

THE SIN OF MAN AND THE LOVE OF GOD

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Maritain's views on moral evil in *Existence and the Existent*, and his later articulation of them in *God and the Permission of Evil*, are controversial. Some accuse him of misinterpreting Thomas.¹ My purpose here is to defend him from this charge by presenting the doctrine of Thomas to which he calls our attention. I believe he has performed a great service to Thomists by returning us, in substance if not in every detail, to the teaching of the Common Doctor. I trust this will become evident from what follows.

The most obvious thing one can say about an act of moral evil, as of any other evil act, is that it is in some manner defective. Since there has been some dispute about words here, we should note at the outset that Thomas uses the word "defect" to refer either to a *simple negation* or to a *privation*. He is quite explicit about this: "the word 'defect'," he says, "can be taken either negatively or privatively."² This division of defect is from Aristotle³ and is a constant in Thomas's analysis of evil, from the *Sentences* on. So, too, is his analysis of the difference between a negation and a privation: a simple negation denotes an absence of being, while a privation denotes an absence of being that is *due*, that a being *ought* to have, or "is born to have,"⁴ in the words of the *Sentences*. Thus, to give the traditional example from the *Metaphysics*, lack of sight is a simple negation relative to a stone but a privation relative to an animal: for an animal "is naturally fitted to have sight,"⁵ and hence a blind animal is deprived of something proper to its nature.

As everyone knows, Thomas holds a privative view of evil. An evil act is one *deprived* of its proper order: an absence of being or order *in* a being by nature ordered otherwise. Moral evil is no exception. The following may be taken as a summation of Thomas's doctrine on its nature:

Two things occur in the nature of sin, namely the voluntary act, and its lack of order, which consists in departing from God's law. Of these two, one is referred essentially to the sinner, who intends such and such an act in such and such a manner; while the other, namely the lack of order in the act, is referred accidentally to the

intention of the sinner, for 'no one acts intending evil,' as Dionysius declares.⁶

This is Thomas's doctrine throughout his career. The act of intent is called the *conversion* of the will to the good desired. The lack of order is called the *aversion* of the will from its proper and due end. The aversion is never directly intended, but is rather the accidental yet inevitable consequence of intending the mutable good. He says in the *Summa Theologiae*: "from the fact that man turns unduly ['indebita conversione'] to some mutable good, it follows that he turns from ['aversio'] the immutable good."⁷

Now, while man's aversion from his proper order is the accidental effect of his conversion to a mutable good, this does not lessen its importance for the act. On the contrary, the aversion from God and His rule is what makes the act *sinful*. It is the defect which renders the act *disordered*; it is the formal element of evil in the act. Thus, from *De Malo*: "sin consists in the *aversion* of the created will from its final end."⁸ And, from the *Summa Theologiae*: "...two things are to be observed in sin, conversion to the mutable good, and this is the *material* part of sin; and aversion from the immutable good, and this gives sin its *formal* aspect and complement."⁹ This position indeed follows from his entire theory of evil, since the *defect in* the act (i.e., something negative) makes a thing evil. On the other hand, the conversion to, or intention of, a mutable good involves activity and order and to that extent is good, not evil.

When Thomas turns to a consideration of sin's cause, he offers two explanations: in terms of its psychology, and in terms of metaphysical principles. Since the second poses the greater difficulty, its full sense is best seen in relation to the concrete psychology to which it is applied.

Thomas here follows and goes beyond Aristotle's analysis as he advances it in Book VII of the *Ethics*. There, Aristotle argues that one can have an habitual knowledge of the true moral good, yet fail to act on it. This failure is to be explained by the influence of passion, which distracts one from the true principle habitually known. Thomas accepts this analysis. A sinful choice is usually based on a faulty judgment caused by the influence of the passions:

Since the first cause of sin is some apparent good as motive, yet lacking the due motive, viz., the rule of reason or the divine law, this motive is an apparent good and appertains to the apprehension of the sense and to the appetite; while the lack of due rule appertains to the reason, whose nature is to consider the rule; and the completeness of the voluntary sinful act appertains to the

will, so that the *act* of the will, given the *conditions* we have already mentioned, is a sin.¹⁰

Thomas keeps to this analysis throughout his discussion of sin in the *Summa Theologiae*: inclination of sensitive appetite, judgment of reason, inclination of the will, is the usual order of human sin.

This position raises the obvious question: are the person's passionate inclinations and faulty judgment the *sufficient* cause of his will's sinful act, or, on the contrary, can he avoid sin given these prior conditions? Thomas's answer is unequivocal: these are insufficient causes of sin, whose avoidance lies within the power of man's will. His most careful analysis of the capacity of man's reason and will to resist passion is made in the *Prima Secundae*. Against the argument that concupiscence impairs reason and hence causes involuntariness, he responds as follows:

In those actions which are done from concupiscence, knowledge is not completely destroyed, because the power of knowing is not taken away entirely, but only the *actual consideration* in some particular act. Nevertheless, this is voluntary, according as by voluntary we mean that it is within the *power* of the will, for example, *not to act* or *not to will*, and in like matter *not to consider*, for the will can *resist* the passion.¹¹

This passage complements our previous one. Passion initially leads our judgment astray, so that we consider its object good and fail to consider the moral order that should govern our judgment. Yet it lies within the will's power to redirect reason to consider that order. It can resist the influence of passion and the considerations it prompts. Because the will possesses this power, it is responsible for failing to exercise it and then for choosing a false good.

Thomas, then, locates the cause of sin in a failure of the will. Furthermore, he gives this failure a name: it is a *non-use* of reason. The rule of reason and God's law ought to govern one's final judgment. If it does not, this is because it is not used: "*not to use* the rule of reason and the divine law is presupposed in the will *before* an inordinate election."¹² One should not confuse this use with the act that *follows* election, which Thomas examines in his treatise on human acts in the *Summa*. Rather, the act of use here spoken of corresponds to the general ability of the will to move the rational faculty, as he makes clear in that same treatise: "since the will, in a way, moves the reason and *uses* it, we may take the *use* of the means as consisting in the *consideration* of reason according as it refers means to an end. In this sense, use *precedes* choice."¹³ In the language of the

Sentences, "the intellect is able to consider or not consider, according as it is moved by the will."¹⁴

We are now in a good position to understand Thomas's metaphysical analysis of sin's cause. The groundwork for his mature doctrine is laid in the *Sentences*. Since, however, it reaches its full articulation in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, we will save time by going directly to that work.

When he there treats of moral evil's cause, he locates it in the will: "...it is necessary," he says, "to presuppose a defect in the will before moral evil."¹⁵ He then poses a dilemma: is this defect natural or voluntary? If it is natural, then the will necessarily sins in willing; if voluntary, however, then it is already an actual sin and will require a cause in its turn.¹⁶ Instead of finding a cause of sin, one will only find another sin, which itself will require a cause.

Thomas solves his dilemma in this way. First, he denies that the voluntary defect is natural, for then the will would always sin in acting; and he adds that the defect is neither casual nor fortuitous, on the ground that this would absolve man's will from responsibility for his sin.¹⁷ It remains that the defect is voluntary. The dilemma does not succeed, however, because this voluntary defect is not itself a sin: "Est igitur voluntarius. Non tamen peccatum morale."¹⁸ Thus Thomas solves his chosen aporia by *distinguishing voluntary defect*. He grants that there is a defect in the will prior to its act of sin. He grants that this makes the will the defective and voluntary cause of sin. But he *denies* that this defect is a moral evil. It is voluntary for the same reason as already noted: because it lies within the *power* of the will to redirect the intellect to overcome its non-consideration.¹⁹ This failure to consider, however, is not itself sinful; for reason can consider any good or no good without being sinful so long as the will does not proceed to election.²⁰ Although Thomas holds this view throughout the remainder of his work, it is most clearly expressed in *De Malo*: "...this itself, which is actually not to attend to this rule, considered in itself is not evil, neither guilt nor punishment, because the soul is not held to be nor can it always be actually attentive to this rule."²¹

Thus Thomas affirms two sorts of cause of sin. It possesses an *accidental efficient cause*, as already noted: the conversion to or intent of a mutable good. And it also possesses a *deficient cause*: the will itself as not using the intellect to reconsider. He always refers to this cause in his analysis of sin, and he always holds that the will as defective is not yet sinful. This is the view of both the *Prima Pars* and the *Prima Secundae*.²² It is again in *De Malo* that we have his most explicit testimony of this. For he there gives this defect its proper technical name: it is a simple negation, a "negatio sola" or "negatio pura."²³ This is required by his entire theory. Man's will lacks a being and an order that it *could* possess; yet this order is not due it, is not something it *should* possess, until it actually proceeds to election. Hence it is not a privation but a negation.

Between the two causes of sin, the deficient clearly precedes the accidental efficient. Thomas repeatedly says that the absence of order in the will precedes the evil election. It has to, on pain of making God the cause of sin. For, as mentioned previously, the will's conversion to a mutable good is an activity; as such, then, with all created activity, its source is in God. The reason that God is not the cause of sin, however, is because the formality of sin, the aversion, derives from a creaturely defect. The aversion and privation in sin derive from a voluntary non-use and negation. This is the radical source of man's sin, and it derives from him and not God. God is the cause of all being, but not of all negation. The voluntary negation is the creature's alone.

Although this voluntary defect is primary, it is not sufficient to cause sin. For there will be no sin unless and until the creature chooses a false good. Prior to election, the non-consideration of the rule *can be corrected*, since this lies within the power of the will. Thus, the voluntary defect is only *rendered causative* by the *act* of choice or intention. Each of Thomas's two causes contributes to sin; they are mutually related as causes, in a way analogous to matter and form. *Given* the mutual relation of these latter causes, one must understand the material disposition *as prior* to its individuating effect.²⁴ Similarly, *given* that the will proceeds to election, one must understand the voluntary defect as prior to the defect it causes in the act. Thus, the defective cause is *really prior* to the accidental efficient cause in relation to the *formality* of sin, but it *supposes* this act in order to be really prior as cause.

It is always tempting to ask, at this point, why does man fail, why is he defective? Thomas cautions us here. He notes that we have located the defectible cause of moral defect: man's will. Thus he says, "...of something of this sort, that is the aforementioned non-use of the rule, it is not necessary to search for a cause, because *the will itself*, by which one can act or not act *suffices* for this."²⁵ Also, as we have seen, he provides the will with a *motive* for its sin: the mutable good before it. Yet, between motive and act there is a gap, a gap analogous to that between God's motive of creation and His decision to create. In each case, we are dealing with an *absolute first cause*. In the case of man's failure, however, we are confronted with something that makes no sense. Sin is absurd, unintelligible in itself. And this is why Thomas, here following Augustine, cautions us not to look for an *efficient cause of deficiency*.²⁶ We can see that sin *need not be*, but we cannot see *why it is* because *there is no why*. We can only point to the fact.

As we can see, Maritain exposes the central points of Thomas's doctrine. His major effort, both in *Existence and the Existent* and in *God and the Permission of Evil*, is to insist on the voluntary defect that is not itself sin but a mere negation.²⁷ He brings out this capital point of Thomas's regarding the non-consideration of the rule.²⁸ He rightly notes that it precedes evil election, and he even corrects his earlier doctrine to

affirm that it precedes that election in time as well as in causality.²⁹ And, perhaps most significantly, he insists that it is a *first* cause.³⁰ As he says in *Existence and the Existent*, "we are faced here by an *absolute beginning* which is not a beginning but a 'naught,' a fissure, a lacuna introduced into the warp and woof of being."³¹ Always inventive in vocabulary, Maritain speaks of this negation as a free nihilation.³² Certainly, this conveys the radical nature of man's moral failure. Yet this is appropriate to Thomas's position. He himself speaks of free creatures having it within "their power to *withdraw* themselves"³³ from what is ordained by God and "to *fall away* from being."³⁴ Maritain's expression conveys this doctrine accurately.

Perhaps Maritain's most important contribution, however, is to insist that God is in *no way* responsible for man's sin, not even in His permission of it. He here opposes the doctrine that man sins infallibly given God's permission. This is the basis for the famous (or infamous) doctrine of negative reprobation: God allows a good but defectible creature to fall into sin, and, as a consequence, he inevitably does so. Against this position, Maritain insists that there are *two different meanings* to the affirmation that God permits sin, as there are likewise two different consequences of His permission. If a creature is merely *defectible*, then to say that God permits him to sin is to say no more than that God makes sin *possible*: God does not protect the defectible creature from possible defect. If, on the other hand, the creature is actually *defective*, if he is not merely *able* to sin but a sinner already or *committed* to sin, then to say that God permits him to sin is to say that He leaves him to his sin or does not turn him from sin. Given this second permission, it is indeed true that the creature infallibly continues in sin. This is true, however, because this permission *supposes* a determination for sin on the creature's part. If this determination is *not supposed*, then *sin does not infallibly follow* God's permission; on the contrary, supposing the creature to be merely defectible, but not defective, then he may or may not sin.

In making this distinction, Maritain here presents us with the doctrine of Thomas. Once again, it is clearly before us in his text. The first sort of permission, one which makes sin possible but not infallible, is most thoroughly analyzed in his commentary on the *Sentences*. There Thomas notes that one can act outside God's operation (by sinning); but he also says that one can never act outside His permission.³⁵ The reason for this is that God's permission makes it possible for a creature to fail, but it also makes it possible for a creature *not to fail*. Thus, even if one does not do the sin that is permitted, one still acts within God's permission:

It is nevertheless possible to do the opposite of what is permitted; but this is still according to the permission because permission respects the power of a cause for

opposites; and neither of the opposites is against permission but both are according to it.³⁶

Clearly, Thomas here envisions God's permission as making sin possible but neither infallible nor actual. This is the meaning of "permission" in the only place where Thomas examines it systematically.

This concept of God's permission is the common one of Thomas's early writing.³⁷ It can also be found, however, in his later work. Thus he interprets 1 Corinthians 10:13 to mean that "God does not permit one to be tempted without the aid of divine grace."³⁸ Obverting this double negative, we see that God permits us to sin, but with the aid of divine grace to avoid the sin. Hence one need not sin, given God's permission of temptation. Similarly, in his commentary on *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius, he affirms that God "permits some to be attacked, but He gives to them the fortitude to resist this attack."³⁹ Thus, when man is a friend of God and no longer in a defective, sinful state, God's permission of sin is accompanied by aid that allows man to resist temptation, so that sin is only possible, but not infallibly certain.

It is also possible to find the other sort of permission, the one that supposes sin and leaves man to it, in Thomas's early writings. He usually identifies this permission with a subtraction of God's grace, a subtraction merited by a previous sin. Thus:

God, however, is the cause of the penalty that is the *subtraction of grace*, which is the *effect* of one sin and the *cause* of another, by *not acting*....and in this way He is the cause of a penalty that is itself a deformed act of sin; not because He Himself causes it, but because He *permits* it, by not impeding it.⁴⁰

As can be seen from the passage, God's permission here infallibly leads to sin, but by not impeding man's sinful orientation.

The same understanding of permission is found throughout Thomas's later writings. Take, for example, this passage from the *Summa*:

...one sin is the cause of another, by *removing the impediment* thereto.... For...divine grace...is *withdrawn on account of sin*.... [Yet] even when God *punishes men by permitting them to fall into sin* this is directed to the good of virtue.⁴¹

Note that the same understanding applies in the later as in the earlier work. God's permission is identified with the removal of God's grace, from which sin infallibly follows; yet *this* permission or withdrawal supposes a

previous sin, for which it is a punishment. As he says in his commentary on Romans, God "permits some to rush into sin on account of preceding iniquities."⁴²

It is now possible to see where the position Maritain opposes makes its fatal error. It *conflates* Thomas's two meanings of permission without realizing that the two meanings involve *different suppositions*. It takes the supposition of a defectible creature from the first permission; it takes the infallible entailment of sin from the second. It thus gets a negative reprobation that supposes no sin. This is a conceptual monster, the progeny of two concepts not meant to be joined. Maritain's opposed interpretation of Thomas's view is the correct one. Thankfully, it exorcises from contemporary Thomism⁴³ this awful concept of a negative reprobation that supposes no sin.

Finally, by recalling us to the great truth that the origin of moral evil is in our will and not in God's, Maritain makes us renew and deepen our appreciation of the transcendent mystery of God and of His love for creatures. He thus calls us to reflect on our understanding of the divine impassibility and happiness and to purge it of any false simplifications. And he does this not with a new esoteric theory but by faithfully recalling us to the authentic doctrine of Aquinas.

Consider some of the truths that Maritain places before us regarding our eternal God. Had God not chosen to create us, He never would have seen the ugliness of our sin. He never would have had to witness the everlasting spectacle of His most beloved creatures turning from Him. Again, in sinning, the creature falls from one order of God's providence to another, as Thomas frequently says.⁴⁴ The creature is the first cause of that first order being impeded—even though God can remove the impediment. Man is the first cause of not receiving all the glorious goods that God is prepared to give him. And, most significantly, man's sin resists and rejects the solicitations of God's love. In wounding ourselves, we wound that love, placing obstacles to all that it desires for us. We set ourselves against the antecedent will of God that desires eternal glory for all men; we don't let it caress us, lavish us with its deathless and profound love. We impede its joyful fruition.

What, then, does sin mean for God? This is the meditation towards which all Maritain's work here tends. Perhaps this was really Maritain's central spiritual preoccupation throughout his life, from his encounter with Léon Bloy and his devotion to Our Lady of La Salette to one of his final reflections on theological wisdom. What does it mean for God's truth that it is forever faced with the false and unintelligible, for His love that it is forever faced with resistance and rejection, for His being that it is forever faced with nothingness, for His happiness that it is forever confronted with the misery of the creatures brought into and kept in existence by His love? Is there not work to be done here to speak better of these matters than many

Thomists have in the past? Is not the suffering and resurrection of the Lord of glory revealing something to us about the divine joy? Are not the marks of the crucifixion in the glorified body of Christ a sign to us here, a sign that sin is not taken up into some false dialectical synthesis?⁴⁵ For my part, I agree with Maritain when he says that sin remains something "inadmissible"⁴⁶ to God, which He tolerates in His wisdom only because He can bring greater good from it. Perhaps there is here a need to speak of a divine suffering that is not entirely metaphorical. So much of our instinctive language points in this direction: God is patient with us, He is long-suffering with our sins, He has com-*passion* for the misery wrought by them. Maritain, for his part, believed that something should be said about this and I think he is right. Let us let him have the last word:

That which sin 'does' to God is something that touches the depths of God.... ...this mysterious perfection, which is in God the unnamed exemplar of suffering in us, is an integral part of the divine beatitude, perfect peace but exalted infinitely above the humanly conceivable and burning in its flames that which is apparently irreconcilable for us.⁴⁷

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NOTES

1. See J.-H. Nicolas, "La permission du péché," *Revue Thomiste* 60 (1960) 5-37, 185-206, and 509-46, and H. R. Smith, *Man's 'Conquest of Liberty' and the Problem of Evil: A Study of the Meaning of Salvation in the Writings of Jacques Maritain*, (Washington D.C., 1979).
2. Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* (Paris, 1929-47) II, 31, 1, 2. All Latin references given hereafter are to works of St. Thomas Aquinas and will be cited by title alone. My translation of his commentary on *The Sentences* is used here and throughout.
3. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, transl. H. G. Apostle (Bloomington, Indiana, 1966) G, 2, 1004a 9-16, and Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, transl. J. P. Rowan (Chicago, 1961) 3, #565.
4. *In II Sent.*, 30, 1, 2.
5. *In IV Meta.*, 3, #565.
6. *Summa Theologiae*, transl. The English Dominicans (London, 1912-36) I-II, 72, 1, emphasis added.
7. *Ibid.*, I-II, 73, 2 ad 2.
8. *Questiones Disputatae De Malo* (Turin, 1965) 3, 1, emphasis added. My translation of *De Malo* is used, here and throughout.
9. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, 152, 6, emphasis added.
10. *Ibid.*, I-II, 75, 2, emphasis added.
11. *Ibid.*, I-II, 6, 7 ad 3, emphasis added. For reason resisting passion, see *ibid.*, I-II, 80, 3; II-II, 53, 5; II-II, 155, 4; and II-II, 156, 1. For the will resisting passion, see *ibid.*, I-II, 6, 7 ad 3 and II-II, 175, 2 ad 2.
12. *De Malo*, 1, 3, emphasis added.
13. *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 16, 4, emphasis added.
14. *In II Sent.*, 35, 1, 4.
15. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, transl. The English Dominicans (London, 1928) III, 10.
16. *Loc. cit.*
17. *Loc. cit.*
18. *Loc. cit.*
19. *Loc. cit.*
20. *Loc. cit.*
21. *De Malo*, 1, 3.
22. See *Summa Theol.*, I, 49, 1, ad 3 and I-II, 75, 1, ad 1.
23. *De Malo*, 1, 3 and ad 13.
24. See *Summa Theol.*, I, 76, 7 ad 1. For further examples of the presupposition of material disposition to form, see *In II Sent.*, 31, and *Summa Theol.*, I, 76, 6. For Thomas's use of the word "praeintelligitur" related to voluntary defect and act, see *Sum. cont. Gent.*, III, 10, and *De Malo*, I, 3.
25. *Ibid.*, 1, 3, emphasis added.
26. *Loc. cit.*, emphasis added.

27. See J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, transl. L. Galantière and G. Phelan (New York, 1948) p. 90, and *God and the Permission of Evil*, transl. J. Evans (Milwaukee, 1966) p. 21 and throughout. Hereafter these works are cited as *Existent* and *Permission*.
28. *Existent*, p. 90.
29. *Permission*, pp. 51-54.
30. *Existent*, pp. 91-92 and particularly *Permission*, p. 6 and throughout.
31. *Existent*, p. 91.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
33. *Summa Theol.*, I, 17, 1, emphasis added.
34. *Ibid.*, I, 20, 2 ad 4, emphasis added.
35. *In I Sent.*, 45, 1, 4.
36. *Loc. cit.*
37. See also *In I Sent.*, 46, 4; *In II Sent.*, 23, 2, 1; and *Disputed Questions on Truth*, transl. R. W. Mulligan, S. J. (Chicago, 1952) 23, 3, ad 2 and ad 4.
38. *Epistola II Ad Corinthios* (Rome, 1953) II, 5. My translation.
39. *Expositio Super Dionysius De Divinis Nominibus* (Turin, 1950) 8, 5. My translation.
40. *In II Sent.*, 36, 1, 3 ad 1.
41. *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 87, 2 and ad 1.
42. *Epistola Ad Romanos* (Rome, 1953) 9, 3. My translation.
43. That witness was not without effect. I have collected over thirty supporters of this distinction and its correlative concept of a sufficient grace that is impedible (by man's sin). Many of these philosophers and theologians were openly influenced by Maritain. See the third appendix of my dissertation, "God's Permission of Sin: Negative or Conditioned Decree? A Defense of the Doctrine of F. Marin-Sola, O. P., based on the Principles of Thomas Aquinas" (Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International, 1983), pp. 850-894.
44. For examples see *In I Sent.*, 40, 1, 2; *In I Sent.*, 47, 1, 3; *De Ver.*, 5, 7; and *Summa Theol.*, I, 19, 6.
45. See J. Maritain, "Reflexions sur le savoir théologique," *Revue Thomiste* 69 (1969), 22.
46. *Ibid.*, 18.
47. *Ibid.*, 21-22. My translation.