

WITHOUT ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING

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When I was a beginning teacher many years ago one of my colleagues remarked to me that the problem of divine concurrence was the most difficult problem in metaphysics. He meant, of course, the problem of preserving the freedom of human choice given that God is the first cause of the movement of our will as it makes its decision, and all this in accord with God's providential plan for history.

My colleague was largely but not entirely correct. For it seems to me the mystery of divine concurrence in the human act is escalated when one takes into account that the free act we are considering is sometimes a sinful act.

For here one must balance the insight that God is the first cause of all that exists, and some things that exist are sinful acts, and therefore, in some sense God is the cause of them, with the other insight that God who is Goodness Itself cannot be the cause of evil. And so the question becomes: how can God be the cause of our choices and not be the cause of our evil choices?

In his *Summa Theologiae*, I, 49, 1, ad 3, reflecting on whether or not God can be the cause of evil, St. Thomas simply says

...But in voluntary beings the defect of the action comes from an actually deficient will in as much as it does not actually subject itself to its proper rule. This defect, however, is not a fault; but fault follows upon it from the fact that the will acts with this defect.

In 1942, in giving the Marquette University Aquinas Lecture, Jacques Maritain turned his attention to this problem in giving his analysis of the Thomistic explanation. He returned to this subject just a few years later in his work *Court Traité de l'Existence et de l' Existant*, translated into English by Lewis Galantière and Gerald B. Phelan and published in 1948 with the title *Existence and the Existent*. In presenting my comments on Maritain's analysis I shall begin with the Marquette lecture and move to the somewhat later work, though in my judgment in the later version there is only a more

succinct expression of what Maritain had noted in the *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*. In both works he is following his guide, St. Thomas Aquinas, but presenting an elaboration not in the mentor's texts.

To return to the problem itself: how can God not be the cause of sin when He is the cause of everything which exists? As is well understood the solution lies in the nature of evil. Evil is not a being, it is the lack of being, the privation of a due good. Thus a sinful act, an evil choice, will be a mixture of good and evil. The evil will be a defect, a disorder in the being of a choice which, to the extent that it has the actuality of a human choice, will be good.

Let Maritain speak for himself as he outlines the conditions for the consideration of the problem:

The general principle I mentioned a while ago remains the same: evil of action or of operation always derives from a certain presupposed defect in the being or the active powers of the agent, that is to say, in this case, in the will. But this time the defect itself, that failure in the being which is the root of evil of action, must be a *voluntary and free* defect, since it is the evil of a free action or a free choice which results from it. And furthermore, contrary to what happens in the world of nature, this defect itself must *not be an evil* or a privation, for if it were an evil of the will in the very nature or in the physical being of the latter we should not be dealing with a voluntary and free defect: the cause of this defect must be the will itself, not nature; but on the other hand, if this defect were *an evil of the will in its free activity*, then the defect itself would already be an evil-free action, and we should be explaining the evil of a free action by the evil of a free action, which would be a vicious circle.

What then is this defect--what is that failure in being which is the metaphysical root of evil of action and which is itself free without, however, being already an evil?¹

Now I have quoted Maritain at some length here and, where my quotation ends, Maritain's quotation from St. Thomas' *Disputed Question on Evil* begins (*De Malo*, I, 3).

The issue again is how the creature, who can do nothing positive without God's help, introduces the disorder which warps or twists a good action into the deflected action which is the sinful act.

Maritain quotes St. Thomas:

"Suppose we take a craftsman who must cut wood in a straight line according to a certain ruler: if he does not cut it in a straight line, that is, if he makes a bad cutting, that bad cutting will be caused by the fact that the craftsman did not hold the ruler in his hand. Similarly, delectation and everything that happens in human affairs should be measured and ruled according to the rule of reason and of divine law. That the will does not use [let us take careful note of the simple negation expressed there] - that the will does not make use of the rule of reason and of divine law," that is, does not have the deficiency: which must be considered in the will before the faulty choice in which alone moral evil consists. And for that very absence or that lack which consists in not making use of the rule, "not taking the rule in hand, *there is no need to seek a cause, for the very freedom of will, whereby it can act or not act, is enough.*"²

As Maritain then comments in his expansion of the solution, man's freedom to consider or not consider the moral principle in question is sufficient to account for the introduction of the defect which is the privation of due order giving rise to the sinful choice.

Here we are at the very beginning; impossible to go any further back: a free defect, a defect of which freedom itself is the negative and deficient primary cause--and it is the will thus in default, which in acting with this defect, is the cause--*in quantum deficiens*--of moral evil.³

The simple non-consideration of the rule is not itself the sinful choice; it is the logically prior, not temporally prior, condition of the choice. For it is in that movement of choosing a particular act that the act issues forth from us in its disorder. God is the first cause of the being of the act, but the disorder of the act is due to our failure at the crucial moment to guide our act by the applicable moral principle.

My act is the telling of a lie; the act of speaking is a good, but the deception involved proceeds from my non-consideration of the moral principle of our obligation to tell the truth.

Again, Maritain says:

What is required of the soul is not that it should always look to the rule or have the rule constantly in hand, but that it should produce its act while looking at the rule.

Now in the metaphysical moment we are examining here there is as yet no act produced, there is merely an absence of consideration of the rule, and it is only in the act which will be produced, in terms of that absence, that evil will exist. Therein lies an extremely subtle point of doctrine, one of capital importance. Before the moral act, before the *bonum debitum*, the *due good* which makes up the quality of this act and whose absence is a privation and an evil, there is a metaphysical condition of the moral act, which, taken in itself, is not a due good, and the absence of which consequently will be neither a privation nor an evil but a pure and simple *negation* (an absence of a good that is *not due*), and that metaphysical condition is a *free condition*.⁴

Then, returning to Maritain's quoting of St. Thomas' *De Malo*, we have the original statement:

That which formally constitutes the fault or moral evil, writes St. Thomas, comes into being in this--that, without the concurrent consideration of the rule, the will proceeds to the act of choice. Thus the craftsman does not err in not always having his ruler in hand but in proceeding to cut the wood without his ruler. The faultiness of will does not consist in not paying attention in act to the rule of reason or of divine law, but in this: -- that without taking heed of the rule it proceeds to the act of choice.⁵

And Maritain adds: "Its fault lies in the fact that, without considering the rule--an *absence* of attention of which freedom alone is the cause--*it proceeds to the act of choice*, which is consequently *deprived* of the rectitude it should have."⁶

While I indicated before that the analysis of the causality of the sinful act in *Existence and the Existent* did not differ in doctrinal content from the analysis in the Aquinas Lecture of 1942, there is a difference in style. Maritain was appointed by Charles de Gaulle to be the French Ambassador to the Vatican in 1945. At the end of the latter work is the date "Rome, January-April, 1947." It would seem that Maritain in those few months of intensive composition came to express himself with a polish and fluidity that sharpened his understanding of St. Thomas' text.

Here is the later version:

In one of his most difficult and most original theses, Thomas Aquinas explains on this point that the emergence of a free and evil act resolves into two moments--distinct, not according to the priority of time, but according to ontological priority. At a first moment, there is in the will, by the fact of its very liberty, an absence or a nihilation which is not yet a *privation* or an evil, but a mere lacuna; the existent does not consider the norm of the *thou shouldst* upon which the ruling of the act depends. At a second moment the will produces its free act affected by the privation of 'its due ruling and wounded with the nothingness which results from this lack of consideration.

It is at this second moment that there is moral evil or sin. At the first moment there had not yet been moral fault or sin, but only the fissure through which evil introduces itself into the free decision about to come forth from the person, the vacuum or lacuna through which sin will take form in the free will before being launched into the arteries of the subject and of the world. This vacuum or lacuna, which St. Thomas calls non-consideration of the rule, is not an evil or a privation, but a mere lack, a mere nothingness of consideration. For, of itself, it is not a duty for the will to consider the rule; that duty arises only at the moment of action, or production of being, at which time the will begets the free decision in which it *makes* its choice. Non-consideration of the rule becomes an evil, or becomes the privation of a good that is due, only at the second of the two moments we have distinguished - at the moment when the will produces some act or some being, at the moment when it causes the choice to irrupt; at the moment when the free act it posited, with the wound or deformity of that non-consideration.⁷

Here Maritain's elaboration of Aquinas' answer re-states the presentation given in the Marquette lecture. It is a delicate balance preserving God's causality of the actuality of the act (the giving being to the effect) and the failure to follow through with the ruling of the act by the applicable moral principle. It is not easy to express the negativity of the failure to follow through except as Maritain expresses it with variations of the expression "do a nothingness." As he says, "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."⁸

Maritain continues to explain that this failure to act has no need of God's causality as the will is truly alone, and only its freedom not to do something at a crucial moment is required.

It follows from this that whereas the created existent is never alone when it exercises its liberty in the line of good, and has need of the first cause for all that it produces in the way of being and of good, contrariwise, it has no need of God, it is truly alone, for the purpose of freely nihilating, of taking the free first initiative of this absence (or 'nothingness') of consideration, which is the matrix of evil in the free act - I mean to say, the matrix of the privation itself by which the free act (in which there is metaphysical good in so far as there is being) is morally deformed or purely and simply evil. 'For without Me, you can nothing;' which is to say, 'Without Me you can make that thing which is nothing.'

So far this paper has been a simple exposition in which I have quoted the reflection of Maritain, who is often quoting or paraphrasing the text of St. Thomas. When all is said and done the question remains: how satisfactory is the analysis, brilliant though it may be in its notion of *doing a nothingness*, letting the ball drop, as it were, instead of bringing the hands together to catch it?

The difficulty that has always bothered me (and the students with whom I regularly discuss the problem in our philosophical theology courses) is that this theory implies that you cannot psychologically consider the moral rule you are breaking while you are choosing to break it. The defect or sin arises from the non-consideration of the rule at the moment of choosing to do something immoral. But common experience confirms our ability to look a moral principle in the face and defy it. To put it in more innocent terms, as my students are inclined to do in classroom discussions: "I can very well know I should be sticking to my diet while I can choose to help myself to a dish of ice cream." Granted that eating a dish of ice cream is trivial enough, substitute fornication for eating ice cream and the psychological insight is the same. The mortality of a mortal sin consists in our "don't-give-a-damn defiance" of the *thou shouldst*, as Maritain might say.

[Here the paper as presented in Montreal ended; as I put it, it came to a stop but not a conclusion. In the discussion that followed a conclusion of a sort developed. Members of the audience enlarged the problem to the classic question related to the Socratic theme that virtue is knowledge. Can one who has had a vision of the Good knowingly do what is evil? Even Plato recognized the conflict we experience when knowing full well what

we should do: our desire overpowers our judgment and we do the shameful thing against our conscience.

...One day Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was coming up from the Piraeus alongside the north wall when he saw some dead bodies fallen at the hand of the executioner. He felt the urge to look at them; at the same time he was disgusted with himself and his morbid curiosity, and he turned away. For a while he was in inner turmoil, resisting his craving to look and covering his eyes. But finally he was overcome by his desire to see. He opened his eyes wide and ran up to the corpses, cursing his own vision: "Now have your way, damn you. Go ahead and feast at this banquet for sordid appetites."¹⁰

This observation was supplemented by reference to Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* in Book VII, chapter 2, of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, wherein he pondered how someone who knows better can misbehave. He reports Socrates as holding that no one acts against what he judges best; that is, people act wrongly only by reason of ignorance.¹¹ To which Aristotle replies: "Now this view contradicts the observed facts."¹² Thus Aristotle, always the realistic psychologist, recognizes how in some situations, while knowing better with one part of our mind, we can still focus on the immediate pleasure another course of action will bring us. And consequently we can choose to go ahead and do the sinful act.

That would seem to be some form of dropping the rule and, without God's help, doing nothing.]

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NOTES

1. *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee, 1942) pp. 23-24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28. Cf. *De Malo*, I, 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
7. *Existence and the Existent* (Garden City, N.Y., 1956) pp. 97-98.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
10. *Republic*, Bk. IV, 439-440. The text used is the Sterling/Scott translation (New York, 1985).
11. *Protagoras*, 352.
12. *Ethica Nichomachea*, VII, 2 (1145b28). Cf. W. K. C. Guthrie: *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. VI (Cambridge, 1981) 364-368.