

- Joseph Gallagher, Translation Editor, 1966: p. 501, 508 and 515.
- 4 *North West Labour History*, Issue No. 16, 1991/92. Patrick Doyle, "Accommodation or Confrontation: Catholic Response to the Formation of the Labour Party".
 - 5 Bishop Harris of Middlesbrough in a recent Pastoral letter has recommended that all Parishes set up Finance Committees: *Middlesbrough Diocesan Catholic Voice*, September 1992.
 - 6 *New Blackfriars*, November 1987. Kathleen Walsh, "Questioning the Idea of Lay Ministries". *The Tablet*, September 5, 1992: p. 1114, "Scottish Catholics look to the Future".
 - 7 John Hickey, Urban Catholics, "Urban Catholicism in England and Wales from 1829 to the Present Day", 1967: p.13. Hull Heath Authority: *Department of Public Health Annual Report*, 1991, p. 37. *Diocese of Middlesbrough Year Book*, 1992.
 - 8 See William J . Rademacher, *Lay Ministry a Theological, Spiritual and Pastoral Handbook*, 1991.
 - 9 Ian Pettit, O.S.B ., author of several spiritual works, e.g. *The God who Speaks*, 1991.
 - 10 Bishop Harris, who has since retired.
 - 11 Patrick J . Doyle, unpublished essay on the Salford Federation.
 - 12 Theodor Herr, with an Introduction by Rodger Charles, S.J., *Catholic Social Teaching, a Textbook of Christian Insights*, 1991, p 63f.

Aquinas on God's Knowledge of Evil Intentions

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In order to understand how God could know evil intentions, two things are requisite: an understanding of how God knows and an understanding of the nature of evil. It is a well-known doctrine of Thomas Aquinas that God knows his creation through knowing himself. As the ultimate explanation of potentiality and change in the world, it could not be that God himself is in any way potential. Hence he does not learn about his creation from his creatures. Rather, God knows all his creatures and their actions through knowing his own simple nature. It is also a well-known doctrine that evil is the privation of good, and that evil is only known through knowing good. Putting these two doctrines together, it follows that God knows evil in the world by knowing the good that he is. While this explanation seems adequate to explain physical evils (e.g., the mouse's demise is explained by God's understanding himself as able to be participated by the good which is eagle), it is not clear how

this explanation can handle God's knowledge of evil intentions since these intentions do not seem capable of being explained in terms of something essentially good.

In order to better understand this problem and set up the grounds for some legitimate answer, it is necessary to treat each of these issues separately and in some greater detail. Thus, in the first section, God's knowledge as it concerns his creation in general and in particular will be discussed. Section two will focus on evil, concentrating on what is essential in moral evil, and will show why this presents great difficulties in explaining philosophically how God can be said to know evil intentions. In the concluding section, an attempt at a solution to the problem will be made.

I

The doctrine that God knows his creation by knowing himself is a direct implication of the doctrine that God exists. As Thomas Aquinas makes eminently clear over and over again, we only know that God exists through our knowledge of the things around us, or rather through our recognition that we lack knowledge of them, for it is through the questions which these familiar things raise for us that we are led to the frontier of explanation, to the reason why there is anything at all and not nothing, to what we call "God." Recognizing, on the one hand, that the things around us lack sufficient explanation—through their changeability, dependency, contingency, limitedness in perfection, and lack of complete self-directedness (the famous Five Ways)—and, on the other hand, that these very things are actually changing, caused, existing, sharing in perfection, and directed, we are led to the insight that there must be an ultimate explanation which is itself unchanging, uncaused, in all ways noncontingent, without limits, and not itself directed.¹ For our purposes, the insight of the First Way is sufficient, for if God is not in potency in any way (since he is pure actuality), then he does not learn; that is, he does not go from a state of potency to one of actuality in knowledge. If he were able to learn, then he would be in potency and therefore not God, not, that is, the ultimate explanation of every change from potency to act.

Thus, God's knowledge is perfectly actual, simple, and complete.² While we do not know what such a state of knowledge could be like since our knowledge is irreducibly complex (always moving from plurality toward unity yet never reaching completion³), we do know that God's way of knowing cannot involve any complexity or coming to be. For wherever complexity and coming to be have place, there is need for a further explanation (an explanation of how diverse things are found together in a whole), and God the creator is just what is meant by the

ultimate explanation. Thus, while reason cannot give us a positive understanding of what it is for God to know, it does tell us that his way of knowing cannot involve potency or limitation of any kind.

So it is that Aquinas says God knows all things by knowing his own simple essence.⁴ One might think that for God to know his essence is for him to know only himself—like Aristotle's self-thinking thought. And, indeed, if God's essence were limited to a particular definable nature, then his knowledge of himself would not afford him insight into the natures of other things. However, it is just the case that God's nature is not limited (Fourth Way). We must remember that God's essence as we know it by natural reason is to be the creator of all other things. As creator, he knows all the things that he creates, and he knows them prior to their creation, not in the sense of temporal priority since God does not exist in time, but in the sense of priority in origin. Thus, he does not depend on his creatures for his knowledge of them. Since his nature is absolutely simple, he knows the essences of all that he creates by knowing his simple essence. Perhaps, then, as Avicenna thought, God knows things only by their essences or general species.⁵ However, this, too, cannot be the case. Were God restricted in his knowledge to generalities, he would lack some knowledge and thus be limited. But we know that God is unlimited. Hence, his knowledge cannot be restricted to generalities: rather, God knows every individual and every action of every individual. And he knows all this, again, by knowing his simple essence, and the ways that his infinite goodness can be participated specifically, individually, and through particular actions.⁶ Again, while we cannot understand how God knows every particular thing and act, we can know that such knowledge is not incompatible with what we know about God, i.e., that he is creator of all things and hence not any particular thing himself, and we can know that the complexity inherent in definition (which would allow us to know what God is and how he acts) is incompatible with God's perfect simplicity as the ultimate explanation for all complexity, that is, for all created reality.

So far, we have seen that God's knowledge of creatures can be explained in terms of his knowing his own simple essence as good and the various ways that his goodness can be participated. These ways include both metaphysical good, that is, the good of being and acting which applies to all creatures, and moral good, that is, the good of intending what is right and virtuous which applies only to intellectual creatures. While this seems to cover the aspects of creation that are good, it is not immediately clear that this explains how God can know the evil that occurs in his creation. Let us now turn to a discussion of what evil is and how it can be known.

II

In general, evil is explained by Aquinas as privation of good, that is, as something missing from or destructive of some good thing.⁷ Thus, loss of life is evil to every living thing, for it is of the essence of such a thing that it live. However, it is not evil for a stone not to be alive, for it is not part of the essence of a stone to live. Likewise, blindness is an evil in an animal, who by nature ought to see, but is no evil in a plant. So, also, immoral intentions and actions are evil for intellectual beings, but they would not even apply to stones, plants, or irrational animals. Evil is a particular failure of some thing to fulfil its nature. Hence, one must know what the fulfilment of a nature is, that is, its goodness, in order to know that the nature is unfulfilled, that some evil attends to it. To know evil, whether a defect of being or of moral intention, one must know good. "Neither can it [evil] be defined nor known unless through the good."⁸ Thus, God could be said to know evil in general by knowing the various ways his goodness can be participated and hence fail to be participated.

However, when it comes to understanding how God can know the particular evils that occur, the problem is tougher, for it clearly is not the case that by knowing the kinds of evils that could happen, one knows particular evils that do happen. And in explaining God's knowledge of the world, one must never slide into the mistake of considering his knowing as dependent on his seeing what goes on in the world, for this would put God in a position of potency with regard to his creatures, and such a position is ruled out by the metaphysics of creation. Rather, one must be able to explain how God knows the actions of creatures by showing how in those actions God is causing and willing creaturely good. For, while the existence of other things is the informing cause of our knowledge, God's knowledge is the cause of the existence of other things.⁹ God is the cause of every action of every creature,¹⁰ and since God is absolutely simple,¹¹ God's causality is his knowledge. This brings us to the centre of our problem. How is it that one can say that God causes (knows) every action in the world—including the evil ones—through knowing the good that he is? To get at this problem, we must make some distinctions about different kinds of evil.

Just as one can distinguish the good of being which applies to all things from moral good of intention which applies only to intellectual beings, one can distinguish evil as it affects the being of things from moral evil; for, as we said above, evil is parasitic on good and can only be known insofar as good is known. The parallel, however, admits of this important difference: while the good of being applies to all manner of creatures, physical and intellectual, the evil which is a defect in being applies only to physical creatures, for intellectual creatures, *qua*

intellectual, are immaterial and hence not subject to loss of being. The damage which can be done to intellectual creatures is in terms of intention, and this damage is really moral corruption, not metaphysical corruption. By their evil intentions, intellectual creatures do not lose any actual powers to know and will, nor are these powers metaphysically altered. That no metaphysical damage is incurred does, on reflection, make perfect sense, for if the intellectual creature is metaphysically damaged by error and sin so that the creature's reason and freedom are essentially distorted or limited,¹² then the creature could not be held responsible for future errors and sins.

In distinguishing these two kinds of evil, let us begin with a discussion of physical evil and how it can be known by God. It is fairly easy to explain how God knows physical evil. He knows the various evils that in general *can* befall any creature by knowing that creature as good, for in knowing the good he knows the ways in which that good can fail to be fulfilled or be damaged. And God knows each creature as good by knowing his own good nature as able to be participated in a particular way. This knowledge is the same as his act of will which, in turn, is the same as his act of creation. As for how he knows particular physical evils which *actually do* befall certain creatures, such as this mouse getting eaten by this eagle, or this human being getting sick by this virus, he knows these by causing the existence and activities of each physical being within a universe of physical beings. In such a universe, whose order is the best good God intends in creation,¹³ the proximity of mouse and eagle results in the destruction of the mouse (which is physical evil for the mouse), and the explanation of such an occurrence is the goodness of existence and activity of the eagle.¹⁴ The same can be said for the human being and the virus. When, in the overarching goodness of a universe of interacting physical things,¹⁵ a human being and a virus come into proximity with one another, the human being gets sick. This is evil for the human being, but the explanation of the occurrence, again, is in terms of good—the good of the virus. Thus, for every instance of physical evil that occurs, there is an explanation in terms of physical good. And so God can be said to know these evils through knowing himself as able to be participated in various physical ways, all of which are, in themselves, good.

However, when one turns to the question of moral evil, the explanation is far more difficult, for evil intentions cannot be explained in terms of good intentions the way physically harmful actions can be explained in terms of physically beneficial ones. Moral evil is essentially about intentions, not the physical actions stemming from those intentions, nor the results of those actions.¹⁶ And there is no

essential gain to offset or explain an evil intention the way there is in an explanation of physical evils. While the loss of the lamb is the gain of the lion, there is no essential benefit for the moral agent (or for anyone else) which offsets the evil of the intention. For in sinning, the agent morally corrupts himself, and the fact that he or someone else may benefit from his sin does not affect the essential character of his act. For example, the goods which he might gain from theft (e.g., money and pleasure) bear no direct relation to the moral evil done such that they could compensate for it, for as goods which concern the physical wellbeing of the agent, they are on an entirely different plain from the immaterial moral attending the evil intention. And while it could be argued that the one wronged might gain in the virtue of patience, which is an immaterial moral good and hence could be related to the moral evil, the gain in character (if it occurs) is not in response to the essence of sin—the evil intention, but to an action following from the sin. It is not essential to evil intention that any physical act follow from it. Nor is there in the evil intention itself any direct relation to good. As Thomas writes: “It is beside the intention of the sinner that from this [the evil he does] any good should follow.”¹⁷

Thus, while it is true that God, as the cause of the existence and all the activities of the moral agent, can be said to know these activities even in their particular instantiations, this does not show how God could know moral evil. For the evil in evil intentions is not caused by God either directly or indirectly. Since an evil intention, insofar as it is evil, is not a metaphysical entity such that it requires the direct act of the creating hand for its existence (rather, it is a deficiency in the proper ordering of the will to what is good), it is not directly caused by God. Nor can it be indirectly explained in a sufficient way as the inevitable concomitant of something essentially good and hence known by God in knowing himself as good. Thus, evil intention, as the privation of the good activity of the will, cannot be explained either by God’s activity as cause of the will, nor by some essential good that issues from the will’s evil intention.

Aquinas does, in several places, speak of evil intentions being caused by the passions overruling reason.¹⁸ Here lies a possible explanation for how God can know sins. For, insofar as God is the cause of our sense inclinations or passions, he can be said to be the cause of something good and hence to know these by knowing himself. In fact, Thomas also says in several places that no one intentionally seeks evil.¹⁹ Thus, sin appears to be able to be explained in terms of intending good—the good of the senses. However, as Thomas himself says, the passions are not a sufficient explanation of moral evil.²⁰ If they were,

then there would be no such thing as moral evil. In the first place, sense inclinations, in themselves, are animal goods; they are not evils. If moral evil is simply a matter of following something good, then it is not evil.

In trying to categorize moral evil, Aquinas says that it has no formal or final cause, and has an agent cause only accidentally.²¹ Since moral evil is not a metaphysical entity, it has no formal cause. Since it cannot be understood as having a purpose that is good, it has no final cause. It does, indeed, have an agent cause—the human agent in his physical and intellectual activities, and God as the cause of these activities. However, these agent causes are all accidental: none of them explains what is essential in moral evil—that is, the evil intention. Hence, none of the ways in which God is cause of us and hence knows our actions—not as cause of our passions, nor of our knowledge, nor even of our will—can explain our evil intentions.

In both *Summas*, there are passages where Aquinas explicitly takes up this problem of how God knows (and hence causes and wills) particular evils.²² In both cases, his answer revolves around (as it must) God knowing himself and knowing himself as good, for in his simplicity God knows everything at once, and evil, which is unintelligible in itself, is only known through good. Thus, in the *Summa contra gentiles*, he writes: “If it [divine intellect] were to know something through a species that is not itself, it would follow by necessity that its proportion to that species would be as the proportion of potency to act. Hence it must be that God understands solely through the species that is his essence.”²³ And in the *Summa Theologiae*, we find the following: “Any thing is knowable according to what it is. Hence, since evil is the privation of good, through the very fact that God knows good things, he also knows evil things; just as through light darkness is known.”²⁴ However, every example Aquinas gives to explain how God can know evil is a generality, or it refers to physical evil, or it concerns what is accidental in sin (i.e., what happens besides the intention of the agent, such as the virtue of patience in the one who is harmed).²⁵ The evil which we are concerned to explain is particular, moral, and essential.

In the abstract, one can see how God, by knowing his own goodness and the ways it can be participated, also knows the ways it may fail to be participated, which is what is meant by evil.²⁶ And in the concrete, as we have discussed already, God knows the physical evils that occur in the universe by knowing the good of various creatures and the transcendent good of the order of the whole universe.²⁷ Indeed, he even knows passion and intellectual aspects of evil insofar as he is cause of every human activity, and he knows the physical and mental consequences of sin insofar as he is the cause of every real thing.²⁸

However, all these examples are accidental to sin, for sin is a matter of evil intention, not passion, and it is outside the intention of the evil doer that any good should follow from his sin.²⁹ Thus, God does not cause what is essential in moral evil, that is, the assent to evil. "God in no way wills the evil of sin, which takes away the order to the divine good."³⁰

III

However hard Aquinas tries, he is unable to give a fully intelligible account of how God can know our evil intentions. Two things Thomas does know, however: 1) whatever God knows, he knows through knowing himself³¹; and 2) evil can only be known through good.³² Philosophically, there seems to be no way of solving this puzzle of the relation between our particular evil intentions and God. If one would have it that God knows our evil intentions by seeing us assent to them, one is simply metaphysically wrong: for it is impossible that God, who is the answer to why there are any creatures at all, should be influenced by his creatures. If one would have it that God knows our evil intentions by knowing himself as good, then one must answer the question of how sin can be explained in terms of good. Neither the concomitant activities of body, intellect, and will nor the patience born of suffering in others³³ is a sufficient answer to why it is good that there be moral evil, for each of these is only accidentally related to the moral evil itself, which is essentially a matter of intention.

If one would give an answer, the two certainties above must be honoured. God must know moral evil by knowing himself, and know it by knowing himself as good. The answer Aquinas gives, and I think it is the only answer which can be given, is theological. It is the belief that somewhere in the mystery that is sin, unknown to us, there is good—the belief that God can bring good out of evil in ways we cannot conceive. This is, in fact, how Thomas answers the objection to the existence of God based on the problem of evil in the second question of the *Summa Theologiae*.³⁴ Thus, it is in the order of final causality, where the ultimate purpose lies hidden in God and is embraced through grace in faith, that the explanation for God's knowledge and his role in causing sin is to be found. But to have said this is not to have rationally understood the relation between God and moral evil. The solution stretches beyond what is naturally comprehensible to human reason.

Such a solution must remain a mystery for three reasons. First of all, we cannot give a satisfactory answer to the question of what is good about moral evil. By definition, there is nothing good about it: evil is the lack of good. Secondly, to bite the bullet and admit that God just does know and cause our evil intentions is to say that God is imperfect; but this is either to be talking about some being other than God (since what

we mean by the word “God” is an absolutely perfect being), in which case such talk is mere confusion, or it is to deny the metaphysical and logical priority of perfection to imperfection (Fourth Way), which is a metaphysical error, an absurdity of theoretical reason. Finally, if we were to accept the point about God causing the evil we intend, we would be implicitly denying our own moral responsibility for our choices and actions. After all, if God wills that I do evil, then I cannot do otherwise, and if I cannot do otherwise, then I am in no way culpable for my sins. But this is an absurdity, not of theoretical reason this time, but of practical reason, for it is clear that we know very well that we do not always do what we know we should do and can do.

In the face of this mystery, Aquinas is unwilling either to condemn humanity for its sins, or to exculpate it. Hence he talks about our passions and the temptations of the fallen angels as making it extremely difficult for us to avoid sin,³⁵ yet he steers clear of attributing to these causes a sufficient explanation for our sins. “The will does not of necessity follow the inclination of an inferior appetite; for although the irascible and concupiscible passions have a certain force in inclining the will, nevertheless, it remains in the power of the will to follow the passions or to repress them.”³⁶ Thus, sin remains a mystery, unable to be attributed wholly to causes outside the will, nor wholly to the will. As sin is a mystery, so is God’s knowledge of sin. We are baffled and troubled by the sin that we do, and so we should be, for we cannot understand how sin can be good. Nevertheless, we also know philosophically that we are under divine providence. And if we believe that in some mysterious way all things work for ultimate good under divine providence, we can know theologically that (although still not how) it is possible for God to know evil intentions insofar as he knows his inscrutable plan for good.

1 *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, 2, 3.

2 *ST* I, 14, 7.

3 *ST* I, 14, 7, c.

4 *ST* I, 14, 5, c.

5 *Metaphysics* VIII, 6 [fol. 100rb–100va].

6 *ST* I, 14, 6.

7 *ST* I, 48, 1. This doctrine he inherits from Aristotle (see *Metaphysics* IX, 4 [1055 a 33]) and Augustine (see *Enchiridion* XI).

8 . . . neque definiri, neque cognosci potest, nisi per bonum. *ST* I, 14, 10, ad 4, ed. Commissio Piana (Ottawa: Harpell’s Press, 1953), Tomus I, p. 101b. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

9 *ST* I, 14, 8.

10 *ST* I, 105, 5.

11 See *ST* I, 3.

12 Aquinas does say that these powers are clouded by the growing tendency toward vice

- that evil intentions incur. See *ST I*, 64,1 & 2, where Thomas discusses the powers of the angels after the fall. I am not sure that he is right in saying that these powers are clouded in the angel, since a purely intellectual creature (as immaterial) does not grow or change in time. I do think that these powers are clouded in us by our evil intentions, but that is because every human act is the act of the whole human being, which is irreducibly composite (intellectual and material). Thus, human intentions involve the passions, and through repeated choices involving these passions, we develop habits or dispositions to do good or evil—the moral virtues and vices.
- 13 *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter, *CG*) I, 71, ed. Commissio Leonina (Romae: Desclee & Herder, 1934), p. 68.
 - 14 Such an explanation can be used as a way to address the problem of evil; and since God's knowledge and his will are the same, such an issue is bound to come up. However, in this paper, I am not so much interested in defending God from the charge of being evil as in the question of how God knows the evils that occur in his world.
 - 15 On the perfection of the universe as best created good, see *CG I*, 71, [8].
 - 16 *CG III*, 10, [11].
 - 17 *Praeter intentionem enim peccantis est quod ex hoc sequatur aliquod bonum. ST I*, 19, 9, ad 1, Piana, Tomus I, p. 140b.
 - 18 *ST I*, 113, 1, ad 1 & ad 3, *CG III*, 6,[7 & 9].
 - 19 *CG III*, 4 & 6, *CG I*, 95, [3]; *ST I*, 103, 8.
 - 20 *ST I*, 115, 4, c.
 - 21 *ST I*, 49, 1, c.
 - 22 *ST I*, 14, 10; 19, 9; *CG I*, 63, [8].
 - 23 *Nam si cognosceret aliquid per speciem quae non est ipse, sequeretur de necessitate quod proportio eius ad illam speciem esset sicut proportio potentiae ad actum. Unde oportet quod ipse intelligat solum per speciem quae est sua essentia. CG I*, 71, [12].
 - 24 *Sic autem est cognoscibile unumquoque, secundum quod est. Unde, cum hoc sit esse mali, quod est privatio boni, per hoc ipsum quod Deus cognoscit bona, cognoscit etiam mala; sicut per lucem cognoscuntur tenebrae. ST I*, 14, 10 c, Piana, Tomus I, pp. 101a–101b.
 - 25 See *CG III* 11; I, 71, [6]; *ST I*, 19, 9; 49, 1 & 2.
 - 26 *CG I*, 71, [2].
 - 27 *ST I*, 19, 9, c. Here Thomas says that the lion's object in killing the stag is the good of food. *CG I*, 71, [8]. Here Thomas speaks of the best created good as the order of the universe.
 - 28 *ST I*, 19, 9, c. Here Thomas gives the example of the good of pleasure as the object of the fornicator.
 - 29 *ST I*, 19, 9, ad 1.
 - 30 . . . malum culpae, quod privat ordinem ad bonum divinum, Deus nullo modo vult. *ST I*, 19, 9, c, Piana, Tomus I, p. 140b.
 - 31 *ST I*, 14, 5, c.
 - 32 *ST I*, 14, 10, c & ad 4.
 - 33 *ST I*, 19, 9, ad 1.
 - 34 *ST I*, 2, 3, ad 1.
 - 35 On the weakness of affections, see *ST I*, 113, 1, ad 1; on the assault of the demons, see *ST I*, 114, 1.
 - 36 . . . voluntas non ex necessitate sequitur inclinationem appetitus inferioris, licet enim passionibus quae sunt in irascibili et concupiscibili, habeant quandam vim ad inclinandam voluntatem; tamen in potestate voluntatis remanet sequi passiones, vel eas refutare. *ST I*, 115, 4, c, Piana, Tomus I, p. 688a. At *ST I*, 114, 3, c, Thomas says that not all sins arise from the instigation of the devil "but some from free choice and the corruption of the flesh" (sed quaedam ex libertate arbitrii et carnis corruptione, Piana, Tomus I, p. 680).