5. Evil and Suffering

The specifically modern problem of evil was, of course, unknown to Aquinas. This does not mean that evil did not pose an intellectual problem for him, but rather that the nature of the problem was not the need to provide a rational justification for belief in God’s goodness in the face of evil through either theodicy or logical defense. Aquinas instead began with a strong doctrine of divine providence and sought to show how that providence encompassed and defeated evil. In reply to the argument that the reality of evil is incompatible with infinite divine goodness, he invokes the fundamental Augustinian axiom that governs his entire treatment: “God, since he is maximally good, would not have allowed any evil into his work unless he were so omnipotent and good that he could even make good come out of evil. Hence it pertains to the infinite goodness of God that evil be permitted so that he might bring good out of it.” Thus rather than impugning or thwarting the goodness and omnipotence of God, evil instead provides the opportunity for God to display these attributes more clearly by making it the occasion for the introduction of an even a greater good than that which evil originally threatened. The root of this claim is decidedly theological since it presupposes the doctrines of original sin and redemption: in response to the evil introduced into creation by the sinful misuse of freedom, God has sent his Son as Savior so that human beings might reach a state of divinisation higher than that which preceded the Fall.

As this opening outline indicates, it is impossible to give an adequate account of evil from the Thomistic perspective without recourse to specifically theological doctrines. Ultimately, the “answer” to the problem of evil lies in Christ; more specifically, it lies not in doctrines about Christ, but rather in the believer’s lived experience of union with Christ in the midst of suffering and evil. Hence any attempt to provide a purely philosophical theodicy is necessarily incomplete and, if the truth be told, unsatisfying. Yet within the framework of a philosophy of religion approach, something akin to a Thomistic philosophical theodicy has been

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1 This point is made by Timothy Jackson at the opening of his “Must Job Live Forever? A Reply to Aquinas on Providence,” The Thomist 62 (1998): 1-3.
2 ST I, 2, 3 ad 1. The Augustine quotation is from Enchiridion, chapter 11.
3 This is the intuition behind the Easter Exultet’s claim: “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam that won for us so great a redeemer.”

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extracted and articulated; as will be seen, however, the coherence of such a
theodicy ultimately presupposes some theological background assumptions. 4

The first part of this chapter will outline the classical Thomistic approach to the
problem of evil as that was developed mainly by French Thomists. The definitive
synthesis of this viewpoint is Charles Journet’s *The Meaning of Evil.* 5 This
approach is a broadly Augustinian-style theodicy with the main themes being a
general account of evil as privation, created free will as the cause of all human
misery, the possibility of loving union with God as the greater good justifying the
human capacity for evil, and the innocence of God’s will from causally originating
evil. The second part of the chapter will survey contemporary modifications of the
classic doctrine by Thomists, both theologians and philosophers of religion, who
either disagree with its approach or desire to engage the contemporary problematic
more directly.

I. THE CLASSICAL APPROACH

A. The General Meaning of Evil in the Created Order

Following St. Augustine, Aquinas denies that evil has any independent
metaphysical reality. So even though we cannot help but reify evil in speaking
about it, it is not a thing or a substance in its own right. It is rather an absence or
lack in a being of some perfection which ought to be there; this is the meaning of
evil as privation. A mere absence of a perfection is not an evil, but rather it must be
the lack of something that ought to be present in a being precisely because its
nature demands it. For example, it is not a privation or evil for a post to be deaf
because the capacity to hear is not a constitutive feature of a post. But for a human
being to be deaf (as a post) is an evil or privation because it prevents the person
from experiencing the full range of sensations that make for optimal human
functioning. The judgment that something is afflicted by evil is always indexed
against the standard set by the optimally functioning nature of the thing. Evil does
not mean the same thing in all its usages; it is not a property having a single or
univocal meaning (like blue). Indeed, it is not a property in the normal sense at all,
but rather a predicate expressing a judgment that the subject in question is not what
it is supposed to be as a flourishing instance of its kind. Evil is thus metaphysically
and logically parasitic upon the good: it is a privation in some subject with some
goodness insofar as it is, but lacking the full measure of being and goodness that
ought to belong to it.

Since evil can only exist in the good and be understood against the intelligibility
of the good, it is necessary to understand Aquinas’ s doctrine of the good in order to
understand his doctrine of evil. In Aquinas’s metaphysics, anything that exists is
*ipso facto* good. Goodness is a transcendental or universal property of being,
expressing the relationship that each being has to its own existence precisely as
perfective and so desirable. 6 The desirableness ingredient in the notion of good

4 For an approach that tries to stay philosophical along these lines, see Georges Van Riet, “Le
problème du mal dans la philosophie de la religion de saint Thomas,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain*
6 On good as a transcendental property, see Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendents:*