

# St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil

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‘Evil’ is the opposite of ‘good’. Accordingly a thing which lacks its perfection will be evil. St. Thomas defines evil as a privation of something which a being should have. Thus a man who is blind is deprived of the faculty of sight in a totally different manner to a mole: for the mole this privation is in contrast to generic animal nature: for man, on the other hand, it is in contrast to his own normal nature. Accordingly, a privation exists whenever a being, which by nature and at a given time should possess an attribute, does not have it. According to Aristotle a privation is always in a subject. But in the platonic tradition it is seen as something subsistent and is identified with matter.

We can study evil as it occurs concretely and divide it into the following classes: evil in nature (*malum naturale*), evil in human work (*malum artificale*) and moral evil in human actions (*malum morale*). In these instances evil is always a privation of a good in a subject.

## Evil in natural things

The privation of a perfection which is called evil can either be a privation of the substantial being of things or the privation of their accidental perfection, or finally the privation of their utility to man. In nature, decay and perishing, malformations and shortcomings occur. In many cases these kinds of evils are useful in the context of the whole world: animals and plants die to make way for fresh individuals and so to make adaptation and development possible so life renews itself in each generation.

In regard to this kind of evil in nature we may not simply apply our human manner of appreciating and speak of cruelty if

one animal serves as food for another. Even accidental malformations are not devoid of meaning in nature, but are frequently the best possible form of life which a part of an organism can attain under given circumstances. Nature avoids squandering and a thing that no longer corresponds to its end on a higher level will frequently have a degree of usefulness in a lower level and will be situated in a lower order of finality.

Furthermore, certain forces of nature are sometimes deprived of their usefulness for a particular group of people, as is the case with hurricanes flooding and earthquakes. Considered on a global scale, these natural disasters do have a purpose. For instance, earthquakes are a by-product of tectonic movements, such as orogeny, which is necessary if there are to be erosion, rivers and fertile land. Hurricanes function in the system of energy exchange and temperature regulation of ocean water at different latitudes.

Pain and suffering may also be classed under the forms of evil in nature. In cases where they are caused by man himself they belong to the categories of evil in human work or moral evil. After the nervous system and the brain had developed in higher animals, pain and suffering became possible: pain is the perception by the sense of touch and the common sense of something which does violence to the organism. Suffering can become more intense the higher one's level of consciousness is. Animals suffer pain from moment to moment without actually knowing explicitly that this pain is contrary to their nature. In man suffering attains an entirely new depth: he experiences its continuity and is aware that this pain hinders him in his quest of happiness. Pain is doubtless one of the most day-to-day experiences and affects all men. In a certain sense pain is more real to us than joy because it is present in our consciousness in a more biting manner. In former times people accepted pain more easily as something inevitable in life. But modern man is inclined to think that pain has no right to vex or cruciate him. When he himself suffers or when he sees others

suffer, he adopts the attitude described by Albert Camus in his “L’Homme revolte”.

Pain is a biting sensation of discomfort or disturbed order. Pain can be a sign of warning of danger and force the organism to rest so that it can organize all its forces towards curing itself. At times pain has a stimulating effect. Repeatedly, however, there exists as disproportion between the possible function of pain and its intensity. The disturbance of order we call evil apparently also occurs in pain to the extent that the latter shows a reduced purposiveness. However, it is also possible that in those cases in which a clear disproportion exists between the disease and the intensity of the pain we are dealing with the so-called civilization diseases in which a natural equilibrium has been disturbed. But here too pain may provoke some good in a different order: it is an incentive to discover and develop effective medication and may have a good influence on man’s spiritual and moral life.

Mental suffering is not as easy to describe as physical pain: it embraces feelings of dissatisfaction, failure, anxiety, loneliness, guilt and painful loss. Mental affliction in our drive for rest, respect, success or of seeing the values we cherish most endangered or in process of disappearing.

By evil in human work we mean a task carried out or work done in a defective way. Examples are a faulty argument, a badly constructed building, a text full of grammatical mistakes, a machine which is defective. In all these cases a task has been performed in a faulty manner. This is caused by insufficient talent, skill or application or sometimes by the use of wrong materials. At times such actions are also a moral evil, sc. if the faulty performance could or should have been avoided. The evil in work carried out by man consists generally in the absence of a necessary accidental quality or ordering or, at times, of beauty, and in lack of usefulness for man.

An action is morally evil whenever man knowingly and freely deviates from what he is obliged to do as a human being. What man must do is contained, explicitly and implicitly, in the fundamental statements of the practical intellect which tells him that the good must be done and evil avoided. The practical intellect deduces rules of conduct from the basic inclinations issuing from human nature and applies them to daily life in society. Moral evil which we call sin is not an infection from the outside but the choice and adoption of a particular stand in conflict with the end of man.

Sin can be divided according to the various inclinations of man and is on each occasion opposed to the respective moral virtues which cover the whole field of human actions. Moral evil is the most total form of evil because it deprives man of his perfection as man and is a conscious free choice of evil (under the form of a limited good which stands in separation from man's duties). Thus sin goes against the love of God for man and against the order he established. Hence it is in conflict with God's goodness itself. Moral evil, which is studied in ethics, is responsible for a large part of the suffering in human life.

When confronted by evil men can adopt various metaphysical attitudes. A first possible attitude is that of pessimism. Even in Greek thought, which was generally optimistic, we do at times hear pessimistic voices. A statement quoted by Aristotle in his "Eudemus" says that it is best for men not to be born; having been born, it is best for him to die as soon as possible. In ancient India pessimistic currents of thought exercised considerable influence. Perhaps influenced by the 'Vedanta', Buddha taught the four basic truths regarding suffering: suffering holds the upper hand in the world; the cause of suffering is "thirst", i.e. desire; putting an end to all desire will bring freedom from suffering; the way to achieve the extinction of desire is renunciation and a virtuous life which turns man in upon himself.

The Christian philosopher cannot follow Buddha in his assertion that everything is suffering and also emphatically rejects that all desire is the cause of suffering: desire is the condition for progress and perfection.

A second attitude towards the problem of suffering is that of the Stoics: pain is indeed a reality but it is neither good nor evil, and hence we should ignore it. Man's true essence is not his body and even less his next of kin or his possessions. There is accordingly no reason whatsoever to suffer because of these things. Even if we lose everything our mind still belongs to us. The Stoic view of suffering can lead to a certain heroism, but must nonetheless be rejected. Suffering is not something indifferent and we cannot separate body and soul in the manner the Stoics do. Finally, it is man's greatness to be profoundly moved by the misery of others and to suffer with them rather than to be indifferent to their plight and misery.

A third attitude is that of naïve optimism. It is true that there is suffering in the world the optimist says, but this is only temporary. Man will be able to banish it through increased medical expertise, social assistance and greater prosperity. Poverty and inequality can be overcome; natural disasters predicted; the human life-span is susceptible of prolongation. We call this position naïve optimism. Some progress is certainly possible, but it seems to be accompanied by new forms of evil. It is impossible to banish all forms of suffering from human life without turning man into a robot.

Apparently the correct attitude towards the problem of evil is more complex. It recognizes that there is much evil in the world, but it assumes that ultimately the good will triumph over evil, even though this will not come about in the present order of the world. This assumption is based on the metaphysics of creation: if God creates out of love, he will see to it that evil is a road towards the

good. Else his power would be insufficient and he would fall short of his own goodness.

A second observation is that the study of evil must always keep the whole in view rather than consider individual occurrences of evil. A simple example is the pain involved in child-birth: to the mother it may seem absurd that she suffers pain when she gives birth, but in the context of the mother-child relationship this pain has a particular function. As a matter of fact man is part of society and he never suffers or dies for himself alone. Somehow tragic events have a function in the human community. Suffering brings into being a new dimension in man and provides greater self-knowledge and a more profound experience of reality. Suffering destroys false certitudes and pride, leads to a deeper understanding of human life and can bring man to the highest forms of charity.

Christian metaphysics argues that God's love of man differs entirely from the human feeling of sympathy and the often expressed wish that "everyone may have a good time". God's love embraces the entirety of human life. Just as in a musical composition it does not make sense to pay attention to individual sounds only, so too we must see the vicissitudes of human life against the background of the eternally continued existence of the human soul. Our perspective, however, is often that of a few years only. We frequently judge things by the way they appear to be at the present moment, and not according to their significance in a view which sees human life on earth as a first preparatory stage.

What also makes a correct evaluation difficult is the fact that we usually approach things to the extent that they affect us bodily. But we should see evil and suffering more in the light of the spiritual perfection to be attained. In the final analysis our bodily reality is an expression of our spiritual principle of life.

In the Christian view of evil, suffering is also the place where man meets God. In his undeserved suffering Job refuses to listen to the explanations of his friends. God himself then intervenes in the discussion to remind that he is the undisputed master of all. Job must learn not to take offence at events which he cannot understand, but should worship God. He must meet God where God wants to meet him; namely, in Job's suffering.

Finally, for a Christian suffering is also a participation in the suffering of Christ, but this aspect of the problem falls outside the scope of philosophy. In this connection the doctrine of original sin is of great importance. In his dealing with his fellow men and in his relationship to the cosmos and to himself man notices at times an inescapable lack of balance between the suffering which he himself and others must undergo and what he thinks he may expect given his human nature his rights and righteous behaviour. Thousands of people are suddenly struck by natural disasters, serious accidents, fatal separation or painful diseases that they could neither avoid nor foresee. Nature is not as serviceable as people think they might expect it to be. In the case of pain too there is frequently a disproportion between its function of usefulness and the intensity of suffering which it brings with it.

Christianity views this outrageous absence of serviceability as an effect of original sin, i.e. the condition of alienation from God in which all mankind is born and which derives from the refusal of the first man to accept a supernatural calling and a surplus of order which implied a strengthening of the finality of things and their being at man's disposal (I, 49, 1).

A last question to be considered is that of the causes of evil. If evil is not a positive being, it is not as such the immediate effect which a causal action is aiming at. But evil does have a cause, for there must be a causal explanation why a being is deprived of its natural disposition. Evil is always a privation in or of something in

a subject which exists. In fact a being (which as such is good) is its subject. Evil has no formal cause because it is the privation of form, but it has an efficient cause (I, 49,1). It arises as something accidental to the good which is produced. Hence we say that evil has a cause 'per accidens'.

When analyzing the cause of evil we divide evil into that which is the privation of a property or perfection and the evil of evil actions. The first type of evil is found in nature. To the extent that God is the ultimate efficient and final cause of all beings, that is also of those beings in which the privation occurs, he is 'per accidens' the cause of the evil inherent in them. There is no contradiction between God's goodness, on the one hand, and the presence of evil, on the other, since this kind of evil is given with created beings, more in particular with material things. Since things are made from nothing, they are limited in their deepest essence. Material things are subject to change because they bear within themselves the constituent for change which we call primary matter. Accordingly change, decay, passing away and hence evil exists at the substantial as well as at the accidental level.

However, the processes of change, generation and corruption take place in a world characterized by finality. As Aristotle writes with great insight, nature works for a goal and reaches this goal in most cases. Even in instances where this end, namely, that of the usefulness of something for man is not attained, there is nonetheless some finality at a lower level. Thus evil in nature serves some purpose. We can reach the same conclusion with the aid of a metaphysical argument. God almighty is good. It is true that he does not cause evil directly. However, he does allow it to happen. This would contradict his essence, if he did not bring forth good out of evil.

Augustine expressed this insight in a well-known text:  
"Because God is good to the highest degree, he would in no way

permit there to be any evil in his works, unless he were so almighty and good that he were able to produce good out of evil”.

(‘Enchiridion, Ch. 11). St. Thomas observes that it is proper to God’s infinite goodness that he permits the existence of evil, in order to bring forth the good from it (I, 2,3, ad 2). It is true that the manner in which God draws good out of evil often escapes us in this life. Because evil presents itself with a considerable degree of unintelligibility we speak of the mystery of evil.

We must now consider the cause of evil actions. In the case of “bad work” (disregarding for the moment moral responsibility) there is human shortcoming because of lack of application or skill or the use of poor materials etc. In a world which consists of limited and perishable things it will never be possible to avoid all failure.

A much deeper form of evil is the morally evil action where man consciously wills evil. Just as the possibility of decay and passing away is imprinted in the essence of material things, so too the possibility of deviating from the good is given with the nature of human free will. St. Augustine connects the possibility of moral evil with the fact that under the human will lies nothingness. Moral evil is not so much doing something as “falling away”, “falling short” and failing, sc. by not observing the rule of reason as St. Thomas points out. We should not look for a cause of this falling away from the rule of reason. This would be the same as seeking an efficient cause of darkness and silence. (‘De Civitate’, 12, 7).

What Augustine is saying is that evil does not have a direct efficient cause ‘per se’. The possibility of performing morally evil actions is an inevitable consequence of the freedom of the will. This can be explained by making a distinction between the ontological aspect of the sinful act and its formal aspect (the privation of its harmony with the rule of reason). It is true that God is the cause of the content of being in any human act, first as all

beings exist by participation in the First Being. But a human act is not God's action and a human choice is not God's choice. God gives only the entitative content and occurrence of an action without being the cause which does something through this action. Hence, God is in no way, not even 'per accidens', the cause who commits this action and so he is in no way the cause of the moral evil. He permits sin to take place in that he grants his causal support to the will to enable it to perform an act, despite its deviation from the rule of reason. The person who performs the evil action is the cause 'per accidens' of the privation of subordination to the moral law. To clarify this St. Thomas gives an example: if a cripple walks, the cause of his crippled gait is not his power to move, but the leg which is too stiff or too short. Therefore all of the entity in an evil action goes back to God as to its first cause, whereas the privation which renders it evil comes from the acting person who does not conform himself to moral law (I, 49, 3 ad 2).