

ON AQUINAS ON EVIL*

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Abstract

In De malo, St. Thomas Aquinas famously argues that evil does not exist, but is only the absence of good. This paper critically examines Aquinas's arguments for this stunning conclusion. First, the three arguments Aquinas presents in Article 1 of De malo are consolidated into a single argument (the reasons for this merger are explained in the paper), which is then evaluated for validity and soundness. It will be shown that Aquinas's reasoning is logically valid but unsound. In addition, the paper offers a sketch of a possible naturalistic reconstrual of Aquinas's position on good and evil.

Keywords: St. Thomas Aquinas, evil, essence, moral terms

Introduction

In *De malo* (Question 1, Article 1), St. Thomas Aquinas famously argues that evil does not exist, but is merely the privation of a due good. He was not the first to hold this view on evil; several others in the Western philosophical tradition, notably Plotinus, St. Augustine, and St. Anselm, also thought the same thing. Aquinas's arguments, however, are remarkable

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for their straightforwardness and rigor. His treatment of evil displays some of the most appealing virtues of his philosophizing: clarity, succinctness, and an extraordinary objectivity.

Aquinas gives three separate arguments in Article 1 for the non-existence of evil. The three arguments may be collapsed into one, as they share an identical conclusion and second premise, and, as I will explain shortly, since the first premise of the three is similar enough that it may be construed as a single more general assumption. In this paper, my aim is to examine Aquinas's reconstructed argument closely, evaluating it for validity and soundness. First I will show that the argument is logically valid, by schematizing it in first-order logic and giving a natural deduction proof. I then critically examine its main assumptions, assessing them for truth and justification. This examination involves taking a brief look at Aquinas's Aristotelian metaphysical presuppositions and Christian worldview. The upshot of our discussion will be that Aquinas's argument is valid but unsound, and likely convincing only to those who already accept his main theological presuppositions. The argument, in other words, is a striking and captivating one, but it is ultimately flawed. The paper concludes with an attempt to reinterpret Aquinas's position on good and evil from a theologically neutral standpoint, that is, naturalistically.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must stress from the outset that even though every effort will be made to interpret Aquinas objectively and charitably, in this paper I will not hesitate to use conceptual tools that Aquinas himself didn't have at his disposal, and his claims will be evaluated from an unabashedly contemporary analytic point of view. My interest here is not so much in exegesis or being faithful to an author's intention or to the tenets of a particular, historical school of thought, but in pursuing philosophical ideas for their own sake.

2. Validity

As I just mentioned, in Article 1 Aquinas presents three different arguments for the conclusion that evil does not exist as a thing, but is merely the privation or absence of a thing's expected good. The three

arguments share the same conclusion, and also their second premise, namely, that «Evil is contrary to good.» Where they differ is in the first premise, which, in the case of the first, reads: «Whatever is in reality must be some particular good;» in the case of the second, it is: «Whatever exists in reality has some inclination toward and tendency for something agreeable to itself [and] whatever has the nature of desirableness has the nature of a good;» and lastly, in the case of the third, it says: «Existence itself, inasmuch as it is desirable, is good.»

These three statements are very similar: the subjects of all three («whatever is in reality,» [*quod est aliquid in rebus*] «whatever exists in reality» [*quod quicquid est in rebus*] and «existence itself» [*ipsum esse*]) are very close in meaning (and even in syntax), and the sentences seem to be about the same thing, i.e. everything that exists. The predicates of the first and third statements are also very similar: in both cases the predicate is the adjective «good» [*bonum*], but the first claim adds the qualification that what exists is some *particular* good (whereas in the third statement both subject and predicate are completely unqualified and general). The second statement is the most complex, since it is a conjunction. In fact, it is a mini-argument, with the syllogistic form $A = B$, $B = C$, therefore $A = C$. So, if following Aquinas, we go from A («whatever exists in reality») to C («has the nature of a good»), we end up with a very similar proposition to the other two, namely that «Whatever exists in reality has the nature of a good.»

Let us, then, merge the three arguments into one by assuming that the content of their respective first premises is essentially the same, and let us express this shared content in a single sentence: «Everything is good.» Aquinas's argument on evil in *De malo*, consolidated and simplified in this manner, would be the following:

Everything is good.

Evil is contrary to good.

Therefore, evil does not exist.

Aquinas's argument, interpreted this way, may be schematized as follows:

$(\forall x)Bx$ [where "B" \diamond "good" or *bonum*]
 $(\forall x)(Mx \equiv \sim Bx)$ [where "M" \diamond "evil" or *malum*]
 $\therefore \sim(\exists x)Mx$

Even though the argument is simple and its validity is not hard to grasp intuitively, many have found it perplexing, if not downright outrageous. This reaction is no doubt due to its content. We can prove its formal validity beyond a shadow of a doubt via natural deduction, as follows:¹

1	1. $(\forall x)Bx$	Assumption
2	2. $(\forall x)(Mx \diamond \sim Bx)$	Assumption
1	3. Ba	1 Universal Quantifier Elimination
2	4. $Ma \& \sim Ba$	2 Universal Quantifier Elimination
2	5. $Ma \supset \sim Ba$	4 Biconditional Elimination
1	6. $\sim \sim Ba$	3 Double Negation
1, 2	7. $\sim Ma$	5, 6 Modus Tollens
1, 2	8. $(\forall x)\sim Mx$	7 Universal Quantifier Introduction
1, 2	9. $\sim(\exists x)Mx$	8 Quantifier Conversion

¹ The following is an alternate proof by reductio:

1	1. $(\forall x)Bx$	Assumption
2	2. $(\forall x)(Mx \diamond \sim Bx)$	Assumption
3	3. Ma	Hypothesis (for Reductio ad Absurdum)
2	4. $Ma \diamond \sim Ba$	2 Universal Quantifier Elimination
2	5. $Ma \supset \sim Ba$	4 Biconditional Elimination
2, 3	6. $\& \sim Ba$	3, 5 Modus Ponens
1	7. Ba	1 Universal Quantifier Elimination
1, 2, 3	8. $Ba \& \sim Ba$	6, 7 Conjunction Introduction
1, 2	9. $\sim Ma$	3, 8 Reductio ad Absurdum
1, 2	10. $(\forall x)\sim Mx$	9 Universal Quantifier Introduction
1, 2	11. $\sim(\exists x)Mx$	10 Quantifier Conversion

Naturally, the validity of an argument doesn't by itself make it a good one; it should also be sound (i.e. composed of true sentences) and persuasive. For instance, if, in the above schematization, we instead use «B» to represent «bachelor» and «M» to represent «married,» and leave the logical operators unchanged, we get a schematization for the following patently absurd and unsound argument: Everyone is a bachelor. To be married is contrary to being a bachelor. Therefore, married people don't exist.

Validity is one thing; soundness is another. Having shown that Aquinas's argument is valid, in the next section we consider the truth and/or justification of its assumptions.

3. Soundness

Our next task is to determine whether Aquinas's assumptions are true, or at least justified. The first premise says that everything is good. Is this true? To a modern mind, this proposition seems absurd—almost self-evidently false. Surely leprosy, ALS, cancer, Huntington's disease, MRSA, and sickle cell anemia are not good—to name just a few terrible diseases and conditions that have afflicted human beings since time immemorial. Other perennial kinds of «natural evil» that one could mention include earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, floods, droughts, wildfires, etc. And then, of course, there are the nearly infinite varieties of moral evil—human-caused suffering—ranging from war to murder to just making someone feel bad unnecessarily, all of which most people today, and presumably also people in the thirteenth century, would say are definitely not good. The presence of evil in the world seems not only incompatible with Aquinas's first premise, but would also directly contradict his conclusion that evil does not exist. So what does Aquinas mean by «Everything is good»?

Here we must remember two key points: First, that the Latin terms *bonum* and *malum* do not have quite the same meaning as our English words «good» and «evil»; second, that in Article 1 (and elsewhere)

Aquinas in fact provides an elaborate theological justification for his first assumption, which we shall consider briefly below.

As regards the meanings of *bonum* and *malum*, they are much broader than the meanings of the English words «good» and «evil.» In contrast with our word «good» (the commendatory adjective), the Latin *bonum* as used by Aquinas seems not only to have an evaluative dimension, but also, as it were, a descriptive dimension—for lack of a better term. The evaluative dimension of *bonum* seems roughly to coincide with that of «good»: as an evaluative term, *bonum* is a very general commendatory adjective that applies to practically anything one could think of, from abstract objects like triangles and laws, to everyday, concrete entities such as horses, barns, swords, or any human artifact, to human actions and human beings themselves—that is, the term also means *morally* good. However, in Aquinas the word also seems to have a singular descriptive side to it, since in many places Aquinas (like other medieval authors) explicitly equates good with being (or existence). For instance, in *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 5, 1, Aquinas says: «Goodness and being are really the same... it is clear then that a thing is good inasmuch as it exists, for... it is by existing that everything achieves actuality.» So according to him, everything that exists, simply in virtue of existing, is «good» in this descriptive sense.

This is not to say that for Aquinas «being» and «good» are synonymous expressions. As Brian Davies (2003, p. 27, fn. 75) points out, Aquinas allows that something may exist without being wholly perfect, or even missing many of those properties that would be necessary for its proper fulfillment. It is true that Aquinas holds that the terms «being» and «good» are «convertible,» which should be taken to mean that they are coextensive. In my view, the only plausible interpretation of the supposed convertibility of «being» and «good» is set-theoretic, since, as is well known, universal affirmative–A–type propositions—such as «Every existing thing is good» and «Every good thing is an existing thing» are not convertible. Compare, for instance, «All humans are mammals» and «All mammals are humans.» The first sentence is true, but the second false; this shows that in general A-type sentences are not convertible.

Now, in the case of «being» and «good,» the relation is not mere intersection, but identity. If we take Aquinas at his word, what we must deduce is that the set of real or existing things and the set of good things have exactly the same members—they are identical. So, even though Davies is right that the terms «being» and «good» are not synonymous for Aquinas, they do not have the same *meaning*, the terms do appear to have the same reference for him, since they are applied to exactly the same things. Putting the point differently and anachronistically, we could say that for Aquinas, the sentences «Apples exist» and «Apples are good» have different meanings, but are nonetheless extensionally equivalent; they have the same truth conditions.

The contrast between «evil» and *malum* is even greater. In modern English, the adjective «evil» is normally reserved for actions and events—usually human-caused ones—that are undesirable or morally repugnant in the extreme. For instance, one might say that the December 2012 shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, is evil. The Latin *malum*, in contrast, applies not only to exceptionally horrible human deeds, but also to any kind of badness, whether human or natural. *Malum* is a great deal more inclusive than «evil,» and in the context of Aquinas's general metaphysical discussion in Article 1 of *De malo*, the term could simply be translated as «bad.» Certainly, a better translation than «evil» in this part of *De malo* could be any of the following: «harmful,» «damaging,» «injurious,» or «detrimental.» Like *bonum*, *malum* has both moral and non-moral senses; the Modern English word «evil,» on the other hand, appears to have only a moral sense. (However, the Old English word from which it is derived, *yfel*, does have the two dimensions; it simply means «bad» in a generic sense.)

It's perhaps worth mentioning that the difficulties of translation are not as great for other languages. For example, the Spanish *malo* and Latin *malum* are nearly perfect counterparts. Like *malum*, *malo* is the most general derogatory adjective there is in the language. Spanish *malo* is a completely generic term that may be applied to practically anything considered bad, including, of course, morally evil acts. Hence the Spanish version of Aquinas's discussion does not require the constant reminder

that Aquinas is not just talking about moral evil, but about much else besides.

As mentioned earlier, Aquinas provides a theological justification for his claim that everything that exists is good. This justification springs from two sources, Aristotelian metaphysics and the Christian religion. According to the Aristotelian picture of reality, everything in existence has its own particular end or function—its *telos*, in Greek. A thing's *telos* is connected to its essence, a property or set of properties that determines what the thing is—it makes it what it is. Moreover, an entity's essence is what distinguishes it from other things, and is required for the entity's very existence: if the thing lacks its essential property or properties, it simply cannot be. Expressed in contemporary modal terminology, an essential property is a property an object has in every possible world. According to Aristotle, an entity's *telos* is determined by its essence. So, for example, if the essence of human beings is rationality, as Aristotle believed, then our *telos* is to exercise this rationality maximally in our lifetime. (There are, of course, diverse interpretations as to what this ultimately amounts to for Aristotle—we cannot go into this matter here.) The «good» for some entity is then the fulfillment of the entity's proper function. As explained by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the highest and most characteristic good for humans, the result of fulfilling their function of living according to a rational principle, is happiness (*eudaimonia*). (Again, we don't have the space here to discuss what Aristotle means by «happiness» exactly, or to explore the connection between happiness and rationality.) Thus, according to this picture, anything that gets in the way of a thing's exercising its function or *telos* is an «evil» for that thing. For instance, cognitive impairments or disorders such as aphasia, cyclothymia, dementia, and amnesia would be evils for humans, in so far as they negatively affect rationality. They would not allow us to be fully happy. On the other hand, as Aquinas frequently reminds us, being an evil for something is entirely relative to the thing's function, and hence to what the thing *is*: for Aquinas, there is no such thing as evil in general, there is no essence of evil; there's only evil *for* something or someone. For example, having a speech impediment is not an evil for a horse,

though it would be for a human, since it is not part of a horse's *telos* to speak; conversely, drought distemper, though deadly for a horse, is not a problem for us. To use one of Aquinas's own examples, blindness is not an evil for a stone, since stones, unlike eyes, do not have seeing as their proper function.

Now, this world of functions and essences and particular goods does not come out of nowhere, nor was it always here, for Aquinas, but rather, it was created by an omnibenevolent being—the God described in the Christian Bible. We should never forget that Thomas Aquinas is first and foremost a Christian theologian; he is a thinker who unquestioningly accepts certain assumptions on the basis of his Christian faith. Prominent among them is the belief that existence is good (in both senses discussed above) because it was willed by an all-good cause, God.²

Again, for Aquinas, the universe, and everything in it, exists simply because God wanted it to. In fact, in explaining the first premise of the first argument of Article 1, Aquinas deploys a version of the cosmological argument that would show how the particular goods we see in the world must have all been caused by a first and universal good. Unlike Aristotle, Aquinas doesn't think that things *just happened* to have the functions and corresponding goods they have; his view is that such functions and goods were assigned to them by God. It was God's plan that they should have them.

So in interpreting Aquinas's claim that everything is good, one must always keep in mind its theological underpinnings. Now, to say that Aquinas's claim is justified by certain metaphysical and theological

² This genetic argument for the goodness of existence may be found in other canonical medieval philosophers as well, such as St. Augustine, St. Anselm, and Duns Scotus. A particularly clear statement of it, along with a rich discussion of its paradoxical and counterintuitive consequences, is contained in St. Anselm's «On the Fall of the Devil.» Of course, the problem with this genetic argument—aside from the issue of God's existence—is that generally speaking, one cannot argue that X has property P because its origin, Y, has property P: that is to commit the «genetic fallacy.» To give a very simple example, chickens come from eggs, but that does not mean that they crack when dropped.

considerations is not, of course, to endorse that justification, let alone to accept the claim as true. Both Aquinas's Aristotelianism and his Christian theology may be questioned and rejected, and many in fact have done so. (For one thing, his justification presupposes the existence of God, a philosophically fraught assumption.) Our goal at this point, however, is not to undertake a detailed critique of Aquinas's theology. Even if we had the space to do so, which we don't, it is unnecessary to provide such a critique. For our purposes, it suffices to note that, in addition to its *prima facie* implausibility, there are multiple well-known reasons to doubt Aquinas's first premise, so that this claim would seem adequately justified and convincing only to those who share his basic theological presuppositions. I think even the most committed Thomist would accept this limitation on the argument.

Let us move on, then, to the second premise, which says that «Evil is contrary to good.» As mentioned earlier, this second premise is common to all three versions of Aquinas's argument. Having previously explained the differences between «good» and *bonum* and «evil» and *malum*, we can proceed to ask the question we asked before: Is the claim true?

Just as the first premise would strike many people today as obviously false or absurd, the second premise might seem obviously and perhaps even trivially true. After all, isn't evil the opposite of good, and aren't the terms «good» and «evil» direct antonyms? The premise just seems to be registering an accepted linguistic fact. But once again we must be careful in interpreting the statement, because Aquinas uses the expressions «contrary» and «opposite» somewhat loosely, sometimes as a property of terms, sometimes as a property of what the terms denote, and sometimes also as a property of whole sentences. In traditional Aristotelian logic, of course, it is sentences that are contraries; one sentence is the contrary of the other if they both can't be true at the same time.

In order to make sense of Aquinas's claim that «good» and «evil» are «opposites» or «contraries,» we are forced here to give the word «contrary» a more precise definition. This definition, however, aims to capture and to do justice to Aquinas's actual meaning, as evinced by his

use of the term in the text. In what follows, the term «contrary» will be taken to mean two related things: (1) primarily, a relation between sets; specifically, disjointness (or mutual exclusion), so that if sets A and B are disjoint or «contrary,» then if $\alpha \in A$, then $\alpha \notin B$, and if $\alpha \in B$, then $\alpha \notin A$; and (2) derivatively, a property of pairs of expressions: two terms are contraries of each other if they denote disjoint sets.

Now, it's true that in many perfectly normal contexts the ordinary English words «good» and «evil» may be considered antonyms or «contrary» expressions in the above sense. However, from a strict, modern logical point of view, they are not. In logic, of course, one expression is the «opposite» of another, syntactically speaking, if it is the negation of the other; semantically, if, for a given interpretation, one is true and the other false. But even within the framework of the old Aristotelian logic, it is not clear that «good» and «evil» may be taken as contraries, for two reasons. First, as Aquinas himself undoubtedly knew, being the foremost authority on Aristotle in the Latin West, the two terms do not exhaust all the possibilities there are; there remain things that are «neither good nor bad» or are «indifferent,» for example.³ Second, and connected to this point, «good» and «evil» are scalar predicates; «good» belongs to the scale composed partly of {**good-better-best**} and «evil» (or «bad») belongs to the scale {**bad-worse-worst**}. (Equivalent scales exist in Latin. They would be, respectively, {*bonum-melior-optimum*} and {*malum-peior-pessimum*}.) While Aquinas wouldn't have used the modern linguistic term «scalar predicate,» he surely would have been cognizant of the phenomenon it labels.

As scalar predicates, «good» and «evil» have meanings that are inherently graded and relative; they do not denote absolute or precisely defined properties as do the expressions «bachelor,» «prime number,»

³ Some have argued that Aquinas and other medieval theologians thought that no action is morally indifferent. However, it would seem that Aquinas did acknowledge that some actions, like lifting a piece of paper or scratching one's arm, are morally indifferent, as his discussion of pleasure in *Summa Theologiae*, for example, would suggest.

and «iridium,» for example. That is to say, unlike the pairs *bachelor/married*, *prime/even*, and *being/non-being*, the terms «good» and «evil» do not sharply mark out opposing properties, and so cannot be proper contraries. Therefore, we must conclude that Aquinas's second premise is strictly speaking false. (Here we are setting aside Aquinas's special descriptive understanding of «good,» according to which it is coextensive with «being;» on this understanding, «good» and «evil» would indeed be contraries, since «being» and «non-being» are contraries. We may safely ignore this descriptive meaning because otherwise Aquinas's argument becomes question-begging.) Aquinas's argument is thus unsound.

4. A Natural Standard for Good and Evil

In this last section of the paper I want to say a couple of positive things about Aquinas's metaphysical explication of good and evil, about why it is important and still holds valuable lessons for us today. I should perhaps say again that I am approaching this subject from a completely secular perspective, purely out of philosophical interest. The remarks to follow are put forth tentatively, simply as an attempt to connect Aquinas's thinking to some issues that are hotly debated in ethics today.

In my opinion, one of the most philosophically interesting things thrown up by Aquinas's discussion of evil is the idea that there is a natural standard for good and evil. The idea is that what is good or evil for something—in both the moral and non-moral senses of «good» and «evil»—may be determined by reference to facts about the thing's nature. This idea can be decoupled from Aquinas's Christian theology, and it is also logically independent of Aristotle's earlier, non-Christian essentialist metaphysics. In fact, it is fully compatible with our modern Darwinian understanding of nature.

An example of an application of a natural standard for good and evil, in the non-moral senses of these words, would be the following. Given what we know, we would say that it is «good» (again, I emphasize, in the non-moral sense) to have a cholesterol level below 200 mg; it would be «bad» to have a level of 410. These judgments are made simply on the

basis of facts about human biology. Indeed, it is uncontroversial that opinions and decisions in medicine about what is «good» or «bad» for us are inevitably (if not exclusively) predicated on the facts of human biology. In 21st century medicine, thankfully, there is no need to appeal to complex theological or philosophical theories to justify routine professional judgments. Doctors rely on our best understanding of nature. (We are disregarding here, obviously, highly contentious topics in medical ethics, such as euthanasia, cloning, or access to medical resources; I'm talking about everyday physical or psychological issues.)

But what about the moral senses of «good» and «evil»? Isn't it *verboten* to go from «natural» to «good,» to deduce an «ought» from an «is»? Isn't that to commit the naturalistic fallacy? (Think of the teenager who argues that smoking pot is morally okay, since it's just a «natural plant.») Is the suggestion really that, in separating Aquinas's idea of a natural standard for the good from his theology, morality is to be reduced to biology?

That's not what I'm suggesting here. The point is rather that by looking to nature, by linking the concepts of existence and the good, Aquinas shows the way to a more concrete and practical criterion for human good and evil, one that derives from the reality of human nature. Such a standard would appear a great deal more attractive and implementable than those offered by other prominent moral philosophers, such as Plato or Kant, for example, since it would be grounded in facts about us as humans, and not in some otherworldly realm. (Again, we are for a moment bracketing away Aquinas's theology. This is obviously a huge «bracketing away,» and, needless to say, a move that Aquinas himself and many others would oppose, or find incomprehensible. We are imagining an Aquinas without God. Once again, though, our interest is in the philosophical idea itself, and not in the man or his religion.)

Personally, I think that any correct account of morality will have to consider the evolutionary and environmental factors that shaped human nature. However, I also believe there's no gainsaying G.E. Moore's (1903, Ch. 1) point that the word «good» does not mean «natural,» or that, for any natural property we would define «good» in terms of, such as pleasure,

the question may always be asked, without contradiction, whether the property is in fact good. (Though this does not necessarily mean that the word «good» is indefinable, as Moore concluded.)

In isolating Aquinas's insight about a natural standard from his theology, no reduction follows, and none is intended; what follows is just the observation that human good is intimately connected to human nature, to our bodies and to the material world. Now, exactly what human nature is, how it got that way, and whether it can be improved, are really, in my view, questions to be answered by science, and not by a priori theological or philosophical speculation.

5. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Thomas Aquinas's famous argument in *De malo* for the non-existence of evil is logically valid but unsound, and likely to persuade only those who already share his core theological commitments. Although the argument is unsound, and may be dismissed simply for that reason, it still possesses considerable historical and philosophical interest. The next step would be to examine further those metaphysical and theological commitments, and to extract what is plausible and has resonance for us today. To that end, I have also suggested here, very briefly, that Aquinas's discussion of good and evil in *De malo* implies a natural standard for good and evil, and that such a standard may be disentangled from his theology. The idea of a natural standard is a fruitful one that may be developed further from a contemporary, naturalistic perspective.

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