

QUESTION 49

The Cause of Evil

The next thing to ask about is the cause of evil. On this topic there are three questions: (1) Can what is good be a cause of evil? (2) Can the greatest good, viz., God, be a cause of evil? (3) Is there a greatest evil that is the first cause of all evils?

Article 1

Can what is good be a cause of evil?

It seems that what is good cannot be a cause of evil:

Objection 1: Matthew 7:18 says, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit.”

Objection 2: One of a pair of contraries cannot be a cause of the other. But *evil* is contrary to *good*. Therefore, what is good cannot be a cause of evil.

Objection 3: A defective effect proceeds only from a defective cause. But evil, assuming that it has a cause, is a defective effect. Therefore, it has a defective cause. But everything defective is evil. Therefore, only what is evil is a cause of evil.

Objection 4: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that evil does not have a cause. Therefore, it is not the case that what is good is a cause of evil.

But contrary to this: In *Contra Julianum* Augustine says, “There was nothing at all from which evil could arise except what is good.”

I respond: One must hold that every evil has a cause in some way or other. For evil is the lack of a good that is apt to be had and should be had. But the fact that a thing falls short of its natural and fitting disposition can arise only from a cause that draws the thing away from that disposition. For instance, a heavy thing is moved upward only by something that impels it, and an agent fails in its action only because of something that impedes it. But only what is good can be a cause, since nothing can be a cause except insofar as it is a being, and every being as such is good.

Moreover, when we consider the specific types of causes, the *agent* and the *form* and the *end* all imply some sort of perfection, which pertains to the notion of the good; and even the *matter*, insofar as it is a potentiality for the good, has the character of goodness. In fact, it is already clear from what has been said that what is good is a cause of evil in the manner of a *material cause*; for it was shown above (q. 48, a. 3) that what is good is the subject of evil. On the other hand, evil does not have a *formal cause*, but is rather the privation of a form. Similarly, it does not have a *final cause*, but is rather the privation of the ordering to a fitting end; for it is not only the end that has the nature of the good, but also the useful, which is ordered to the end.

However, evil does have a cause in the manner of an *agent (per modum agentis)*, though it has such a cause *per accidens* rather than *per se*. To see this clearly, note that evil is caused in one way in an *action* and in another way in an *effect*.

In the *action*, evil is caused because of a defect in one of the principles of the action—either in the principal agent or in an instrumental agent. For instance, a defect in an animal’s motion can happen either because of a weakness in the moving power, as in young children, or solely because of some ineptitude on the part of an instrument, as in the case of those who are lame.

On the other hand, the evil in a given *thing*, though not in the agent’s proper effect, is sometimes caused by the agent’s power and sometimes by the thing’s own defectiveness or that of its matter.

It is caused by the agent’s power or perfection when the privation of another form necessarily follows upon the form aimed at by the agent—in the way that the privation of the form of air or of water

follows upon the form of fire. Therefore, just as a fire imprints its form more perfectly to the extent that it is more perfect in power, so also it corrupts the contrary form more perfectly. Hence, the evil and corruption that belong to the air or the water derive from the perfection of the fire. However, this happens *per accidens*, since the fire does not aim at depriving the water of its form, but instead aims at inducing its own proper form—and yet in doing the latter, it also does the former incidentally (*per accidens*).

On the other hand, if the defect is in the fire's *proper effect*—viz., if the fire falls short in its heating—then this is either (a) because of a defect in the action, which, as has already been explained, results from a defect in one of the principles of the action, or (b) because of a lack of disposition (*indispositio*) in the matter, which does not receive the action of the acting fire. But the very fact that the effect is deficient is likewise incidental to the good thing which is acting *per se*.

Hence, it is true that evil does not in any way have a cause except *per accidens*, and so it is in this sense that what is good is a cause of evil.

Reply to objection 1: As Augustine puts it in *Contra Julianum*, “The Lord is calling a bad act of will (*voluntas*) a bad tree and a good act of will a good tree.” Now a morally evil act is not produced by a good act of will, since an act is judged to be morally good because of the good act of will itself. On the other hand, the very movement of a bad act of will is caused by the rational creature, who is good. And it is in this way that it is a cause of evil.

Reply to objection 2: What is good does not cause the evil which is contrary to itself, but instead causes some other evil, in the way that the fire's goodness causes what is bad for the water, and in the way that a man, who is good by his nature, causes a morally bad act. And this itself is *per accidens* in the way just explained. (It even happens that one of two contraries causes the other contrary *per accidens*, as when an exterior surrounding coldness gives warmth insofar as the interior heat is trapped by it.)

Reply to objection 3: The way in which evil has a defective cause in the case of natural beings is different from the way it has a defective cause in the case of voluntary beings.

For a natural agent produces an effect that is such as itself is, unless it is impeded by something extrinsic, and this very thing is a kind of defect in it. Hence, evil never results in the effect unless some other evil previously existed either in the agent or in the matter, as was explained above.

By contrast, in the case of voluntary beings, a defect in the action proceeds from an actualized defect in the will, insofar as the will, in its acting, fails to subject itself to its own rule. This latter defect is not yet itself a sin, but a sin results from the fact that the will operates in the presence of such a defect.

Reply to objection 4: As has been explained, evil has a cause only *per accidens* and not *per se*.

Article 2

Is the greatest good, viz., God, a cause of evil?

It seems that the greatest good, viz., God, is a cause of evil:

Objection 1: Isaiah 45:6-7 says, “I am the Lord, and there is no other God who forms the light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil.” Further, Amos 3:6 says, “Shall there be evil in a city which the Lord has not done?”

Objection 2: The effect of a secondary cause is traced back to the first cause. But as has been explained (a. 1), it is what is good that is a cause of evil. Therefore, since, as was shown above (q. 6, a. 1), God is a cause of every good, it follows that every evil is likewise from God.

Objection 3: As *Physics 2* says, the cause of the ship's salvation is the same as the cause of its

peril. But God is a cause of the salvation of all things. Therefore, He is likewise a cause of all perdition and evil.

But contrary to this: In *83 Quaestiones* Augustine says, “God is not an author of evil because He is not a cause of anything’s tending toward non-being.”

I respond: As is clear from what has been said (a. 1), the sort of evil that consists in a defective action is always caused by a defect in the agent. However, as was shown above (q. 4, a. 1), in God there is no defect, but only the greatest perfection. Hence, the sort of evil that consists in a defective action or is caused by a defect in the agent is not traced back to God as a cause.

By contrast, the sort of evil that consists in the corruption of various things is indeed traced back to God as a cause. This is clear both in the case of natural beings and in the case of voluntary beings. For it has already been explained (a. 1) that insofar as an agent produces by its own power a form upon which corruption and defectiveness follow, it is a cause by its own power of that corruption and defectiveness. But it is clear that the form that God principally intends in created things is the good of the order of the universe. Yet, as was explained above (a. 48, a. 2), the order of the universe requires that certain things are able to fail and sometimes do in fact fail. And so in causing the good of the order of the universe among things, God consequently and, as it were, *per accidens*, causes the corruption of things—this in accord with 1 Kings 2:6 (“The Lord kills and gives life”). And when Wisdom 1:13 says, “God has not made death,” this means that He does not intend death *per se*.

Now the order of justice, which requires that punishment be inflicted on sinners, is also relevant to the order of the universe. Accordingly, God is the author of the evil which is punishment, though He is not—for the reason explained above (q. 48, a. 6)—an author of the evil which is sin.

Reply to objection 1: The cited passages are talking about the evil of punishment and not about the evil of sin.

Reply to objection 2: The effect of a defective secondary cause is traced back to a non-defective first cause with respect to what that effect has of being and perfection, but not with respect to its defectiveness. For instance, in an act of limping the motion is caused by the moving power, whereas the lameness in the act is caused not by the moving power, but instead by the curvature of the leg. Similarly, whatever there is of being and action in a bad action is traced back to God as a cause, but whatever is defective in the act is caused by the defective secondary cause and not by God.

Reply to objection 3: The reason why the sinking of the ship is attributed to the sailor as its cause is that he does not do what is required to save the ship. By contrast, God does not fail to do what is necessary for salvation. Hence, the two cases are not parallel.

Article 3

Is there one greatest evil which is a cause of every evil?

It seems that there is one greatest evil which is a cause of every evil:

Objection 1: Contrary effects have contrary causes. But according to Ecclesiasticus 33:15 (“Good is set against evil, and life against death: so also is the sinner against a just man”), contrariety is found among things. Therefore, there are contrary principles, the one a principle of good and the other a principle of evil.

Objection 2: As *De Caelo et Mundo* 2 says, if one of two contraries exists in reality, then so does the other contrary. But as was shown above (q. 2, a. 3 and q. 6, a. 2), the greatest good, which is a cause of all good, exists in reality. Therefore, there is likewise a greatest evil opposed to it which is a cause of

every evil.

Objection 3: Just as the good and the better are found in reality, so too are the bad and the worse. But *good* and *better* are predicated relative to the best. Therefore, *bad* and *worse* are predicated relative to some greatest evil.

Objection 4: Everything that is such-and-such through participation is traced back to what is such-and-such through its essence. But things that are evil among us are evil through participation and not through their essence. Therefore, something is the greatest evil through its essence and is a cause of every evil.

Objection 5: Everything that is such-and-such *per accidens* is traced back to what is such-and-such *per se*. But what is good is a *per accidens* cause of evil. Therefore, we must posit some greatest evil that is a *per se* cause of evils.

Nor can one reply that evil has only a *per accidens* cause and not a *per se* cause, since then it would follow that evil does not exist in most things (*ut in pluribus*), but only in a few (*ut in paucioribus*).

Objection 6: The evil of an effect is traced back to the evil of its cause, since, as was explained above (a. 1), a defective effect comes from a defective cause. But there can be no infinite regress here. Therefore, one must posit a first evil being that is the cause of every evil.

But contrary to this: As was shown above (q. 2, a. 4 and q. 6, a. 2), the greatest good is a cause of all being. Therefore, there cannot be a principle opposed to it which is a cause of evil things.

I respond: It is clear from what has already been said that there is no single first principle of evils in the way that there is a single first principle of good things.

For first of all, as was shown above (q. 6, a. 3), the first principle of good things is good through its essence. But nothing can be evil through its essence; for it was shown above (q. 48, a. 3) that (a) every being, insofar as it is a being, is good, and that (b) evil does not exist except in a subject that is good.

Second, as was shown above (q. 6, a. 2), the first principle of good things is a greatest and perfect good that contains within itself every sort of goodness. But there cannot be a greatest evil because, as has been shown (q. 48, a. 4), even if an evil continually diminishes a good, it can nonetheless never totally consume it. And so since some good always remains, there cannot be anything that is wholly and perfectly evil. For this reason the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 4 that if there were something completely evil, it would destroy itself, since if the entire good were destroyed (which is what is required for the completeness of the evil), the evil itself would also be removed, given that its subject is something good.

Third, the notion (*ratio*) of evil is incompatible with the notion of a first principle. For, first of all, as was shown above (a. 1), every evil is caused by what is good. Second, evil cannot be a cause except *per accidens* and so it cannot be a first cause, since, as is clear from *Physics* 2, a *per accidens* cause is posterior to a *per se* cause.

Now those who posited two first principles, one good and the other evil, fell into this error by virtue of the same root cause that also gave rise to other peculiar positions held by the ancients—viz., they did not take into account the universal cause of all being, but instead considered only the particular causes of particular effects. For this reason, if they found a thing to be harmful to another because of the power of its nature, they thought that the nature of that thing was evil—as, for instance, if someone were to call the nature of a fire evil because it had burned down a poor man's house.

However, a judgment about the goodness of a thing should not be based on the way it is ordered to a given particular thing; rather, as has been shown (q. 47, a. 2), it should be based on the thing itself and on the way it is ordered to the entire universe, within which each thing has its own perfectly ordained place.

Again, when they discovered two particular contrary causes of two particular contrary effects, they did not know how to trace the particular contrary causes back to a common universal cause. And so they judged that contrariety among causes holds all the way back to the first principles.

However, since all contraries agree in some one common thing, they must have, over and beyond their contrary proper causes, some one common cause—in the way, for instance, that the power of a celestial body is something over and beyond the contrary qualities of the elements. Similarly, as has been shown (q. 2, a. 3), over and beyond all the things that exist in any way, there is one first principle of being.

Reply to objection 1: Contraries agree in one genus, and they also agree in the nature of being. And so, even though they have contrary particular causes, we must arrive in the end at a single common first cause.

Reply to objection 2: A privation and the corresponding disposition are apt to be effected with respect to the same [subject]. Now as has been explained (q. 48, a. 3), the subject of a privation is a being in potentiality. Hence, since, as is clear from what has been said, evil is a privation of the good, it is opposed to a good that is conjoined with potentiality—and not to the greatest good, which is pure actuality.

Reply to objection 3: Each thing is intensified in accord with its proper nature. But just as a form is a sort of perfection, so a privation is a sort of negation. Hence, every form and perfection and good is intensified by approaching a perfect terminus, whereas a privation or evil is intensified by receding from that terminus. Hence, a thing is not called bad and worse by approaching the greatest evil, in the way that a thing is indeed called good and better by approaching the highest good.

Reply to objection 4: No being is called evil through participation; rather, a being is called evil through a privation of participation. Hence, an evil does not need to be traced back to something that is evil through its essence.

Reply to objection 5: As was shown above (a. 1), evil can have only a *per accidens* cause. Hence, it cannot be traced back to something that is a *per se* cause of evil.

However, the claim that evil exists in most things is simply false. For generable and corruptible things, in which only an evil of nature can exist, are only a relatively small part of the whole universe. Again, within each species defects of nature do not occur in most cases. In men alone does evil seem to occur in most cases. For the good of man with respect to the senses is not the good of man *qua* man, i.e., the good with respect to reason, and yet most men follow their senses rather than reason.

Reply to objection 6: One cannot proceed to infinity among the causes of evil; instead, one can trace every evil back to some good cause from which that evil follows *per accidens*.