent God's goodness. In our contemporary world, our spirituality may rely upon the order, in Aquinas's understanding, manifested in the variety and interdependence of beings, and that may lead us to a new awakening and a transformative relationship with Creation.

Keywords

Aquinas, evil as privation, desirable good, goodness of Creation, perfect universe

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1. Introduction: The Origin of Evil in Augustine

In the *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* (*QDM*), Aquinas proposes a definition of evil as “privation of good” (*malum est privatio boni*).¹ This definition is in no way original and Aquinas’s treatment of evil can be traced back to Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Proclus (412–485) and Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500). The *privatio boni* (as evil is defined by Aquinas) originated from diverse sources and the very notion of evil was conveyed by the Greek word *parhypostasis*.² Evil is not a positive reality nor can be considered independently. To the contrary, it is almost “parasitic” upon the good. Aquinas was deeply influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius who, in his treatment of evil had drawn largely on Proclus and Plotinus.³ The Neoplatonic concept of evil, in turn, is developed by a fundamental interaction with Aristotle’s doctrine of privation. For Aristotle, privation has no subsistence (it is the privation of a form) and, accordingly, it always requires a subject.

Aquinas’s doctrine of evil became a shared reference in Western culture. It develops a distinction between the absence of a perfection in a substance that is proper to its nature (privative absence) and the simple absence of a good in a substance. Only the former should be regarded as evil.⁴ However, Aquinas’s doctrine is also the result of a centuries-long debate on the nature of evil that unfolded in Christian theology and philosophy. The main tenets of this debate were roughly articulated during the period between 300 a.C. to 300 A.D. , namely, the Inter-Testament years.⁵ Following Gavin,⁶ it is possible to distinguish the different approaches to the problem between theological and non-theological (the former grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition) with Kant as dividing line.⁷ In this long history, Augustine is among the most consequential contributors to the debate. He delved into theodicy and the problem of the existence of evil by criticizing the dualist tendencies that characterized his time and,

¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo*, q.1.a.2. Translated from Latin by Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 64.

² The term “parhypostasis” or “parasitic existence” refers to ontologically non-existing being. The word was employed by Iamblichus (ca. 242–ca. 325), Proclus and Dionysius.

³ See Fran O’Rourke, “Evil as Privation: The Neoplatonic Background to Aquinas’s *De malo*”, in *Aquinas’s Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, edited by M. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 192 and p. 221.

⁴ O’Rourke, “Evil as Privation”, p. 196.

⁵ See Gavin Rae, *Evil in the Western Philosophical Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 21.

⁶ This discussion or “problem” of evil arose with the rise of monotheism, where a singular deity, God in Christian terms, is responsible for all creation. If God is One, almighty and good, must He be held responsible for the existence of evil? See Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 1.

⁷ Gavin , *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 2.

particularly, the Manichean religion that arose in the 3rd century. Augustine's main aim was to explain and justify the coexistence of two extreme and opposite realities: the supreme goodness and might of God, on the one hand, and the evil of Satan and Hell, on the other.⁸

In this context, Augustine engaged with the notion of evil by asking a series of difficult questions that seem to impact greatly on the condition of the Christian faith itself. What is the nature of evil? Why does God tolerate it if He is all-mighty? And why does God not prevent individuals from committing evil acts?⁹ Augustine's solution to justify the presence of evil in a universe that tends towards the goodness of God is as easy as consequential: evil does not have a substantial being. Indeed, evil is privation, not negation. Negation refers to the differences or inequalities between beings while privation implies the lack of good that a being should have, given its universal form or nature.¹⁰ It is important to maintain that distinction because not every negation is evil. We restrict evil to the negation of what is a due substance. There are some well-known examples that Scholastics used to illustrate that difference, for example considering blindness in a human being evil as opposed to the lack of wings that cannot be counted for evil. Accordingly, evil does not have substantial being.¹¹

For Plotinus, matter and privation, and thus, evil, are identical. Augustine, however, follows Aristotle along with Proclus, distancing himself from Plotinus's stances on evil.¹² In several writings, Augustine explains in detail his concept of evil as privation.¹³ In *De moribus Manichaeorum* he affirms that "evil is that which falls away from essence and tends to non-existence."¹⁴ In *De natura boni*, Augustine claims that nothing can lack goodness in its entirety: such a completely evil being would be nothing else but non-existence itself. According to Augustine, the nature of all things as being good is originated from the order, number, and measure impressed by God. Insofar as something retains its nature, it is good to that degree. Therefore, evil is just the corruption of the basic ontological goodness intrinsic to all creatures.¹⁵

⁸ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 36.

⁹ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ Patrick Lee, "The Goodness of Creation, Evil, and Christian Teaching", *The Thomist* 64/2 (2000): p. 239 and p. 269, espec. 252-253.

¹¹ Lee, "The Goodness of Creation", p. 253.

¹² O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation", pp. 200-201.

¹³ In the *Enchiridion* (c. 421), Augustine presents evil in contrast to the goodness of the universe and compares evil to sickness as related to the body: evil has no substance but is an accidental defect of the body. See O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation", p. 206.

¹⁴ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation", p. 201.

¹⁵ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation". p. 204.

One of Augustine's defining points is the acknowledgment that the tendency towards evil is a consequence of the *peccatum originale*: the original sin that brought about the loss of the right intellectual perspective resulting in a facilitation to commit sins (*concupiscentia*), together with mortality and ignorance.¹⁶ As an act against natural law, the sin causes a disorder in the natural order of things.¹⁷ It is this 'defect of judgement' that causes the will to desire evil instead of the good.¹⁸ The human tendency to privilege the inferior sensitive powers also results in the death of the body (as an additional consequence of the original sin) and brings about further evil, pain, and misleading desires.¹⁹ According to Augustine, the original sin is transmitted biologically at birth.²⁰ It is worth noting that Augustine distinguishes between the evil done by someone and that suffered by someone. The *malum poenae* or "the evil of the punishment" as committed by God to correct deviate behaviors.²¹ In turn, the *malum culpae* ("the evil of the fault") is committed by humans in the exercise of their free-will capacity.²²

With this distinction between the forms of evil as *poena* and *culpa*, Augustine places the problem of evil into a human perspective that seems to differ from the impersonal notion of a cosmic force far away from human sphere,²³ envisioned by the early Christians and the Platonic approach.²⁴

Augustine's *De libero arbitrio* (388-395), written in his fight against the Manichean teachings and in defense of the freedom of will, would become a fundamental source for Aquinas's conception of sin as principle of all human evil.²⁵ Non-being and privation were adopted by Augustine but greatly transformed on the course of his philosophical journey. Following the line opened by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas would complement his definition of evil as the

¹⁶ See Mathijs Lamberigts, "Peccatum originale", in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, edited by C. Mayer, R. Dodaro and C. Müller (Schwabe Basel: Julius- Maximilian Universität, 2014), 5 vols., IV, 599-614.

¹⁷ Lamberigts, "Peccatum originale".

¹⁸ The Augustinian formula for the good is measure, species and order. Here, order indicates the capacity to perfect what is ordered to the good.

¹⁹ Lamberigts, "Peccatum originale".

²⁰ See Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), p. 272.

²¹ Here, to "deviate" one's individual behavior is understood as turning away from the path of God.

²² Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 5.

²³ Augustine introduces the role of human will, to avoid locating evil outside human nature and moral responsibility. See Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 39.

²⁴ Augustine claims the Platonic approach inadequate for dualistic and unsatisfying to explain the oneness of being. Plotinus identified evil itself with matter and privation but since matter derives from the One (equivalent to the Good), it is contradictory with the axiom that Good only causes good. See William Maker "Augustine on Evil: The Dilemma of the Philosophers", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15/3 (1984): pp. 149-160.

²⁵ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation", p. 202.

absence of good claiming that evil is the absence of *a due* good.²⁶ Indeed, as we will see, Augustine's influence on Aquinas's theory on evil would be profound. The latter, however, combines it with Aristotle's analytical method (e.g., when clarifying evil as the absence of a *due* good that belongs to the nature of a substance) and the theories of Pseudo-Dionysius.²⁷

²⁶ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation", p. 208.

²⁷ O'Rourke, "Evil as privation", p. 208.

2. The Original Sin and the Problem of Evil According to Aquinas

When Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) addressed the problem of evil, centuries had long passed since Augustine's analysis was developed. The socio-historical context differed very much from Augustine's milieu and so did his approach to the nature of evil and its relationship with the good.²⁸ At that time, Christianity had a secure position in the Western world, but the rise of Islam in the Near East and its expansion in Europe challenged the most fundamental Christian truths. Aquinas summarized these truths in the *Reasons for the Faith against Muslims Objections*, namely, that Christ is the "Son of God", crucified and risen from the death, and his body is eaten by Christians in the Eucharist.²⁹

While attempting to distance itself from Islam, Christian thought was highly influenced in its development.³⁰ Islam brought to the Western world the Aristotelian philosophy that was largely lost centuries before, while Christian Neoplatonism and its syncretic approach to the work of Plato and Aristotle was the dominant form of philosophy in the West, with a clear Platonist emphasis.³¹ Something similar characterized the philosophical development in the East, too: Islamic thinkers like Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-1198) developed an Aristotelian approach broadly influenced by Neoplatonism. But Aristotelianism seemed to be to some extent incompatible with fundamental Christian doctrines in relation to stances like the eternity of the world, the mortality of the human soul and the unmoved mover as detached from human affairs.³²

In the 13th century, these controversial aspects of Aristotelian philosophy were the objects of intellectual battles in universities. In this context, Aquinas was deeply influenced by Avicenna, who used Aristotle's ideas to demonstrate the existence of God. Shaped by Averroes and transmitted to the Christian world, the Aristotelian views on mind and the relationship between revealed theology and philosophy were also deeply problematic for Christian philosophy and very much contested. Aquinas assumed the task of arguing against the Averroes's view of Aristotle³³ but, more broadly, he drew inspiration from Aristotle and Islamic sources to reconsider key issues in Christian doctrine, like the problem of evil.³⁴ Therefore, in addressing

²⁸ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 58.

²⁹ See David B. Burrell "Thomas Aquinas and Islam", *Modern Theology* 20/1 (2004), p. 71 and p. 89.

³⁰ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 56.

³¹ Paul O'Grady, *Aquinas's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2014), p. 31.

³² O'Grady, *Aquinas's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 35.

³³ O'Grady, *Aquinas's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 35.

³⁴ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 57.

the question of evil, Aquinas's main aim seems to have been more directed to provide a solid account to settle disputes within the Church than to produce new conceptual development.³⁵ In his *On Evil*, his analysis is based on three basic questions. What is the relationship between good and evil? What is the Original Sin? And finally, what is the role of the body in relation to evil?³⁶ I will limit my analysis here to the first two questions.

Thomas Aquinas draws on Peter Lombard and Anselm of Canterbury to propose his own definition of original sin, namely, the privation of original justice.³⁷ First, Aquinas's notion of original justice entails that human reason was subject to God like the lower powers are subject to human reason and the body to its soul.³⁸ The lack of original justice for Aquinas means the lack of the sanctifying grace that naturally inclines the human will to God. Sanctifying grace is the formal cause of the human will and, consequently, its loss corresponds to the punishment of the original sin.³⁹ Second, Aquinas follows some basic points of Augustine's doctrine. The original sin is transmitted biologically since it is contracted at birth and responsible for the necessity of the death of the body. Death, indeed, is something natural only for the bodily part of the human hylomorphic composite, as its matter. In turn, the soul, as form, is immortal by nature.⁴⁰ Before the fall, death belonged to human nature only in potency but, once Adam sinned, it became real, and its potency was actualized.⁴¹

Yet, how can we understand the existence of evil? The only access we have seems to pass through a consideration of its necessary relationship with the good. In the *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*), Aquinas claims that "of a pair of opposites, one is understood by means of the other, as darkness is understood in terms of light; so we come to understand what evil is by considering the good."⁴² Accordingly, we should briefly examine the nature of the good to better understand the being of evil. In *ST* I, q. 5, a. 3 Aquinas points out that good and being, although different

³⁵ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 57.

³⁶ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 57.

³⁷ The term "original" is applied to justice accounts for the prelapsarian state of Adam and Eve before the first sin was committed. "Original" refers to the divine gift appointed to human nature in its commencement: it means that there was a time when evil was not part of the human condition. Instead, justice was in human nature. See Daniel Houck, *Aquinas, Original Sin, and the Challenge of Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 55, and Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 71.

³⁸ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 71.

³⁹ Houck, *Original Sin*, p. 57.

⁴⁰ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 272.

⁴¹ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 272.

⁴² See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 48, 1. See also Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 53.

in their meaning, are identical realities.⁴³ Since good is identical to being, there must be a universal good from which all goods proceed, and that is God. Here Aquinas claims God as the supreme good, defining the good by universality in terms of causality.⁴⁴ The good adds to being a relationship to the end.⁴⁵ If God is the first being and the first efficient cause of all beings,⁴⁶ we can say that every good depends on the first good.⁴⁷ God produces the good in all things so that goodness is intrinsic to the creatures although they are not essentially good.⁴⁸ In *ST I*, q. 6, a. 1 Aquinas holds that to be good belongs to God in primary fashion and as the first efficient cause also the nature of the good and the desirable belong to Him.⁴⁹

That God is not only good but the supreme Good (*summum bonum*) is of utmost importance for the analysis of evil and must be understood in light of Aquinas's philosophical argumentations.⁵⁰ The first argument that Aquinas gives in *ST I*, q. 3, a. 2 expands on God's divine simplicity, that is, the complete absence of composition of any kind.⁵¹ Thomas addresses the issue of divine simplicity at length in *De potentia* when he develops three lines of reasoning to prove God's simplicity.⁵² He argues that God and creatures are different (1) because of the absence of potentiality in God whereas in composite substances there is always a mixture of potency and actuality; (2) in reason that all created composites depend on a prior agent, while God who, as the first agent, cannot be composite; and (3) because God is the most perfect being and therefore there is no lack of goodness in Him.⁵³

The second argument is found at q.4, where Aquinas concludes that God is perfect to the maximum degree following what he had previously established in *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3, namely that God is the first efficient cause of everything.⁵⁴ As matter is in potency to the act, an agent is in

⁴³ See John F. Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", in *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, edited by M. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 192-221, espec. 15-18.

⁴⁴ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 18.

⁴⁵ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 83.

⁴⁶ In the fourth way, once we establish the existence of a maximum degree of which transcendental properties of being (goodness, truth, unity) participate, there must be something at the summit of all things which its *esse* is its essence, and this is God. Hence, the maximum degree of goodness and the first good comes from God. See Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 227.

⁴⁷ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 16.

⁴⁸ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 83.

⁴⁹ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 15.

⁵⁰ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 14.

⁵¹ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 14.

⁵² John F. Wippel *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*. Vol. 1. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 522.

⁵³ Wippel *The Metaphysical Thought of Aquinas*, p. 522.

⁵⁴ Wippel *The Metaphysical Thought of Aquinas*, p. 495.

act insofar as it is an agent, which means that God is the most perfect because He is the first agent with the highest degree of perfection.⁵⁵ Thomas points out a principle that he frequently cites in his works, that is, the perfection in an effect is a certain likeness of his cause since every agent produces something like itself. It follows that if the effect is good, so too its cause must be good.⁵⁶

The third and final argument is found in *ST I* q. 6, a. 2. As God is the first cause beyond all species and genera, all desired perfections flow forth from Him. As Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, and Aquinas cites in *ST I*, q. 5, a. 4, “the good is what all things desire” because all things desire their own perfection.⁵⁷ The good adds to being the meaning of desirability. Hence, every other substance is a being and may be called good inasmuch as it participates in God, although in a remote and lacking manner.⁵⁸ Consequently, when a substance desires (if it is a living being) or tends (if it is not living) towards its goodness, it desires its perfection. The good elicits desire and appetite and as such, the good has the nature of an end or final cause. Goodness is that to which or for which something acts, exercising a final causality. Although it might appear to us that it operates as formal or efficient causality, Aquinas carefully holds that goodness operates as a final cause, sparking desire. The good, then, is the first of all causes and it is diffusive of itself. It is the cause of causes and is first among the four causes. The good exercises its causality not by acting on things but drawing them to itself, moving things from imperfection to perfection.⁵⁹ Another interesting point of the good as first cause is that it extends to more things than being. Only those things that actually exist have being, but goodness can extend to what remains in potency (e.g., children can stir desire within the family although they are not born yet).⁶⁰ As we desire an end, we desire the things that are ordered to an end, and those things too are attained to the nature of the good.⁶¹ Aquinas claims that whatever is in potency to the good, even prime matter, has the nature of the good by reason of the fact that it is in potency in regard to some degree of perfection.⁶² As a consequence, every being, whether in act or only in potency, may be called good.

⁵⁵ Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*”, p. 14.

⁵⁶ See McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 98 and Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*”, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Lee, “The Goodness of Creation”, p. 248.

⁵⁸ Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*”, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁹ See Aquinas Guilbeau, “St. Thomas Aquinas: On the Good”. <https://soundcloud.com/thomisticinstitute/st-thomas-aquinas-on-the-good-fr-aquinas-guilbeau-op> (consulted on 25 May 2023).

⁶⁰ Guilbeau, “St. Thomas Aquinas”.

⁶¹ Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*”, p. 23.

⁶² Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*”, p. 23.

After this brief examination of the nature of good, we can now move back to evil. As I have mentioned above, it is the notion of privation that enables Aquinas to explain and justify that evil is an absence and a reality at the same time.⁶³ Since evil is privation of goodness, if we say that something is evil, we need to know the nature of that substance which, consequently, must have an essence even when lacking all its properties. From this point, it follows that we can say that there cannot be evil without goodness just like an accident cannot be without being in a subject.⁶⁴ In *ST* 1, q.17, a.4 Aquinas concludes that “every evil is founded in some good”.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he points out that since every nature desires its own perfection and existence and the good is something which is desirable, every nature has the nature of goodness.⁶⁶ As a consequence, evil is opposed to what is desirable and, as such, it cannot be something properly speaking.⁶⁷ Aquinas also makes an interesting point by claiming that “although evil always lessens good... it never wholly consumes it”. Therefore, utter and pure evil is not possible for an actual being.⁶⁸ The notion of evil as a lesser kind of being is accompanied in Aquinas by a second meaning of evil as pure privation. He compares privation to complete darkness and death, which are contraries to light and life and, evidently, goodness.⁶⁹

While maintaining that evil is contrary to the good and to the act of existence itself, Aquinas does not imply in any way that evil does not exist.⁷⁰ Evil is real and can be distinguished in two categories: natural evil or evil of punishment (e.g., an illness, an earthquake) and moral evil or moral wrong.⁷¹ It is important to note the expansive meaning of the Latin term *malum* to designate evil in *ST* I, q. 18, a. 9 as “all that is repugnant to right reason”.⁷² Moral evil as wrongdoing entails the privation of due order, number, and measure in a substance. As Aquinas reminds us in *CG*, III, “Now, this order of things demands that all things be divinely arranged in a proportionate way. This is why it is said in the *Book of Wisdom* (11:20) that God made all things, ‘in weight, number and measure’”.⁷³ Recalling that sin is a voluntary act that happens

⁶³ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 61.

⁶⁴ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 66.

⁶⁵ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 66.

⁶⁶ Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes”, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Lee, “The Goodness of Creation”, p. 252.

⁶⁸ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 113.

⁶⁹ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, pp. 62-63.

⁷⁰ There is a difference between oppose and contrary to the good. Contrary should be understood as relationally to the good, with no separated existence. However, if evil is opposed to the good, Aquinas holds that the separation operates, and could lead to a duality that undermines God’s omnipotence. See Gavin, *Evil in the Western*, p. 63.

⁷¹ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 270.

⁷² Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 60.

⁷³ Thomas Aquinas, *CG*, bk III, cap.144, translated by L. Shapcote, edited by The Aquinas Institute, consulted on August 8, 2023, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~SCG3.C144.10>.

when we go against the natural order, understood as due order, number, and measure, Aquinas claims that sin and moral wrongdoing are inherent derivations of privation.⁷⁴ This entails deviation from the good in a particular being. However, for Aquinas natural evil has less of the character of evil than moral evil.⁷⁵

The discussion in *ST I*, q. 48, a. 2 continues by addressing the question of whether evil is found in existing things. Aquinas claims that God is the cause of the distinction of the degrees of inequalities in created things.⁷⁶ The perfection of the universe requires those inequalities⁷⁷ in order to communicate His goodness through the multiplicity of beings.⁷⁸ Consequently, in some things, goodness is complete (they cannot lose their existence whatsoever, like incorporeal beings such God) while in others it falls short (i.e., corporeal things). Accordingly, Aquinas maintains that it happens to the latter that at times goodness falls short and then evil is found and exists as corruption does.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 60.

⁷⁵ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 270.

⁷⁶ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 21.

⁷⁷ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 390.

⁷⁸ O'Grady, *Aquinas's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 127.

⁷⁹ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*", p. 21.

3. Good and Evil in a Universe Tending Towards Perfection

In the previous section, I have given a short summary of the concepts of good and evil and their relationship, concluding that evil cannot exist except in what is good. Any substance is said to be good when it has its proper perfection (e.g., a *virtuous* human or a *sharp* eye).⁸⁰ In fact, the actualization of the substance's potentiality and its completion is what is called "good".⁸¹ At the same time, we can also say that something is "good" when the subject has in itself the potency to its perfection. As evil is privation of the good that is due, it can only exist in a potential being, which leads to the conclusion that evil resides in what is good as the subject that is in potency to the good.⁸²

I will now move on to examine what goodness means in relation to the perfection of the universe and how evil fits in this scenario. First, I will show why Aquinas understands perfection as the form and order of the universe, which is its intrinsic good.⁸³ Second, I will examine what Aquinas writes in his commentary on the *Sentences*, following Blanchette's interpretation.⁸⁴ Indeed, Aquinas makes a puzzling statement about the possibility of a universe without any evil:

A universe in which there would be no evil would not be of such goodness as this universe, because there would not be as many good natures in that one as in this one, in which there are some good natures to which evil is not attached and some to which it is: and it is better for the both natures to be than for only one or the other to be.⁸⁵

Two questions arise from Aquinas's statement. First, does evil pertain to the perfection of the universe? And second, if evil deprives the perfection of the universe of goodness, how can that perfection still be complete? To tackle these questions, Aquinas makes use of some analogies expressing the structure of the universe.⁸⁶ But before discussing these analogies, there are three fundamental points that I should recall, which are crucial to understand Aquinas's analogies.

⁸⁰ O'Grady, *Aquinas's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 126.

⁸¹ Lee, "The Goodness of Creation", p. 252 and McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 42.

⁸² McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 66-67.

⁸³ Olivia Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe According to Aquinas: A Theological Cosmology* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 14 and pp. 72-73.

⁸⁴ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 126.

⁸⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, d. 44, q. 1., a. 2, ad 5:

<https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.I.D44.Q1.A2.Rep3> (consulted on 10 June 2023).

⁸⁶ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 12.

First, the good is what all things desire in as much as they desire their perfection. Second, the good is the final cause. And third, the good is the first of causes and diffusive of itself.⁸⁷

Aquinas illustrates the first analogy taking the case of a house. This analogy allows him to establish certain conditions for the universe to be one. All substances come to constitute “one” universe together. Accordingly, they must have something in common: they must fit together insofar as they fall under one order that holds diversity together. This is analogical with what we see of a house: the parts of the house must complement each other and, finally, certain proportion must be respected. Commonality, diversified order, complementarity and proportionality: these four conditions together are what allow to establish a totality or “universality” of things.⁸⁸ In this context, I should highlight that the perfection of the universe can only be understood as relational insofar as Aquinas regards perfection not of a particular entity but of the arrangement of the plurality of beings.⁸⁹

The second analogy focuses on the army and is taken from Aristotle. With it, Aquinas introduces another, more fundamental order: that of finality. This is the order linking the parts of the army to one another in view of the whole army ultimately to the general. This second analogy is connected to the first insofar as the diversity of the parts is structured and organized by an ordering function that allows to speak of *one* house and *one* army.

Aristotle made a wide use of this approach in the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Metaphysics*, in the latter to relate the universe to the Unmoved Mover as to its good.⁹⁰ In Aristotle, the First Mover moves as good and appetible, but this notion is further expanded by Aquinas in his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, splitting the notion of good in a twofold meaning: extrinsic and intrinsic. The extrinsic end to which things move to (for instance, when we say that the summit of the mountain is where the alpinist heads to), namely, the unmoved mover, is identified with God, the first efficient cause and the ultimate source of finality in the universe.⁹¹ In turn, the intrinsic end, which is within the substance as its form, is the end of generation and change, so that once that form is attained there is some good in the substance. Now, Aquinas continues, the form of any whole is the ordering of its parts so that the whole is one, and the

⁸⁷ Guilbeau, “St. Thomas Aquinas”.

⁸⁸ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Piotr Roszak, “Imperfectly Perfect Universe? Emerging Natural Order in Thomas Aquinas”, *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 78/2 (2022): a7199. 9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7199>.

⁹⁰ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 13.

⁹¹ Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 495.

order is its good.⁹² The cosmos, then, has a twofold good: one nature pertains to the order of its parts, intrinsic, and the other is separated and extrinsic. For Aquinas, the latter is the Prime Mover or *bonum separatum* and the former the *bonum ordinariis* whose actualization is based on the understanding of the final causality principle represented by the Prime Mover.⁹³ As Aquinas stresses, “since all things having one end must agree in their ordination to that end, some order must be found in the parts of the universe; and so the universe has both a separate good and a good of order”.⁹⁴

Aquinas points out that the end itself is a principle of order so that the whole universe is in view of the Prime Mover. This cosmological order entails two aspects: first, all things are ordered but, second, they are not ordered in the same way.⁹⁵ In *ST*, Aquinas claims that there are different degrees of perfection among beings, setting the ground for his fourth way on the demonstration of the existence of God. One substance enjoys greater ontological goodness than another, so in Aquinas’s view the universe is ordered hierarchically.⁹⁶ Hence, we find order in things inasmuch as one is better than another and is moved by another, not only regarding the excellence of its form but the operations that flow from those forms. The higher the form, the better and far-reaching in its operations.⁹⁷ In this view, an animal enjoys greater goodness than a stone, and less than a human being, ontologically speaking, although all are ordered to one another and to one end at the same time.⁹⁸ The difference between the stone and the animal has its basis on the fact that, although both the stone and the animal act purposively, the stone is not purposive itself but the animals are. For Aquinas, animated things act or are moved by an intrinsic principle that entails certain awareness of the purpose and the end of their actions, whereas inanimate things have the interior principle but not the principle for a purpose.⁹⁹ Hence, animals and human beings contain inside its generator (the cause that brings the stone into being), so to speak, to fulfill their own distinctive purposes.¹⁰⁰ Human beings are part of that

⁹² Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 14.

⁹³ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 15.

⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, book XII, L. 12, translated by J. Rowan, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Metaph.Bk12.L12.n2629.2> (consulted on 03 June 2023).

⁹⁵ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 15.

⁹⁶ Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 469 and p. 471.

⁹⁷ John H. Wright, *The Order of the Universe in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1957), p. 104.

⁹⁸ Wippel, *The metaphysical thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 471.

⁹⁹ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 83-84.

¹⁰⁰ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 84.

order although in his own peculiar way, but still they are only a part and as such, ordered to the good of the universe as a whole.¹⁰¹

A third analogy, the well-governed household, introduces the notions of community and diversity within community. In the household's community, the father represents the principle of order.¹⁰² Aquinas likens the head of the household and the ruler of a state to God's rule over the world by providence.¹⁰³ God appears first, as the pre-existing intellect that embeds nature and orders it to an end. And second, He is like the archer that affects the impact of the arrow.¹⁰⁴ Either way, every work of nature is said to be a work of divine intelligence.¹⁰⁵ In this analogy, children, servants, and animals have different grades of affinity with the head of the household. The children are connected more intimately with the father and therefore they participate more profoundly in the order of the household.¹⁰⁶ This notion of affinity is the new added element above the analogy of the army, and that is because it is not an affinity that depends on the choice of the head of the household, but that pertains to the nature of the parts and their relation to one another.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, inclination (i.e., appetite) acts as a principle of unity inasmuch as it makes a substance to refer to something else, for whatever acts has an end by reason of which it moves to. Aquinas claims in *De veritates*, q.23, a.1 that "since a thing has its reference to another being through something which it has within itself, its different ways of being referred to another correspond to the different ways in which it has something within itself."¹⁰⁸ The father of the household represents the other principle of unity, for he acts as final cause. By his authority, the father leads each member to accomplish what is due for the order of the house.¹⁰⁹

The inclination of a substance to the good according to its proper nature not only belongs to the particular good of that substance but is partaken by a communal context and is part of the universe.¹¹⁰ The harmonious terms in which the diverse appetites of the household members

¹⁰¹ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 15.

¹⁰² Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 16.

¹⁰³ It is by means of divine providence that God governs the world drawing all thing to its goodness, which implies that everything happens according to certain order.

¹⁰⁴ Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 412.

¹⁰⁵ Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 412.

¹⁰⁶ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *De veritates*, q. 23, art. I, translated by R. Schmidt, edited by J. Kenny, : <https://isidore.co/aquinas/QDdeVer23.htm#1> (consulted on 19 July 2023). See also Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, pp. 100-101.

¹¹⁰ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 16.

(sons, daughters, wife, servants, animals) come together, is an agreement caused and maintained by the father of the household. Correspondingly, God causes and maintain the order of the universe that arises from the harmonious agreement of the various appetites.¹¹¹ We can affirm that the proper good of anything is only attained inasmuch as it attains its particular good and the universal good¹¹² for each substance “spread abroad their own good among others, so far as possible. Hence, we see that every agent, in so far as it is perfect and in act, produces its like”.¹¹³

Regarding the notion of perfection, we have seen how the perfection of the universe is proper to the unity of order and how it is a common good.¹¹⁴ In ancient Greek, the idea of perfection brings out some other notions like completeness, wholeness and integrity, on the one hand, and the achievement of an end or goal, on the other.¹¹⁵ The latter is connected to the Greek ideas of *teleiosis* and *telos*, both related to the nature or form of things when they reach their perfection, as Aristotle suggested when speaking of the form of a substance in terms of its *entelecheia*.¹¹⁶ Thus, Aristotle and Aquinas saw its original meaning as a kind of expected completion at the end of a process.¹¹⁷ Aquinas, for his part, distinguished in *ST*, I q.6, a.3.c a threefold meaning of perfection: first, according to its *esse*; second, in so far as certain accidents are superadded and necessary for its operation; and third according with the attainment of its proper end, which is to be said the ultimate perfection.¹¹⁸ As the good is that to which or for which something acts, it is its perfection. Therefore, the causality that the good exercises, in the way that an end elicits desire, is final causality.¹¹⁹ Perfection in its full sense includes the three aspects although the last one is the most essential because a substance is said to be perfect in as much as it arrives at its proper end.¹²⁰

After providing this brief overview of the main meanings of perfection, we can add up to the idea of universe as the highest perfection of creation insofar as it comprises the totality of

¹¹¹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 100.

¹¹² Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 17.

¹¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I pars, q.19, a.2: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q19.A2.SC> (consulted on 05 June 2023).

¹¹⁴ Wright, *The order of the Universe*, p. 103.

¹¹⁵ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 41.

¹¹⁶ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, pp. 43-44.

¹¹⁷ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 45.

¹¹⁸ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 70.

¹¹⁹ Guilbeau, “St. Thomas Aquinas”.

¹²⁰ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 71.

created substances and all come from the First Principle¹²¹. Two texts were essential for Thomas Aquinas to make the point: *Metaphysics* XII and Genesis 1, the latter providing the first account of creation by claiming that “God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good.”¹²² This last sentence had been brought out by Augustine and other Church Fathers to emphasize the especial goodness of the universe as totality. Aquinas associates the Aristotelian idea of the internal order of the universe with what is most perfect. Hence, he brings the idea of perfection to a broader understanding that applies to individuals in the process of becoming more perfect, on the one hand, and to the totality of them altogether, on the other.¹²³

Aquinas links the perfection associated to wholeness, again, with the traditional analogy of an animal body made of different parts, some higher than others in dignity: analogically, the world, too, is made of parts that vary in degree of perfection.¹²⁴ This variety of degrees explains its perfection, just as the variety of parts of an animal explains its higher perfection. This fundamental statement of principle is made clear in the *Contra Gentiles* (CG)¹²⁵: “But the good and the best in the universe consists in the mutual order of its parts, which is impossible without distinction, since by this order the universe is established as one whole, and this is its best.”¹²⁶

Perfection presupposes heterogeneity, diversity, and the unity of order cannot be without the distinction of the parts.¹²⁷ If we question the nature of the order that join all parts of the universe into one, the first aspect we see is that there is no force that binds together all its distinct parts. It is an order of activity, in which secondary causes act to produce order and distinction in things.¹²⁸

Of course, for Aquinas the first cause of diversity and distinction is the goodness and wisdom of the Creator.¹²⁹ He clearly maintains this position in CG II, 39-45.¹³⁰ All creatures resemble God, first by existing and second by communicating their existence to others. Insofar as an activity that affect others is causal, the order of the universe embraces the whole order of

¹²¹ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 72.

¹²² Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 72.

¹²³ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 73.

¹²⁴ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 90.

¹²⁵ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 121.

¹²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk II, ch. 39, n. 1157: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~SCG2.C39.7> (consulted on 10 June 2023).

¹²⁷ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 121.

¹²⁸ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 96.

¹²⁹ That the cause acts as a source of order among its effects is a general principle for Aquinas regarding causality and order. See Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 97.

¹³⁰ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 122.

causality and God is its first cause.¹³¹ It could not be otherwise: perfection would not comprise diversity within the whole if it was not in God's intention from the very beginning. It follows that, for Aquinas, the goodness and the wisdom of the Creator are the first source of diversity.¹³² According to this logic, Aquinas claims, in *De potentia*, that "if every part of the human body were an eye, since the functions of the other parts would be wanting, or if every part of the house were the roof, the house would be imperfect and fail of its purpose, which is to shelter from rain and disaster."¹³³

Returning to the questions that I asked at the beginning of this section – whether evil pertains to the perfection of the universe, and if so, to what extent evil deprives some goodness from that perfection – some crucial points appear to emerge from Aquinas's discussion.

Firstly, these questions arise in the context of the debate around the necessity of the material realm (corruptible and incorruptible) in addition of the spiritual realm, for the perfection of the universe.¹³⁴ Aquinas argues for that necessity of the material world which, albeit imperfect, makes the universe the most perfect universe.¹³⁵ As in an animal body, there are some parts higher and lower in dignity, so too in the universe we find a variety of degrees of perfection.¹³⁶ However, all are part of the double diversity of creation. The first is the spiritual and the second part, the material, and within the material, the incorruptible and the corruptible.¹³⁷ Accordingly, the imperfection of created things is a pursuit of the greater good, preferred by God over lesser evil because "God loves what is better" (*De veritate*, q. 5, a. 5, ad 3).¹³⁸

Secondly, the completion of the universe requires different grades of being so that God's divine goodness might be represented in all substances.¹³⁹ Thus, Aquinas points out the fact that God's simplicity cannot be attained by creatures in themselves. Moreover, for this multiformity to be preserved, God allows certain evils because otherwise many good things would never exist. This operates in the ontological order as well as in the moral order, which is a controversial issue inasmuch as it raises the questions of why, by the will of God, some creatures obtain

¹³¹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 97.

¹³² Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 122.

¹³³ Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 3 a. 16 c.: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~QDePot.Q3.A12.Rep3> (consulted on 12 June 2023).

¹³⁴ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125.

¹³⁵ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125.

¹³⁶ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 90.

¹³⁷ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125.

¹³⁸ Roszak, "Imperfectly Perfect Universe?"

¹³⁹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 50.

mercy and others reprobation, and on what grounds and how we still can talk about proper divine justice.¹⁴⁰

Thirdly and despite such a delicate issue, Aquinas's answer is grounded on the authority of Augustine, who claimed for the goodness of God to permit evil and ordering it to what is good.¹⁴¹

In several works, Aquinas alludes to this double diversity, spiritual and material, *formalis* and *materialis* (*ST* I, q. 47, a. 2).¹⁴² It is worth noting that Aquinas comes to the conclusion that multiplicity and diversity are required in each species of the material world for the perfection of the universe, insofar as the material world is made up of corruptible individuals that do not exhaust the potentiality of matter, and therefore are accompanied by privation. This is extensively discussed in *CG* III, 20.¹⁴³ In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas firmly states that the universe is more perfect containing a multiplicity of natures by which diverse degrees of goodness are filled rather than only one kind of the most perfect nature (for example, only angels):¹⁴⁴

Although an angel is absolute better than a stone, still both natures are better than only one, and therefore the universe in which there are angels and other realities is better than one where there were only angels. For the perfection of the universe is viewed essentially in reference to the diversity of natures in which are fulfilled the diverse grades of goodness, and not according to the multiplicity of individuals in a single nature.¹⁴⁵

In conclusion, Aquinas's response to the questions on evil and its role on the perfection of the universe stems from the text which is the object of this section (*Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, ad 5). Evil, even being not a nature neither a part of the universe, pertains to its perfection *per accidens*.¹⁴⁶ If evil has a cause, it is a cause *per accident* and not *per se*.¹⁴⁷ As a general

¹⁴⁰ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 390.

¹⁴¹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 108.

¹⁴² Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125.

¹⁴³ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁴ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, ad. 6:

<https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.I.D42.Q1.A2.C> (consulted on 10 June 2023). See also Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, pp. 125-126.

¹⁴⁶ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁷ A substance is a being which enjoys existence (*esse*) on its own right (*per se*) whereas an accident is that whose existence is to exist in something else. See Wippel *The Metaphysical Thought of Aquinas*, p. 240.

observation, we can say that evil is disorder in respect to the proximate cause, but it is reduced to order by the superior cause.¹⁴⁸ However, inasmuch as God rules all things by his providence, there is a sense in which God seems to cause evil. If He does, it is *per accidens*¹⁴⁹ that, in intending the good of the order of the universe (the form) it inevitably involves defect and decay.¹⁵⁰ That order includes justice, which requires punishment as a result of sin.¹⁵¹ Despite God may cause evil *per accidens*, He does so insofar as the accompanying good is greater than the good that evil deprives.¹⁵² When considering corruption, namely, as a particular kind of evil, one form cannot be produced without the corruption of another and concomitant with the generation of something new. Accordingly, we can see that privation is intended *per accident*. The lion can be fed only if the gazelle dies, and the persecution of the just brings out their virtuous patience.¹⁵³

Aquinas goes further in his arguments claiming that it is not only inevitable (inasmuch as certain natures are in fact deficient and can commit evil) but even desirable, so to speak, for evil to pertain to the universe.¹⁵⁴ As he points out, “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.”¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, the universe would be less good without defective things because it would be deprived of the good that those natures are, although in an incomplete fashion.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 111.

¹⁴⁹ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 113.

¹⁵⁰ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 115.

¹⁵¹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 111.

¹⁵² O’Grady, *Aquinas’s Philosophy of Religion*, p.129.

¹⁵³ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 111.

¹⁵⁴ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 127.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 48, a. 2, ad 3: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q48.A2.Rep3> (consulted on 10 June 2023).

¹⁵⁶ Wippel, “Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*”, p. 21.

4. Conclusion

By examining the philosophical problem of good and evil, the aim of this thesis was to determine to what extent evil plays a role in the goodness of a creation that, in Thomas Aquinas's view, desires its own perfection. To that end, first, I have briefly presented the historical context and focused particularly on Augustine and some other central figures that exerted a profound influence on Aquinas theologically and philosophically, shaping many of his arguments. Second, I have expanded the discussion on the definition of evil as privation of good, analysing the relationship between good and evil. Finally, I have explored the meaning of perfection and the central role of order by engaging with several analogies that Aquinas uses at length to explain how the Universe is the most perfect, even when evil is included among its multiplicity and diversity of beings.

The question of evil can be traced back in a timeline from Plato, who first raised the question about evil's nature, and Aristotle, whose doctrine of privation was fundamental to the definition of evil in *De malo* to Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and indirectly, Proclus and Plotinus.¹⁵⁷

As we have seen, in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its strict monotheism, Augustine had to deal with Manichaeism. This belief presented a dualist metaphysics with a good and a bad god, and the resulting conception of evil as a substance. Both ideas were rejected by Augustine.¹⁵⁸ In his *Confessions*, he makes clear his stances on the origin of evil¹⁵⁹ and established three fundamental arguments concerning its nature: firstly, the distinction between the *malum poenae* and the *malum culpae*, secondly, that the original sin is in evil's root and in fact is the source of all human evil¹⁶⁰, and thirdly, that evil, as absence of being, cannot have emanated from God, who is solely responsible for being.

Augustine's profound influence on Aquinas is evident by considering the definition of evil that the latter proposed: "malum est privatio boni". Although eight hundred years had passed and the social and religious context was much different from the Late Antiquity, Aquinas's understanding of evil follows Augustine's remarks in *Enchiridion*, III: "What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good?"¹⁶¹ However, Aquinas adds a fundamental

¹⁵⁷ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation", p. 192.

¹⁵⁸ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁹ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 39.

¹⁶⁰ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation".

¹⁶¹ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation".

clarification: evil is the absence of a due good.¹⁶² In examining the nature of the good, Aquinas makes two essential claims: first, that being and good are not only identical realities but convertible; and second that goodness adds to being a sense of desirability, inasmuch as a substance desires its own good.¹⁶³ Hence, goodness operates as a final cause and diffusive of itself.¹⁶⁴

In providing the good with final causality, God, the supreme good and the first cause and the efficient cause of everything, makes goodness the intrinsic force of all the creatures. Thomas recalls Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* arguing that the good is what all things desire, as a child desires to be an adult or even matter desires form as its perfection.¹⁶⁵ Desire or appetite is what he calls love in the commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's *On the Divine Names*.¹⁶⁶

Yet evil can either be a real substance or not. Aquinas argues that "every evil is founded in some good" but just like an accident that needs a subject to exist.¹⁶⁷ Since the good is something which is desirable, every nature has the nature of goodness, and therefore evil as opposed to what is desirable in a being, has no real nature.¹⁶⁸ However, Aquinas reckons that evil is real in two ways: first, as natural evil and, second, as moral evil, with the latter corresponding to sin, namely, a voluntary act against the natural order.¹⁶⁹ This notion of moral evil or wrongdoing is what Aquinas regards more properly evil because of its foundational role. Furthermore, for Aquinas as for Aristotle, evil can be understood in two senses: firstly, as a subject that is evil and, accordingly, absolutely real; and secondly, as a quality, which has no real entity.¹⁷⁰

When explaining the nature of the good, Aquinas develops a sophisticated notion of perfection and claims that every substance desires its own perfection, which is its own good to the maximum degree.¹⁷¹ However, when applying the idea of perfection to the Universe, a twofold meaning of the good emerges: on the one hand, an intrinsic good which is its form, the order of

¹⁶² O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation".

¹⁶³ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*".

¹⁶⁴ Guilbeau, "St. Thomas Aquinas" and Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 203.

¹⁶⁵ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*".

¹⁶⁶ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 68 and p. 130.

¹⁶⁷ McCabe, *God and Evil*, p. 66.

¹⁶⁸ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*".

¹⁶⁹ Gavin, *Evil in the Western Tradition*, p. 60.

¹⁷⁰ O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation".

¹⁷¹ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 68 and p. 71.

the Universe; and on the other, an extrinsic good, appetible and desirable, which is the First Mover and ultimate source of finality.¹⁷²

In Aquinas's world, the Prime Mover is a principle of order itself, separated from the created things and He is the cause of the harmonious agreement among the various appetites in the Universe.¹⁷³ The created substances have an order according to several degrees of perfection, a diversity that contributes to that perfection of the universe and reflects better the divine goodness.¹⁷⁴ Therefore, for Aquinas perfection presupposes heterogeneity and diversity that can only flow from the goodness and wisdom of the Creator.¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless, his understanding of the universe is somehow perplexing when he asserts that the universe is more perfect containing natures to which evil is attached and others to which it is not.¹⁷⁶ His fundamental point, discussed in *ST I*, q. 47, a. 2 is that the perfection of the universe requires that there must be some inequality among things, so that all degrees of goodness may be filled.¹⁷⁷ The distinction and multiplicity of created beings follow God's intention willing to communicate his goodness to creatures, so that He may be represented by them.¹⁷⁸ From here, Aquinas concludes that evil as privation not only exists in the material world but was permitted by God in order to preserve many good natures that otherwise would never exist.¹⁷⁹ In a sense, God allows evil and gives evil an existence, so to speak, but only per accident, inasmuch as the existence of created substances entails corruption and death.¹⁸⁰

Two significant implications for our contemporary world arise from Aquinas's notion of perfection. First, a cosmology where created substances have a religious dimension. Following Thomas Berry's cosmological view, "from a religious perspective, we might consider that because of the diversity of life expression that is held together in such intimate unity, the Earth is a special presentation of the deep mysteries of existence whence religious consciousness arises".¹⁸¹ The Earth and all its components have that religious sense, and the universe itself is

¹⁷² Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷³ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 100.

¹⁷⁴ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 125 and p. 274.

¹⁷⁵ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 122.

¹⁷⁶ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*".

¹⁷⁷ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*".

¹⁷⁸ Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*".

¹⁷⁹ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 108.

¹⁸⁰ Wright, *The Order of the Universe*, p. 111.

¹⁸¹ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 90.

“the primary bearer of the religious experience”.¹⁸² In Aquinas’s view “ the order of the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things”¹⁸³ and, as he continues in *ST I*, q. 22, a. 4, “the principal good in existing things themselves is the perfection of the universe”.¹⁸⁴ Consequently, our religious experience is clearly grounded on that order: an order that, in Aquinas’s understanding, manifest the variety of beings, with the Creator as the first and ultimate cause of the Universe’s goodness.

The second implication is expressed by the *Laudato Si* papal encyclical. As Pope Francis observed, “we understand better the importance and meaning of each creature if we contemplate it within the entirety of God’s plan. As the Catechism teaches: ...creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.”¹⁸⁵

Both implications combined open avenues for future research on the consequences of Aquinas’s cosmovision for our relationship with the created world.

¹⁸² Berry, *The Sacred Universe*. P. 94.

¹⁸³ Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, p. 94.

¹⁸⁴ Blanchette, *The Perfection of the Universe*, p. 73.

¹⁸⁵ Pope Francis, *The Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis* “*Laudato Si*”: *On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: The Vatican Press, 2015).

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