

QUESTION 79

God as a Cause of Sin

Next we have to consider the exterior causes of sin (questions 79-81): first, on the part of God (question 79); second, on the part of the devil (question 80); and, third, on the part of man (question 81).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is God a cause of sin? (2) Is the act of sinning (*actus peccati*) from God? (3) Is God a cause of spiritual blindness and of hardness of heart (*causa excaecationis et obdurationis*)? (4) Are spiritual blindness and hardness of heart ordered toward the salvation of those who are spiritually blinded or whose hearts are hardened?

Article 1

Is God a cause of sin?

It seems that God is a cause of sin:

Objection 1: In Romans 1:28 the Apostle says of certain people, “God delivered them up to a reprobate sense, to do things that are not right.” And a Gloss on this passage says that God works in the hearts of men, inclining their wills toward whatever He wills, be it good or evil. But it is a sin to do what is not right and to have one’s will inclined toward evil. Therefore, God is a cause of sin for men.

Objection 2: Wisdom 14:11 says, “God’s creatures were made into an abomination (*in odium factae sunt*) and a temptation to the souls of men.” But ‘temptation’ usually means a provocation toward sinning. Therefore, since, as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 44, a. 1), creatures were made only by God, it seems that God is a cause of sin who provokes men toward sinning.

Objection 3: Whatever is a cause of a cause is a cause of its effect. But God is a cause of free choice, which is a cause of sin. Therefore, God is a cause of sin.

Objection 4: Every evil is opposed to some good. But it is not incompatible with God’s goodness that He is a cause of the evil of punishment (*causa mali poenae*); for of this evil Isaiah 45:7 says that God creates evil and Amos 3:6 asks, “Is there evil in the city that God has not brought about?” Therefore, it is likewise not incompatible with God’s goodness that He should be a cause of sin (*causa culpae*).

But contrary to this: Wisdom 11:25 says, “You hate nothing that you have made.” But God hates sin—this according to Wisdom 14:9 (“To God the wicked man and his wickedness are hateful”). Therefore, God is not a cause of sin.

I respond: There are two ways in which a man is a cause of sin, either his own sin or the sin of another:

(a) in one way, *directly*, viz., by inclining his own will or the will of another toward sinning;

(b) in a second way, *indirectly*, viz., by not drawing someone back from sin; hence, in Ezechiel 3:18 the watchman is told, “If you do not tell the wicked man, ‘You will die the death’, then I will require his blood at your hands.”

Now God cannot be a cause of sin *directly*, either of His own sin or the sin of another. For every sin involves a withdrawal from the ordering that is directed toward Himself as an end. But as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 1, God inclines and turns all things toward Himself as their ultimate end. Hence, it is impossible that He should be a cause, for Himself or others, of a departure from the ordering that is directed toward at Himself. Hence, He cannot be a cause of sin directly.

Similarly, He is also unable to be a cause of sin *indirectly*. To be sure, it is possible for God not to offer certain individuals assistance for avoiding sin—assistance which is such that if He were to give it, they would not sin. But He does all of this in accord with the order of His wisdom and justice, since He Himself is Wisdom and Justice. Hence, the fact that someone else sins is not imputed to Him as a cause of sin, just as the helmsman is not called a cause of the sinking of the ship by virtue of the fact that he is not steering the ship, except in a case in which he stops steering the ship when he is able to and obliged

to steer it (*nisi quando subtrahit gubernationem potens et debens gubernare*).

And so it is clear that God is in no way a cause of sin.

Reply to objection 1: As far as the Apostle's words are concerned, the reply is clear from the text itself. For if God "delivers them up to a reprobate sense," then they already have a reprobate sense for doing things that are not befitting. Therefore, He is said to hand them over to a reprobate sense insofar as He does not prevent them from following their reprobate sense, in the same way that we are said to leave exposed those whom we do not keep safe.

Now as for what Augustine says in *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio* (and this is where the Gloss in question is taken from), viz., that "God inclines men's wills toward good and evil," this should be taken to mean, as has been explained, that God inclines men's wills directly toward the good, whereas He 'inclines' them toward evil insofar as He does not prevent it—and yet this likewise happens as something that is deserved because of previous sin (*hoc etiam contingit ex merito praecedentis peccati*).

Reply to objection 2: When it says, "God's creatures were made into an abomination and a temptation to the souls of men," the preposition 'into' is being used consecutively and not causally. For God did not make His creatures to be bad for men; rather, this followed because of men's foolishness. This is why it is added "... and a snare to the feet of the foolish," viz., of those who through their foolishness use creatures for something other than that for which they were made.

Reply to objection 3: When a mediate cause's effect proceeds from it insofar as it is subordinated to the order of the first cause, then the effect is likewise traced back to the first cause. By contrast, if a mediate cause's effect proceeds from it insofar as it departs from the order of the first cause, then the effect is not traced back to the first cause. For instance, if a servant does something contrary to his master's command, then this thing is not traced back to his master as its cause. Similarly, a sin that free choice commits against God's precept is not traced back to God as its cause.

Reply to objection 4: Punishment is opposed to the good of the one who is punished, since he is deprived of some good or other. But sin is opposed to the ordering that is directed toward God, and hence it is directly opposed to the divine good. Because of this, the lines of reasoning concerning sin and punishment are not parallel (*non est similis ratio de culpa et poena*).

Article 2

Is the act of sinning from God?

It seems that the act of sinning (*actus peccati*) is not from God:

Objection 1: In *De Perfectione Iustitiae* Augustine says, "The act of sinning is not an entity (*non est res aliqua*)." But everything that is from God is an entity (*res aliqua*). Therefore, the act of sinning is not from God.

Objection 2: A man is said to be a cause of sinning only because the man is a cause of the act of sinning (*causa actus peccati*); for as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, "No one acts by intending what is bad (*nullus intendens ad malum operatur*)." But as has been explained (a. 1), God is not a cause of sin. Therefore, God is not a cause of the act of sinning.

Objection 3: As is clear from what was said above (q. 18, aa. 2 and 8), it is by their species that some acts are bad and are sins. But whatever is a cause of something is a cause of whatever belongs to that thing by its species. Therefore, if God were a cause of the act of sinning, it would follow that He is a cause of sin. But as has been shown (a. 1), this is not true. Therefore, God is not a cause of the act of sinning.

But contrary to this: An act of sinning is a certain movement of free choice. But as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 3, "God's will is a cause of every motion." Therefore, God's will is a cause of the

act of sinning.

I respond: The act of sinning is both a *being* and an *act* (*actus peccati et est ens et est actus*), and in both these respects it is from God. For as is clear from Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5, every being, in whatever way it exists, must be derived from the first being. And every action (*actio*) is caused by something that exists in act, since nothing acts except insofar as it is actual (*est actu*). But everything that exists in act (*omne ens in actu*) is traced back to the first act as its cause, viz., God, who is actual through His essence (*est per suam essentiam actus*). Hence, it follows that God is a cause of every action insofar as it is an action.

However, 'sin' names a being and an action *along with a certain defect*. But the defect is from a created cause, viz., free choice, insofar as it falls away from the order of the first agent, viz., God. Hence, this defect is not traced back to God as a cause; instead, it is traced back to free choice. In the same way, the defect of limping is traced back to the crooked leg as its cause and not to the power of effecting movement (*virtus motiva*), and yet the power of effecting movement is a cause of whatever motion is involved in the limping. Accordingly, God is a cause of the act of sinning but He is not a cause of the sin, since He is not a cause of the fact that the act exists with a defect.

Reply to objection 1: Augustine is using the name 'entity' (*res*) here for that which is an entity absolutely speaking, viz., a substance. In this sense, the act of sinning is not an entity.

Reply to objection 2: What is traced back to the man as a cause is not only the act but also the defect itself; for the act is not subordinated to the one to whom it should be subordinated, even though the man himself does not principally intend this. And for this reason the man is a cause of the sin.

By contrast, God is a cause of the act in such a way that He is in no way a cause of the defect that accompanies the act. And for this reason He is not a cause of the sin.

Reply to objection 3: As was explained above (q. 72, a. 1), acts and habits receive their species not from a privation, in which the character of evil consists, but instead from an object to which a privation of this sort is conjoined. And so the defect itself, which is said not to be from God, is not like a specific difference (*non quasi differentia specifica*) but instead belongs to the species of the act as something that is posterior to it (*petinet ad speciem actus consequenter*).

Article 3

Is God a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart?

It seems that God is not a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart (*causa excaecationis et indurationis*):

Objection 1: In 83 *Quaestiones* Augustine says that God is not a cause of a man's being worse (*Deus non est causa eius quod homo est deterior*). But a man becomes worse through spiritual blindness and hardness of heart. Therefore, God is not a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart.

Objection 2: Fulgentius says, "God is not the punisher of what He is the author of." But God is the punisher of a hardened heart—this according to Ecclesiasticus 3:27 ("A hard heart will do badly in the end"). Therefore, God is not a cause of hardness of heart.

Objection 3: It is not the case that the same effect is attributed to contrary causes. But the cause of spiritual blindness is said to be (a) a man's badness—this according to Wisdom 2:21 ("For their badness blinded them")—and also (b) the devil—this according to 2 Corinthians 4:4 ("The god of this world has blinded the minds of non-believers"). But these causes are contrary to God. Therefore, God is not a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart.

But contrary to this: Isaiah 6:10 says, "Make blind the heart of this people, and make their ears heavy." And Romans 9:18 says, "He has mercy on those whom He wishes; and those whom He wishes,

He hardens.”

I respond: Spiritual blindness and hardness of heart signify two things:

One of them is a *movement of the human soul* when it adheres to evil and is turned away from God’s light. And in this respect God *is not* a cause of spiritual blindness and of hardness of heart.

However, the other one is the *withholding of grace (subtractio gratiae)*, from which it follows that the mind is not divinely illuminated in order to live in an upright way and that the man’s heart is not softened in order to live in an upright way. And in this respect God *is* a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart.

Now notice that God is a universal cause of the illumination of souls—this according to John 1:9 (“This was the true light, which illumines every man who comes into this world”)—just as the sun is a universal cause of the illumination of bodily entities. Yet the two cases are different, since the sun effects its illumination by a necessity of nature, whereas God does it voluntarily through the order of His wisdom. Now even though the sun, as regards itself, illuminates all bodies, still, if there is in a given body some impediment, the sun leaves that body in the shadows (*reliquit illud tenebrosum*), as in clear in the case of a house whose windows are shuttered. But the sun is in no way a cause of the house’s being darkened, since it is not by the sun’s own judgment that it does not emit light to the interior of the house; instead, the cause of this is just the one who shuttered the windows. By contrast, it is by His own judgment that God does not emit the light of grace to those in whom there is an obstacle to it. Hence, it is not only the one who posits the obstacle to grace who is a cause of the withholding of grace, but also God, who by His own judgment does not posit the grace (*qui suo iudicio gratiam non apponit*).

It is in this way that God is a cause of spiritual blindness, of heaviness of the ears, and of hardness of heart. These three are distinguished in a way that corresponds to the effects of grace. For grace perfects the intellect by the gift of wisdom and softens the affections by the fire of charity. And given that two of the senses serve the intellect’s cognition most of all, viz., sight and hearing, one of which, viz., sight, assists in discovery and the other of which, viz., hearing, assists in learning, so spiritual blindness is posited with respect to seeing, heaviness of the ears is posited with respect to hearing, and hardening is posited with respect to the affections.

Reply to objection 1: Since as regards the withholding of grace, spiritual blindness and hardness of heart are punishments of a sort, on this score a man is not made worse by them; rather, having been made worse through sin, he incurs them, just as in the case of other punishments.

Reply to objection 2: This objection has to do with hardness of heart insofar as it is a sin.

Reply to objection 3: Badness is the meritorious cause of spiritual blindness in the way that a sin is the cause of a punishment. And it is likewise in this way that the devil is said to make someone spiritually blind, insofar as he leads him into sin.

Article 4

Are spiritual blindness and hardness of heart always ordered toward the salvation of the one who is blinded or whose heart is hardened?

It seems that spiritual blindness and hardness of heart are always ordered toward the salvation of the one who is blinded or whose heart is hardened (*ad salutem eius qui excaecatur et obduratur*):

Objection 1: In *Enchiridion* Augustine says, “Since God is supremely good, He would in no way permit something bad to occur unless He were able to elicit good from any evil.” Therefore, *a fortiori*, He orders toward the good the sort of evil of which He Himself is a cause. But as has been explained (a. 3), God is a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart. Therefore, these conditions are ordered toward the salvation of the one who is blinded and whose heart is hardened.

Objection 2: Wisdom 1:13 says, “God takes no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked.” But He would seem to take pleasure in their destruction if He did not turn their spiritual blindness to their own good—just as a physician would seem to take pleasure in afflicting a sick man if he did not order the bitter medicine that he prescribes for him toward his health. Therefore, God turns spiritual blindness toward the good of those who are blinded.

Objection 3: As Acts 10:34 says, “God is not a respecter of persons.” But He orders the spiritual blindness of some persons toward their salvation, e.g., certain Jews who had been blinded, so that they did not believe in Christ and killed Him while they were non-believers, but afterwards were converted, having been overcome with compunction—as we read in Acts 2 about some of them and as is clear from Augustine in *De Quaestionibus Evangeliorum*. Therefore, God turns the blindness of all of them to their salvation.

But contrary to this: As Romans 3:8 says, evil is not to be done in order that good might come of it. But spiritual blindness is an evil. Therefore, God does not blind individuals for their own good.

I respond: Spiritual blindness is a certain precursor to sin (*praeambulum ad peccatum*).

Now there are two things toward which sin is ordered, one toward which it is ordered *per se*, viz., damnation, and the other of which stems from God’s merciful providence, viz., spiritual health, insofar as God allows some to fall into sin so that, acknowledging their own sin, they might become humble and be converted, as Augustine says in *De Natura et Gratia*.

So spiritual blindness is likewise by its very nature ordered toward the damnation of the one who is blinded, and because of this it is also posited as an effect of reprobation. But because of God’s mercy, spiritual blindness is for the time being (*ad tempus*) ordered as a sort of medicine toward the salvation of those who are blinded (*ad tempus ordinatur medicinaliter ad salutem eorum qui excaecantur*). However, as Romans 8:28 makes clear, this mercy is not offered to all of those who are blind, but only to the predestined, for whom “all things work together for the good.”

Hence, as Augustine says in *De Quaestionibus Evangeliorum*, for some individuals spiritual blindness is ordered toward health, whereas for others it is ordered toward damnation.

Reply to objection 1: All the evils that God either brings about or permits are ordered toward some good, and yet they are not always ordered toward the good of the one in whom the evil exists, but are sometimes ordered toward the good of someone else or even of the whole universe. For instance, God ordered the sin of the tyrants toward the good of the martyrs, and He orders the punishment of the damned toward the glory of His own justice.

Reply to objection 2: God does not take pleasure in the destruction of men as regards the destruction itself, but He does take pleasure in it by reason of His justice or because of the good which follows from it.

Reply to objection 3: It belongs to God’s mercy that He orders the spiritual blindness of some individuals toward their salvation, and it belongs to His justice that the spiritual blindness of other individuals is ordered toward their damnation. And as was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 23, a. 5), the fact that He metes out mercy to some but not to all does not indicate any “respect for persons” in God.

Reply to the argument for the contrary: It is the evil of sin that is not to be done in order that good might come of it; by contrast, the evil of punishment is to be inflicted for the sake of the good.