AQUINAS

for Armchair Theologians

Illustrations by Ron Hill

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CHAPTER THREE

Why Is There Evil? Do Humans Have Free Will?

(and Other Questions You're Better Off Not Asking)

Aquinas often spent years dealing with seemingly simple questions. After centuries of the so-called Dark Ages, a time when reason and logical argumentation were suppressed (in many instances by the church itself), Aquinas believed Christians needed to make rational sense out

of even their most basic beliefs. They needed to face the fundamental questions about their faith.

Here is one of the most troubling: Why is there evil in the world?

For many Christians from Aquinas's age (and our own), the answer is a simple one: Satan. God creates a world of boundless goodness, and Satan enters God's creation in Eden and corrupts it throughout history. Aquinas, of course, accepts this account as *true* (all of the Bible is true for Aquinas) but adds for himself the task of showing how it is *reasonable*. How can Christians rationally account for the existence of Satan and evil in the world? This task is not as easy to accomplish as it at first may seem.

If God is truly all-powerful (or *omnipotent*), Aquinas reasons, then surely God has the power to eliminate Satan if he so chooses. One cannot say "God cannot possibly eliminate Satan" without implying that God is limited in power. If God is all knowing (or *omniscient*), then God knows about each and every one of Satan's actions, even before they occur within our temporal schema. One cannot say that God does not know about the terrible suffering that Satan has caused in the past and will cause in the future without claiming that God is limited in his knowledge. If God is all good, then he should desire the cessation of evil and injustice. One cannot claim that God wants Satan to wreak havoc on creation, or is indifferent to Satan's doing so, without undermining God's goodness.

Why then does evil persist? Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God make evil in the first place?

These are age-old questions, and Aquinas turns to some centuries-old thinkers—most notably the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (born c. 428 B.C.) and the early church father Augustine (born A.D. 354)—for guidance.[1]

Why would God make evil in the first place? Aquinas

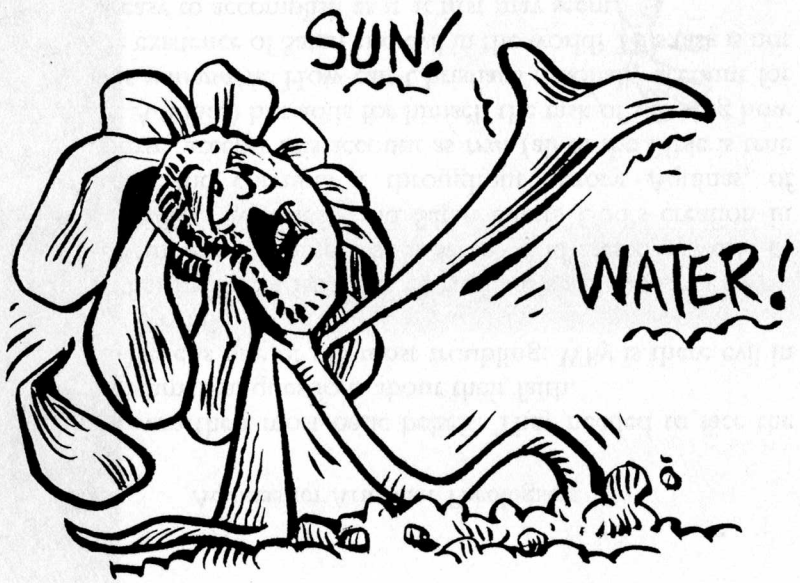
responds that God does *not* make evil. God only makes good. Evil, in a sense, does not exist at all—at least it is not a substance or a thing. What then is evil? It is nothing more than a "privation of the good," that is, a removal of some of the good from a good object.

An example may help here. Imagine a daisy at the peak of its beauty. Its petals are white, its center is bright yellow, and its stem is firm and green. Aquinas would say the

"matter" that makes up this daisy (we might say "molecules" today) is wholly good. There is no evil substance present, only good.

Now revisit the daisy a few days later. A few petals have begun to turn brown around the edges; a leaf has dropped. We might well say that the daisy is not as good as it was a few days earlier. But what has effected this change? Not, Aquinas answers, the addition of any bad matter to the daisy. No, what caused its decline was the dissipation of some of the good that was the daisy at its height.

Come back a week later. All of the petals have dropped. The stem, once turgid, is limp and brown. The daisy's beauty is gone. Yet no badness has been added, Aquinas again points out. Rather, even more of the original good matter has dissipated. We have gone from a perfect daisy to a bad daisy without ever bringing an evil substance into the



picture. All we have observed is the continuous and gradual removal of some of the good that had previously characterized the flower.

Aquinas's surprising claim is that *all* of what we as humans call evil is like this. Evil is never a thing. It is a privation of some of the good from a wholly good substance.

What is Aquinas's goal here? Why does he introduce this rather strange argument? In simplest terms, it's to get God off the hook for creating evil. If the all-powerful, creator God sits in heaven and makes evil matter and infects the world with it, Aquinas reasons, then the problem of evil is irresolvable. If there is but one creator of everything and if anything in the world—whether a daisy or Satan—is evil in its very created substance, then the creator must be the source of evil. There can be no other reasonable conclusion.

Some groups, like the heretical Manichees (a group of self-professed Christians who accepted the teachings of a third-century Persian by the name of Mani), respond to this challenge by suggesting that God is *not* the only creator. Satan and God are cocreators. Evil exists as a substance, and Satan is the source of it.

But this view raises Satan up to a status equal to that of God. Aquinas finds this utterly unacceptable and, following Augustine, suggests a very different argument. Aquinas replies (to paraphrase), "*Neither* God *nor* Satan creates evil. There is no evil substance in the world; only good. Admittedly, at times some of the good dissipates from an object, and we humans tend to call that evil, but in point of fact, no evil exists materially. There is only good."

This may seem implausible as an explanation for our overall experience of evil. Sure, you might say, this may account for how a daisy loses its beauty, but does it account for something—or someone—like Adolf Hitler? Here, the

argument goes, is the very embodiment of evil. Is Aquinas going to tell us that Hitler is wholly good but has merely had some of his goodness removed?

Aquinas's response is, in a word, yes. Hitler is no different from a daisy. (When was the last time you saw that combination of words strung end to end?) He is in substance wholly good (if not "perfectly and immutably" so; I'll say more about this strange phrase in a moment). He is created with a keen intellect and able brain, a strong heart, muscles for mobility, and a voice for oration. All of the created substance of Hitler is good. Yet when some of the good is removed from this wholly good creation (for instance, his self-control or his love of neighbor is removed) then he uses these good, created talents, such as intelligence, strength, and persuasion, for evil ends—to conquer nations, kill innocents, and so on. Has God *made* evil in creating Hitler? Not materially, replies Aquinas. God makes only good. Does Hitler *do* evil? Most certainly.

And this is just how Aquinas attempts to leave it. God never makes evil. He does make wholly good substances like people that, at times (all right, darn often), end up doing evil. Aquinas thus tries to reconcile two basic but, in some ways, seemingly conflicting Christian beliefs: God and his creation are wholly good, and the world has evil in it.

In fact, Aquinas explains Satan's existence in much the same way that I have just accounted for Hitler's. You have likely heard the claim that Satan is a "fallen angel." In Aquinas's account, you can begin to see the logic of this claim. God made Satan wholly good. He made an angel with great ability and power, an entity (like all angels) of pure, unbounded intellect. These created attributes were wholly good (but not perfectly and immutably so). When this angel rebelled against God, he did not become evil in

substance. Satan's angelic abilities are still in place and are good. But Satan has come to use these potent, created attributes for evil ends—to challenge God, to tempt creation, and so on. In a very real sense, then, for Aquinas, Satan is wholly good. This is, admittedly, a strange claim. But recognize that Aquinas intends the statement in only a formal sense. (Satan's created nature is good; his actions are not.) Besides, reasons Aquinas, such a conclusion is not only consistent with but dictated by the biblical claim in Genesis that God made the world "and it was very good." There are no exceptions—not for daisies, Hitler, or Satan.

I hope by now that you can begin to see some of the logic of Aquinas's arguments on evil. (I also hope that now you can appreciate how complicated it quickly gets for Aquinas when he attempts to prove even the most basic of

Christian beliefs by means of reason.) But if you've been following the argument carefully, you doubtlessly have begun to have some questions. I've talked about the beauty dissipating from a daisy and about some of the good being removed from Hitler or Satan but left unanswered a crucial question: Who or what causes this removal? What is the source of what Aquinas calls the "privation of the good"?

After all, if God were the one who causes the good to be removed from an angel, and that angel then becomes Satan, is not God really responsible for evil in the end? Isn't God back *on* the hook?

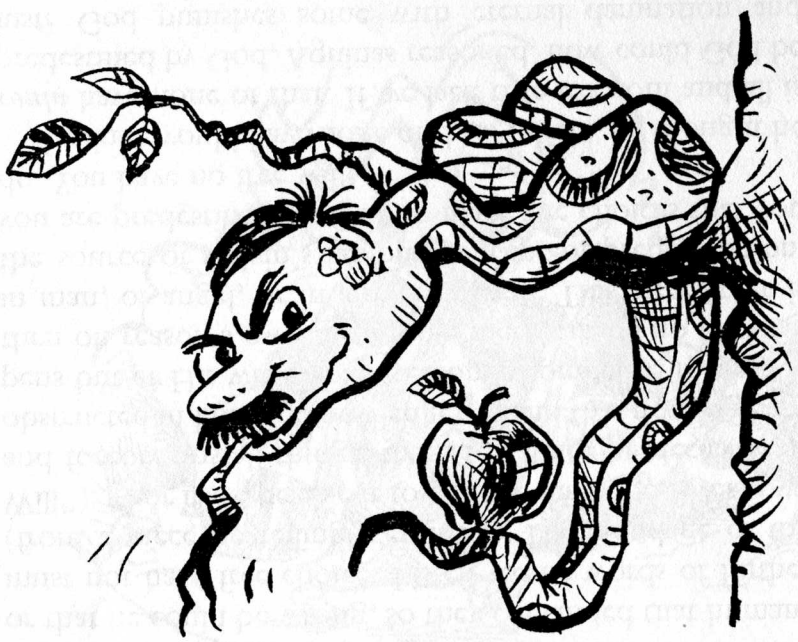
Aquinas, like many Christians, has difficulty with this question. As we've seen above, Aquinas does suggest that

if God were to make the created world good, it had to be less than "perfectly and immutably so." In other words, it had to be made good but imperfect. Why? Well, there is only one thing that is perfectly and immutably good, and that is God himself. If the created world were created perfectly and immutably good, God would merely be producing more of himself—and that is nonsensical. Indeed, for Aquinas, *anything* created is by definition limited, if only by the simple fact that it owes its existence to something else, namely, that which created it. No, the wholly good matter that constitutes the world has to be imperfect. Hence, we must expect that good will at times decay.

But still, is not God the source of that decay (and hence the ultimate source of Satan's jealousy and Hitler's murderous acts)? Aquinas's consistency as a thinker causes him to admit that the answer is, at least in part, yes. In fact, the very "first mover" proof of God's existence that we explored in the last chapter comes back to haunt Aquinas here. In his discussion of evil, Aquinas concedes that, as first mover and first cause, God—in one important sense—*is* the cause of all things that subsequently happen, even evil.[2] If God had not initiated motion, then the motion that was Satan's entry into the garden (or Hitler's entry into Poland) would never and could never have occurred.

I admire Aquinas for this concession. Many lesser thinkers merely ignore their earlier arguments when the claims later prove inconvenient. What Aquinas will need to argue, of course, is that while God (in one formal sense) is the cause of all things that happen, he is not morally responsible for the evil acts of humans and (fallen) angels. Can this narrow line be walked?

To answer this question, we need to move from the issue that we have been exploring for the last few pages and turn to a second major example of the way in which the demand



for reasonable explanation can complicate even very simple beliefs. We need to turn from the question, "Why is there evil?" to the question, "Do humans (and angels) have free choice?"

Intuitively, the answer to this new question seems obvious: Of course we do. For instance, you can put this book down right now if you wish, without ever reading another line. Ah, you decided not to (and for that my fragile ego as an author is deeply grateful) but you *could* have stopped reading. It was *your* decision.That much is plain.

Or is it?

Some thinkers suggest that there exists a problem in believing in free choice, at least for Christians. Assume for a moment what most Christians assume: that God exists and that he is all-knowing (or *omniscient*), knowing perfectly everything that happens even before it happens. God

knew when and where you would be born. God knew you would not put this book down and stop reading a moment ago. God even knew beforehand that the Lisa Marie Presley–Michael Jackson thing would never work out. (All right, maybe some things *don't* take divine omniscience to know in advance.)

What's the problem? Medieval thinkers began to wonder if there could be true human free choice in the face of a God who possessed such omniscience. Think about it for a moment. If God knew before you were ever born that on this day and at this moment you would continue to read this book, could you really have *not* continued to read it? Did you have the freedom to stop? An all-knowing God

cannot be wrong or he would not be all-knowing. If he knew you would keep reading and you had stopped, God would have known wrongly. You *had* to keep reading, no doubt about it. And if that's the case, what freedom did you have? The problem is a sticky one.

As philosophers ask, is divine omniscience consistent with human free choice? (Tip: Try this last question as an icebreaker at a party sometime. Resolve yourself to having no friends.)

Later Christians such as Martin Luther (born A.D. 1483) and John Calvin (born A.D. 1509), two of the most influential figures in Protestantism, gave up on finding a way to resolve the tension between free choice and God's knowledge. They couldn't imagine God was less than all-knowing or that he could be wrong, so they concluded that humans must not have free choice. Listen to the words of Luther (from a piece he tellingly entitled "The Bondage of the Will"): "For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things; that He cannot be deceived or obstructed in His foreknowledge . . . and that nothing happens but at His will (which reason is compelled to grant); then on reason's own testimony, there can be no free will in man, or angel, or in any creature."[3] This same logic is the source of Calvin's famous concept of predestination; you are predestined by God to make the choices that you do. You have no free will.

Aquinas would have none of that. In fact, he thought he *could* have none of that. If we lack true freedom and all is predestined by God, Aquinas reasoned, how could God be just? God punishes some with eternal damnation and rewards others with salvation. If we have no free choice—if everything we do is a product of God's control—then God is unjust, punishing some poor wretches for actions that are not their own. It is as if a traffic court judge were

to determine your accident was totally beyond your control and then threw you in jail regardless.

Because of this predicament, Aquinas struggled throughout his life to find a way for God to be all-powerful and all-knowing *and* for humans still to have genuine free choice. Some critics (Luther and Calvin among them) say his arguments fail. You should judge for yourself.

One attempt Aquinas makes to deal with the problem is to argue that God is *timeless*. He suggests that it is incorrect to think that God knew you would continue to read this book today *before* you actually made the choice to do so. In the *Summa,* Aquinas says that humans, living as we do *within* time, are like travelers along a road. We can see directly in front of us and a short distance behind, but uncertainty lurks beyond the next curve in the road. The future is cloudy. God, on the other hand, by knowing all perfectly, has a bird's-eye view. He sees the entire road at once—every curve and every traveler upon it. In Aquinas's words, "A man who is walking along a road cannot see those who are coming after him; but a man who looks down from a hill upon the whole length of the road can see at the same time all those who are traveling along it. So it is with God."[4] God's knowledge of time is like this bird's-eye view of the road, Aquinas says. God sees all events and all moments, in fact all of history, perfectly at once—not before they happen nor after they happen. He is *beyond time*. As such, Aquinas reasons, it is not the case that God knows what you will do *before* you do it, thus leaving you no ability to choose freely. You exist within time. God is timeless.

Is this all just fancy footwork? Is Aquinas trying to solve the problem of free choice by clever but empty wordplay? That's what his critics say, and they may have a point. After all, even if God exists outside of time, *we* exist within it,

and we are the ones whose ability to choose freely is in question.

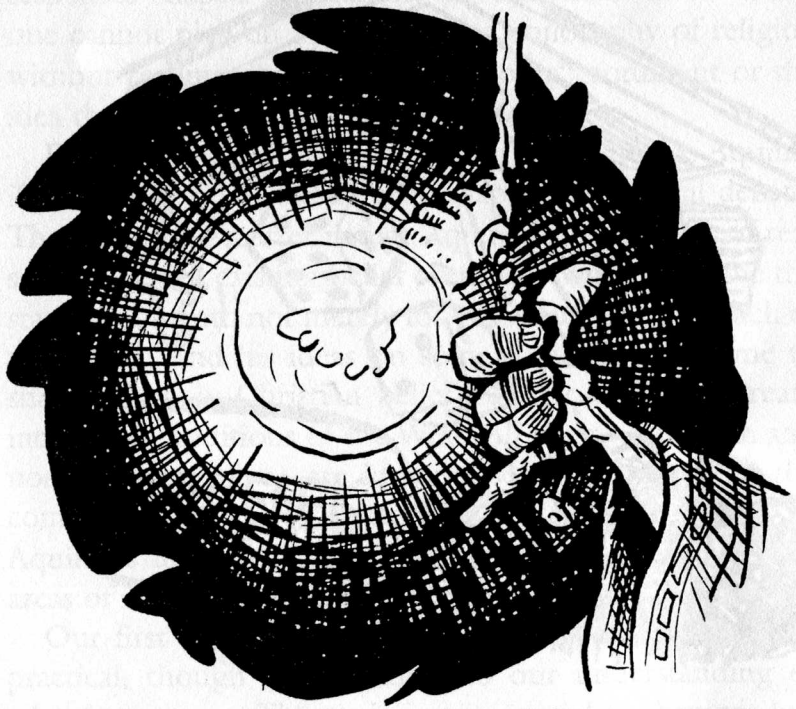
But Aquinas offers another argument, and it's an interesting one. He claims that God can desire things to happen in two very different ways. The actual words Aquinas uses is that God wills some things to happen *necessarily* and other things to happen *contingently*. What does he mean? In effect, Aquinas tells us that God can wish for things to happen—God can create things—in two different manners.[5]

God creates some things by willing them to happen necessarily. An example would be God's announcing "Let there be light" at the beginning of the book of Genesis. Aquinas says that God willed necessarily that this light exist. As a result, there was no possibility that there would

not be light. The mere fact that God willed it in this way meant that it would definitely happen. Simple enough.

Aquinas's more original idea is to say God wills other things to happen in an entirely different way: contingently. Contingent means for something to depend upon something else. What does it mean for God to will something to happen contingently?

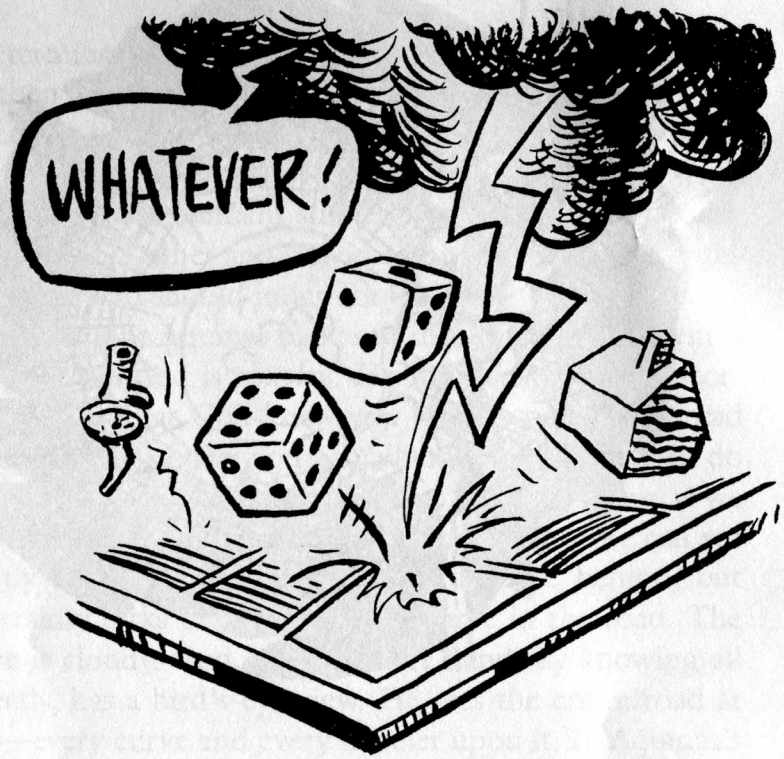
An example might help. Imagine that God is a great lover of the game of *Monopoly*. He gathers the angels around and plays by the hour. (Somehow it makes sense



that the omnipotent God would gravitate toward a game called *Monopoly.*) One night, he reaches a crucial juncture in the game and needs to roll double sixes to win (something having to do with Baltic Avenue, I'm told). Well, being God, he *could* will to roll the double sixes in the first sense discussed above. If he did so, the double sixes would definitely come up, the game would be over, and some angels might be a bit peeved. (I'm not suggesting that this was the source of the original rebellion by Satan against God, but have your ever seen the two playing *Monopoly* since?) But doing so hardly seems fair. Moreover, if God truly loves playing *Monopoly,* it's self-defeating. He would only enjoy the experience of playing the game, and potentially winning, if he had a chance to lose, to *not* roll double sixes.

Aquinas says that in such circumstances, God must have the ability to will that the double sixes come up contingently. Being a pretty smart guy, God surely knows that he needs double sixes to win. He could even wish for the double sixes to come up. But, Aquinas asks, what if God wishes for this to happen *contingent* upon the natural roll of the dice? To say that God could not do this—that he could only wish for the double sixes in such a way that they come up necessarily and he could never allow the dice to roll naturally—seems to say God is less than fully powerful. It seems to say there is something God cannot do, and it is a simple act at that: rolling dice and allowing the natural probabilities to determine how they fall. Do we really want to say that God is not capable of performing an act that any one of us could perform? Aquinas thinks that this would be absurd. No, God must be able both to wish for double sixes and to allow the dice to roll naturally.

What does this have to do with the problem of whether you have free choice? Quite a bit. What if God wills certain



things about you necessarily—that you exist, that you have an intellect, that you be born in New Jersey? Well, then, these things certainly will happen. You will exist. You will have an intellect. You will be born in New Jersey. (Hey, we'll get back to the claims of God's injustice in a minute!) But what if God wills other things about you—that you choose to develop your intellect to its fullest, that you choose to be faithful and good and thus earn salvation, that you choose to move from New Jersey—contingently? Contingent on what? Aquinas responds: contingent on your free choice. God wishes for you to develop your potential, to do the good rather than evil, and to be faithful, but in a way parallel to the sense in which he wishes for double sixes

when playing *Monopoly*. He wants it to occur but does not *necessitate* that it occur. Does it undermine God's power to say that God wishes for certain things to occur contingent on other things? Aquinas says heavens no! It adds to God's abilities and powers. He can create in a multitude of ways. Does it then undermine your human free choice that God wishes *contingently* that you do something? Again Aquinas responds heavens no—no more than it undermines the freedom of the dice when God wishes for double sixes but allows the natural probabilities to determine the dice's roll.

So maybe this is how we should understand the acts of evil by Satan and Hitler discussed earlier. In one sense, God as first mover is the cause of their atrocious acts. Clearly, if God as creator had not made these beings in the first place, then they could not have wreaked the havoc that they did. In another sense, though, God is not at fault. He willed that Satan and Hitler use their natural talents to serve the good, but he willed this not necessarily but contingently. It was contingent upon *their* free will. Hence, in another sense, Satan and Hitler are responsible for the evil that they do. And if that's the case, then maybe God is not culpable

for their evil acts (although he's still not off the hook for creating New Jersey).

If you followed these arguments, you're doing very well. Even professional philosophers struggle to make sense of Aquinas at times. These are some of his more difficult concepts. But they show how even very simple beliefs—in this case, the beliefs that God is all-knowing and that you have free will—can lead to sticky and complex theological issues when reason is demanded.

The nature of God, the proofs of God's existence, the problem of evil, the problem of free will—these are some of the most important theological issues, and Aquinas's responses shaped generations of Christians. Even today, one cannot pick up a book on the philosophy of religion without reading about the "first mover" argument or the idea that evil is a "privation of the good."

But it does a disservice to the legacy of Thomas Aquinas if we merely point out that he shaped theological debate. The fact of the matter is that Aquinas's application of reason as a test of existing belief eventually would become the standard of truth not merely for Christians but for much of the world. And his ideas on some topics would come to shape not only Christian belief but also the mainstream intellectual traditions of the West. All of us—Christian and non-Christian alike—are in some sense Thomists. In the coming chapters, we'll see how by exploring some of Aquinas's influential contributions to important practical areas of inquiry such as law, morality, women, and politics.

Our first stop, though, is a topic that is anything but practical, though it is essential to our understanding of what is to come. The topic is one crucial to Aquinas but rarely discussed today: metaphysics. Brace yourself.