

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AS TREATED BY ST. THOMAS

Modern schools of Philosophical Thought, striving as they are with might and main to demolish the formidable ramparts of Theism, propose as their greatest argument against its tenets, the prevalence of evil in this world of ours. No man possessed of an unperverted intellect, can call into question the existence of evil, especially in the form of sin and of suffering. It is, unfortunately, a fact of whose reality, each one of us has been only too firmly convinced, both by the testimony of his fellow beings, and by personal experience. Yet reason tells us that there exists a God, all-good, all-potent, who "hath made all things good in His own time" (Eccles. III, 2). This then, is the paradox, the seeming contradiction, before which many an able thinker has quailed. To reconcile these two undeniable propositions has been the task to which certain men of all ages and climes have set themselves. The solutions arrived at are as varied and multiple as are the investigators themselves. Some, following Plato and the Manicheans, have concluded that matter itself is evil. Others with Buddha, tell us that all conscious thought, as such, is an evil, and that our chief purpose in life is to rid ourselves of it. Schopenhauer and some of the more recent philosophers, reflecting the pessimistic and idealistic sentiments of the age, have even gone so far as to assert that the universe is fundamentally evil; that "life is but a path of red-hot coals, with a few cool places here and there."

Catholic philosophy alone has held itself aloof from all such irrational, chimerical and absurd theories, and drawing from the inexhaustible fount of truth which it possesses, has set forth the only sane and reasonable explanation of this prodigious mystery. For we do not deny that the problem of evil is mysterious; we cannot fully grasp its meaning, but we can and we do show that it is not wholly inexplicable. St. Thomas Aquinas, able champion of Catholic truth, following in the footsteps of St. Augustine and the other doctors of the Church, has left us an admirable treatment of the question in his "Summa Contra Gentiles." It is to his writings, then, that we shall apply ourselves in the endeavour to gain some notion of what has been termed the "appalling problem of Evil" (Book III, Chapters IV-XV.)

The question easily divides itself into a consideration of the two members of the paradox, the examination of evil itself, and its relation to the Creator. St. Thomas first makes inquiry into the nature of evil, and finds that it is really not an essence or nature, but simply the privation of that which a thing is naturally fit to have, and should have. His reasoning on this point is most clear; for a privation is not an essence, but the denial of something in a subject. It follows from this that evil, as evil, does not exist, since all being, in so far as it is being, is good. We must be careful, however, not to pervert the real meaning of this doctrine. St. Thomas does not here contend that there is no evil in the world. The point which he desires to emphasize is, that evil lacks both substantial and accidental being; that it consists entirely in privation. All things, even what we call evil things, contain some good, for God has endowed all positive being with a place in His scheme of creation. When, therefore, we say that evil "is" in the world, we do not mean that it exists as a thing. We merely wish to signify the truth of a certain proposition, just as we say that a man "is" blind, without desiring to attribute substantial being to blindness, as such. (B. III, C. 7, 8, 9.)

With these few notions as our starting point, we now come to the investigation of the varieties of evil, for it is evident that evil is not predicated of all things in the same manner. St. Thomas finds that in voluntary things every evil is to be considered as a penalty or as a fault, that is to say, that evil is to be divided into physical and moral evil. Physical evil occurs through the privation of any part which is necessary for the integrity of an object, as sickness is an evil, and as it is evil to lack any member of the body. Now on supposition that all things are subject to Divine Providence, evil under this aspect has the nature of a penalty; for it belongs to the very essence of penalty to be against the will. But there is another kind of evil, as we have indicated, which consists in the deviation of human volition from the prescribed rules of the moral order, or, as we might say, in failure as regards perfect action, as stealing and other unjust actions. This is termed moral evil, and is to be imputed to the agent not as a penalty or punishment, but as a fault, as it is due to the misuse of free will. This division of evil into physical and moral is, according to St. Thomas, wholly adequate (S. T. 1, 2, XLVIII, 5, 6). Yet in an analogous sense

we may say that there is still a third kind of evil, the evil of nature, which is the limitation by one another of the different parts that go to make up the natural world, and through which, natural objects are prevented from acquiring their full or ideal perfection. Since, however, this limitation is not a privation of something due, but a simple negation, and is called evil only in a broad sense, it is wisely disregarded.

We have thus far seen what evil is, and how it is predicated of things. We have next to explain, in so far as explanation be possible, the source whence evil arises; the causes to which the evil of human life, physical and moral is to be attributed. It must necessarily be admitted that evil, in some way or other has a cause. Now, nothing can be a cause only in so far as it is a being, and every being, as such, is good. Hence that which is the cause of evil is good. "But," warns St. Thomas, "evil does not result from good as from an efficient cause, but accidentally, through lack of power, in the agent" (C. G. III, X). But in moral matters the case is slightly different, inasmuch as departure from the prescribed moral laws does not proceed from lack of power, since weakness either wholly removes or at least lessens, imputability. However, it is demonstrated by means of irrefutable arguments that in moral, as well as in physical action, evil is caused by good, not directly but accidentally. "It is in the act of the will that we must seek the root and the origin of what in the moral order is sin." The Angelic Doctor concludes by proving that evil, moral and physical, is due to the fall of man; to the abuse of the priceless gift of free-will by Angels and men.

Now that we have obtained some idea as to the nature of evil, its division and its origin, it remains that we consider the second member of our question; the relation of evil to the Creator. This is by far the more perplexing part of the problem, the point on which those who are not guided by sound principles, inevitably fall down. We are forced by reason to admit that the universe which contains so much suffering and sin, is the work of an all-benevolent, all-powerful God. Now if this God be all-good, why, did He cause or permit physical evil? If He be all-powerful, as we say, then He can be under no necessity to create or permit it. Indeed, if He were under any such necessity He could not be all-powerful. Moreover, since He is Goodness itself. Moreover, since He is Goodness itself, how can He with-

out manifest contradiction, allow that moral evil, which we term sin, to exist.

St. Thomas, proceeding in a logical manner, first considers these different attributes of the Deity. "God," he says, "is the sovereign good; not merely good, but Goodness itself. Therefore, there cannot be in Him, anything that is not Goodness" (C. G. I, XXXIX). He also possesses all power, that is, He can do all things that do not involve a contradiction. (C. G. I, XXV). Moreover, since He has a knowledge of all particular good things, He must also know evil things, for when good is known, the opposite evil also is known. (C. G. I, LXXI). These three points concerning the absolute goodness, the omnipotence and the omniscience of God, have been authoritatively defined, and so any theory which would solve the problem of evil, in the light of Catholic doctrine, must include them. Our task then, is reduced to proving that Divine Providence is not inconsistent with the presence of evil in creation.

First of all, we must attempt to explain why God permits evil, both physical and moral. St. Thomas replies that the existence of evil subserves the perfection of the whole of creation: that if the universe contained no evil, it would be less perfect. (C. G. III, LXXI). If there were no order of goodness among creatures, some being better than others, a great beauty would be lost to the universe, since there could be in it, no perfect goodness. Now it is the task of a just ruler to maintain the perfection of his subjects, not to lessen it. Hence it is fitting that God, the supreme ruler, should not remove from creation the capability of falling away from good. But from this very capability, evils follow; for what *can* fall away, sometimes *does* fall away, and the mere lack of good is evil.

Again, we know that every society, every government is composed of members whose offices and conditions of life are widely divergent, and often contrary to each other. Yet, if the rulers of the government desire to bring about harmony and union amongst these different members, they must, in all justice, allow them to act according to their natural bent and state in life, and must not attempt, except in cases of extreme emergency, to coerce their several actions. Such is the plan of divine government. Every class of creatures possesses its distinctive nature, and since this nature is from God, it would be wholly inconsistent with His wisdom for Him to prevent them

from acting in accordance with it. But when creatures do act in this manner, by reason of mutual contrariety and incompatibility, there follow necessarily, destruction and evil. Creatures are necessarily limited and imperfect, and hence, once things exist in time, evil, physical evil at least, is bound to spring up.

But if evil were to be removed from the world, many good things, many virtues would disappear. We know that in the physical order one thing cannot come into being unless something else be destroyed. Fire could not exist if that which it consumes were not corrupted. The more powerful creatures must destroy their inferiors if they would eat and live. We ourselves, human beings, live only because previous generations have passed away and made room for us. So, although it is undoubtedly an evil for a thing to be consumed by fire, an evil for one creature to be destroyed that another may live, yet this very destruction subserves the perfection of the universe and helps to find place for better things.

So it is in the moral order. If there were no malice, no wrongdoing, there would be no sphere for patience and justice. We should have never been able to admire the fortitude and strength of the martyrs if there had been no persecutors to assist them in winning their crowns. There would have been no patience of Job, had he had no trials. There would be no room for the glorious patience and endurances of Ireland, were it not for the perfidy of her oppressors. So then we may see why God has ordained that evil exist; for if it were wholly excluded from the world, then would the number of good things be proportionally diminished, "which ought not to be," concludes St. Thomas, "for good is more vigorous in goodness, than evil in badness."

Likewise a prudent and wise man will overlook some defect in the part for the sake of the goodness of the whole; for certainly the good of the whole takes precedence over the good of the part. Thus does the builder lay his foundation beneath the soil, that he may strengthen the whole edifice. Now the beauty of the entire universe consists in the orderly arrangement of things good and evil; and so, much of this beauty would be lost were evil to be removed, and the good of the whole would suffer accordingly.

Thus we have established that God permits evil as a means to work out His wondrous design of creation: that moral evil serves to further the advancement of good. Can we then say that He is the cause of evil? St. Thomas replies to this question in a few words, giving us the most satisfactory explanation possible. We know that whatever action is to be found in creatures, has God for its principal cause, since they act only in so far as they have been endowed with power by the Creator. We know also, that evil in things subject to Divine Providence, comes from a defect in secondary causes, in creatures, namely. In the light of these two principles, we may safely conclude that evil acts, in that they are defective, are due to deficient secondary causes, not to God; but, inasmuch as they are *acts*, they are necessarily of God. The truth of this can be more readily seen from the illustration which St. Thomas adds. "Lameness," he says, "or the halting motion of the legs, in so far as it is an *action*, comes from the motive power; but the fact that it is a *halting* motion, must be referred to the curvature, or other defect in the leg."

To sum up, we have seen that evil is not a thing, but the privation of something; that it may be divided into physical and moral evil; that it arises, though only accidentally, from good; and finally, that its presence in the universe is by no means inconsistent with the notion of a Supreme Being. This account of the Holy Doctor is a true Theodicy, for it takes into consideration, every factor of this momentous problem, and solves, in so far as human reason can ever solve, the Great Riddle of the Universe. It remains for us to make these principles practical; to apply them to our daily lives. Moral evil and the suffering which it entails, can be bettered only through the reform of the individual, and that not so much through the increase of knowledge, as through the re-direction of the will. Since there are definite limits to human speculation, we can not hope to attain, in this life, to the ultimate "why" of evil.

We must accept the fact as it is and make the best of it, convinced of the wisdom of God in permitting evil to exist. We may wonder why He does not mend matters as we should mend them, did we have His Omnipotence. But we must bear in mind that if we had His power, we should also have His infinite knowledge, and should then understand and appreciate, the marvelous order and justice in the existing disposition of created things.

—Bro. Leonard Callahan, O. P.