

QUESTION 76

Ignorance as a Cause of Sin

Next we have to consider the particular causes of sin: first, the interior causes of sin (questions 76-78); second, the exterior causes of sin (questions 79-81); and, third, sins that are a cause of sin (questions 82-84).

Given what has gone before, the first consideration will have three parts: For first of all, we will discuss ignorance, which is a cause of sin on the part of reason (question 76); second, we will discuss weakness or passion, which is a cause of sin on the part of the sentient appetite (question 77); third, we will discuss malice, which is a cause of sin on the part of the will (question 78).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is ignorance a cause of sin? (2) Is ignorance a sin? (3) Does ignorance totally excuse one from sin? (4) Does ignorance diminish a sin?

Article 1

Can ignorance be a cause of sin?

It seems that ignorance cannot be a cause of sin:

Objection 1: What is nothing is such that it is not a cause of anything. But ignorance is a non-being, since it is a certain sort of privation of knowledge. Therefore, ignorance is not a cause of sin.

Objection 2: As is clear from what was said above (q. 75, a. 1), the causes of sin have to be from the side of the turning-toward (*ex parte conversionis*). But ignorance seems to have to do with the turning-away (*respicere aversionem*). Therefore, it should not be posited as a cause of sin.

Objection 3: As was explained above (q. 74, a. 1), every sin consists in an act of willing (*consistit in voluntate*). But the will is directed only toward something known, since the will's object is an apprehended good. Therefore, ignorance cannot be a cause of sin.

But contrary to this: In *De Natura et Gratia* Augustine says, "Some sin through ignorance."

I respond: According to the Philosopher in *Physics* 8, there are two sorts of moving causes, the one *per se* and the other *per accidens*. A *per se* cause is one that effects movement by its own power; for instance, whatever generates [the bodies] is a cause that effects movement in heavy and lightweight [bodies]. On the other hand, a *per accidens* cause is, for instance, one that removes an obstacle, or else it is the very removal of an obstacle. It is in this second way that ignorance can be a cause of a sinful act. For ignorance is a privation of the knowledge that perfects reason, and reason prevents a sinful act insofar as it directs human acts.

Note, however, that there are two sorts of knowledge in accord with which reason directs human acts, viz., *universal* knowledge and *particular* knowledge. For one who takes counsel about matters of action makes use of a sort of syllogism whose conclusion is an act of judging or either an act of choosing or an operation (*iudicium seu electio vel operatio*). But actions exist among singular things. Hence, the conclusion of a syllogism about actions is a singular [proposition] (*conclusio syllogismi operativi est singularis*). But a singular proposition (*singularis propositio*) is inferred (*concluditur*) from a universal proposition only by the mediation of some singular proposition. For instance, a man is restrained from an act of parricide by the fact that (a) he knows that one should not kill his father and that (b) he knows that *this* is his father. Therefore, ignorance of either of these propositions can be a cause of an act of parricide—more specifically, either ignorance of the *universal principle*, which is a rule of reason, or ignorance of the *singular circumstance*.

Hence, it is clear that it is not just any instance of ignorance on the part of a sinner that is a cause of a sin, but only an ignorance undermining the sort of knowledge that would prevent the sinful act. Thus, if a man's will were so disposed that it would not be restrained from an act of parricide even if the man recognized his father, then ignorance with respect to his father would not be a cause of his sin; instead, it

would be related to the sin as something concomitant with it. And so, according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 3, such a man would not be sinning *because of his ignorance*, but would instead be sinning *while ignorant*.

Reply to objection 1: A non-being cannot be a *per se* cause of anything, and yet it can be a *per accidens* cause in the sense of removing an obstacle.

Reply to objection 2: Just as the knowledge that the ignorance undermines has to do with a sin on the part of the turning-toward, so too ignorance is a cause of a sin on the part of the turning-toward insofar as it removes an obstacle.

Reply to objection 3: The will cannot be directed toward what is in every respect unknown, but if something is known in some respect and not known in some other respect, then the will can will that thing. And it is in this second way that ignorance is a cause of sin, as when someone knows that this being whom he is killing is a man but does not know that it is his father, or as when someone knows that this act is pleasurable and yet does not know that it is a sin.

Article 2

Is ignorance a sin?

It seems that ignorance is not a sin:

Objection 1: As was established above (q. 71, a. 5), a sin is “a word or deed or desire that is contrary to God’s law.” But ‘ignorance’ does not imply any act, either interior or exterior. Therefore, ignorance is not a sin.

Objection 2: Sin is more directly opposed to grace than it is to knowledge. But the privation of grace is not a sin; instead, it is a sort of punishment that follows upon sin. Therefore, ignorance, which is a privation of knowledge, is not a sin.

Objection 3: If ignorance is a sin, this is only insofar as it is voluntary. But if ignorance is a sin insofar as it is voluntary, then it seems that the sin consists in the very act of the will rather than in the ignorance. Therefore, ignorance will not be a sin; instead, it will be something that follows upon a sin.

Objection 4: Every sin is removed through repentance and, with the sole exception of original sin, no sin that passes from guilt remains in actuality. However, ignorance is not removed by repentance, but still remains actual after all the guilt has been removed through repentance. Therefore, ignorance is not a sin—unless, perhaps, it is the original sin.

Objection 5: If ignorance itself is a sin, then as long as the ignorance remains in a man, he is actually sinning. But ignorance remains continually in the one who is ignorant. Therefore, the one who is ignorant is continually sinning. This is clearly false, since in that case ignorance would be the gravest sin. Therefore, it is not the case that ignorance is a sin.

But contrary to this: Nothing merits punishment except sin. But ignorance merits punishment—this according to 1 Corinthians 14:38 (“If anyone does not know, he will not be known”). Therefore, ignorance is a sin.

I respond: Ignorance (*ignorantia*) differs from a lack of knowledge (*nescientia*) in that ‘lack of knowledge’ implies a *simple negation* of knowledge, and so anyone who does not have knowledge of certain things can be said to ‘lack knowledge of them’ (*nescire illas*). This is the sense in which Dionysius, in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7, posits a lack of knowledge in the angels.

By contrast, ‘ignorance’ implies a *privation* of knowledge, when someone lacks knowledge of something that he is naturally capable of knowing (*quae aptus natus est scire*). Some of these things he is obligated to know (*scire tenetur*), viz., the things without which he cannot correctly exercise the right act. Hence, everyone is obligated to know in a general way what belongs to the Faith and to the universal

precepts of law, whereas each individual is obligated to know those things that are relevant to his state in life or his job (*quae ad eorum statum vel officium spectant*). On the other hand, there are certain things which are such that if even if someone is able to know them, he is nonetheless not obligated to know them, e.g., geometrical theorems and contingent particulars—except in the case of some individuals.

Now it is clear that anyone who neglects to have or to do what he is obligated to have or to do sins by a sin of omission. Hence, ignorance of those things that one is obligated to know is a sin because of one's negligence.

However, a man is not held to be negligent if he does not know what he is unable to know. Hence, ignorance of such things is called *invincible*, because it cannot be overcome by the man's efforts. And because of this, ignorance of this sort is not a sin; for it is not voluntary, given that it is not within our power to repel it.

From this it is clear that no instance of invincible ignorance is a sin. On the other hand, vincible ignorance is a sin if it is ignorance of what someone is obligated to know, though not if it is ignorance of what he is not obligated to know.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 71, a. 6), in the phrase “word or deed or desire” one is to understand the opposite negations as well, insofar as their omission has the character of a sin. And so the negligence because of which ignorance is a sin falls under the aforementioned definition of sin, insofar as something is omitted that ought to be said or done or desired in order to acquire the requisite knowledge.

Reply to objection 2: Even if the privation of grace is not a sin in its own right (*secundum se*), it can nonetheless, like ignorance, have the character of a sin by reason of one's negligence in preparing himself for grace. And yet they are dissimilar to the extent that a man can acquire knowledge through his own acts, whereas grace is acquired by God's gift and not by our own acts.

Reply to objection 3: Just as, in the case of a sin of transgression, the sin consists not only in the act of willing, but also in the willed act which is commanded by the will, so too in a sin of omission the sin is not just the act of willing but also the omission itself insofar as it is in some way voluntary. And it is in this sense that negligence with respect to knowing, or a failure to take something into consideration (*inconsideratio*), is itself a sin.

Reply to objection 4: Even though, once the guilt has passed away through repentance, the ignorance remains insofar as it is a privation of knowledge, it nonetheless does not remain an instance of the negligence because of which the ignorance is called a sin.

Reply to objection 5: Just as, in the case of other sins of omission, a man is actually sinning only at the time for which the affirmative precept obligates him, so too with a sin of ignorance. For one who is ignorant is not sinning continually in actuality, but is instead sinning only when it is time to acquire the knowledge that he is obliged to have.

Article 3

Does ignorance excuse one totally from sin?

It seems that ignorance excuses one totally from sin (*ignorantia ex toto excuset a peccato*):

Objection 1: As Augustine says, every sin is voluntary. But as was established above (q. 6, a. 8), ignorance is a cause of involuntariness. Therefore, ignorance totally excuses a sin.

Objection 2: What someone does outside his intention, he does *per accidens*. But an intention cannot be directed toward what is unknown. Therefore, what a man does through ignorance is *per accidens* in matters of human action. But what is *per accidens* does not confer a species. Therefore, nothing that is done through ignorance ought to be judged either as sinful or virtuous in matters of human

action.

Objection 3: A man is a subject of virtue or sin insofar as he participates in reason. But ignorance excludes knowledge, through which reason is perfected. Therefore, ignorance excuses one totally from sin.

But contrary to this: In *De Libero Arbitrio* Augustine says, “Some things done through ignorance are correctly reprov’d.” But only those things that are sins or mistakes (*peccata*) are correctly reprov’d. Therefore, some things done through ignorance are sins. Therefore, it is not the case that ignorance excuses one totally from sin.

I respond: Ignorance is of itself (*de se*) such that it makes an act that it causes involuntary.

Now it has already been explained (a. 1) that ignorance is said to cause an act when the knowledge opposed to it would prevent that act. And so if the knowledge were present, then such an act would be ‘contrary to the will’, which is what the name ‘involuntary’ conveys.

However, if the knowledge of which one is deprived through ignorance would not prevent the act, and this because of the will’s inclination toward that act, then, as Aristotle says in *Ethics* 3, ignorance of this knowledge makes the man a “non-willing” agent (*non volentem*) but not an involuntary agent. And this sort of ignorance, which, as has been explained (a.1), is not a cause of the sinful act because it does not cause involuntariness, does not excuse one from the sin. And the same line of reasoning holds for any instance of ignorance that does not cause a sinful act, but instead follows upon it or is concomitant with it.

On the other hand, since ignorance that is a cause of an act does cause involuntariness, it is of itself (*de se*) such that it excuses one from that sin, since voluntariness is part of the nature of sin. However, there are two ways in which it can sometimes happen that ignorance does not *totally* excuse one from sin:

In one way, it can happen *on the part of the thing that one is ignorant about*. For ignorance excuses one from sin to the extent that something is not known to be a sin. Now it can happen that (a) an individual is ignorant of some circumstance of a sin which is such that, if he knew about it, he would refrain from sinning, whether or not that circumstance contributes to the act’s sinful nature (*sive illa circumstantia faciat ad rationem peccati sive non*), and yet that (b) there still remains in his knowledge something in virtue of which he knows that the act is a sinful act. For instance, suppose that (a) an individual who is beating someone up knows that he is a man, which is sufficient for the character of sinfulness, but that (b) he does not know that the man is his father, which is a circumstance that makes for a new species of sin. Or perhaps (a) he did not know that the man, in defending himself, would strike back, and (b) if he had known this, he would not have struck him—something that is irrelevant to the character of sinfulness. Hence, even though such a man sins because of ignorance, he is not totally excused from his sin, since he still retains knowledge of the act’s sinfulness.

In a second way, this can happen *on the part of the ignorance itself*, viz., when the ignorance is itself voluntary—either (a) *directly* voluntary, as when someone assiduously desires not to know certain things in order that he might sin more freely, or (b) *indirectly* voluntary, as when, because of work or other occupations, someone neglects to learn something by which he would have been held back from the sin. For such negligence makes the ignorance itself voluntary and a sin, as long as it is ignorance of things that one is obligated to know and is able to know. And so this sort of ignorance does not totally excuse one from sin.

However, if the ignorance is wholly involuntary—whether because it is invincible or because it is ignorance of something that one is not obligated to know—then ignorance of this sort totally excuses one from the sin.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above, not every instance of ignorance is a cause of involuntariness. Hence, not every instance of ignorance excuses one totally from sin.

Reply to objection 2: The intention to sin remains in the individual who is ignorant to the extent that voluntariness remains in him. Accordingly, the sin will not be *per accidens*.

Reply to objection 3: If the ignorance were such that it totally excluded the use of reason, then it would excuse one from sin altogether, as is clear in the case of those who are furious or mindless (*sicut patet in furiosis et amentibus*). However, the ignorance that causes a sin is not always like that. And so ignorance does not always totally excuse one from sin.

Article 4

Does ignorance diminish a sin?

It seems that ignorance does not diminish a sin:

Objection 1: What is common to every sin does not diminish a sin. But ignorance is common to every sin; for in *Ethics 3* the Philosopher says, “Every bad man is ignorant.” Therefore, ignorance does not diminish a sin.

Objection 2: A sin added to a sin makes for a greater sin. But as has been explained (a. 2), ignorance is itself a sin. Therefore, ignorance does not diminish a sin.

Objection 3: It is not the case that the same thing both aggravates sin and diminishes sin. But ignorance aggravates a sin; for Ambrose, in commenting on the passage from the Apostle (Romans 2:4) that goes, “Are you ignorant of the fact that God’s kindness?”, says, “You sin very gravely if you are ignorant.” Therefore, ignorance does not diminish a sin.

Objection 4: If any sort of ignorance diminishes a sin, it would seem especially to be the sort of ignorance that totally undermines the use of reason. But ignorance of this sort does not diminish a sin, but instead increases it; for in *Ethics 3* the Philosopher says, “The drunkard deserves a twofold curse.” Therefore, ignorance does not diminish a sin.

But contrary to this: Any reason for forgiving a sin (*ratio remissionis peccati*) lessens the sin. But ignorance is like this, as is clear from 1 Timothy 1:13 (“I received mercy because I did it in ignorance”). Therefore, ignorance diminishes or lessens a sin.

I respond: Since every sin is voluntary, ignorance can diminish a sin to the extent that it diminishes voluntariness, whereas if it does not diminish voluntariness, then it in no way diminishes the sin.

Now it is clear that since the sort of ignorance that totally excuses one from sin totally destroys voluntariness, it does not diminish the sin but instead removes it altogether. On the other hand, the sort of ignorance that is not a cause of the sin but is instead [merely] concomitant with the sin neither diminishes the sin nor increases it. Therefore, the only sort of ignorance that can diminish a sin is ignorance that (a) is a cause of the sin and yet (b) does not totally excuse one from the sin.

Now it sometimes happens that this sort of ignorance is *per se* and directly voluntary, as when someone keeps himself deliberately (*sua sponte*) ignorant of something in order that he might sin more freely. This sort of ignorance seems to increase the voluntariness and the sin, since it is because of the intensity of his act of willing to sin that someone wants to sustain the loss represented by the ignorance—and this in order to have the freedom to sin.

On the other hand, sometimes ignorance that is a cause of a sin is not directly voluntary, but instead indirectly or *per accidens* voluntary—as, for instance, when someone does not will to work hard at his studies, with the result that he is ignorant; or as when someone wills to drink wine to excess (*immoderate*), with the result that he becomes inebriated and lacks discretion. This sort of ignorance diminishes the voluntariness and, consequently, the sin. For when one does not recognize that something is a sin, his will cannot be said to be moved toward a sin directly and *per se*. Instead, it is moved toward the sin *per accidens*; hence, there is less contempt in such a case and, consequently, a lesser sin.

Reply to objection 1: The ignorance in accord with which every bad man is ignorant is not a cause

of a sin, but rather something that follows upon the cause, i.e., upon the passion or habit that inclines one toward the sin.

Reply to objection 2: A sin added to a sin makes for more sins, and yet it does not always make for a greater sin, since they might not converge into the same sin but might instead be more than one sin. And if the first diminishes the second, it can happen that the two of them together are not as grave as the one would have been by itself. For instance, homicide is a graver sin when it is committed by a sober man than if it is committed by a drunk man, even though [drunkenness and homicide] are two sins. For the drunkenness diminishes the sinful character of the subsequent sin to a degree that is greater than its own graveness.

Objection 3: The quotation from Ambrose can be taken to refer to ignorance that is merely feigned (*simpliciter affectata*).

An alternative reply is that Ambrose can be understood to be talking about a certain type of sin of ingratitude, in which the highest level of ingratitude is that a man should not even recognize the benefits that he has been given (*etiam beneficia non recognoscat*).

Another alternative reply is that the quotation can be taken to refer to the ignorance of infidelity, which subverts the foundation of one's spiritual edifice.

Objection 4: The drunk man merits two curses because of the two sins that he commits, viz., drunkenness and the other sin that follows upon the drunkenness. Yet the drunkenness, by reason of its being joined to ignorance, diminishes the sin that follows upon it; and, as has been explained, it might diminish it to a greater degree than the graveness had by the drunkenness itself.

An alternative reply is that this passage is induced by the ordinance of a certain legislator named Pittacus, who ordered that drunkards should be punished more severely if they struck someone—thus focusing not on the leniency that drunkards should have more of, but instead on the public welfare (*sed ad utilitatem*), since more drunk men do injury than sober men. This is clear from the Philosopher in *Politics 2*.