God in the Face of Natural and Moral Evils: A Thomistic Approach

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Abstract: The existence of evil in a world created by God raises very difficult questions to answer. Under the inspiration of Thomistic philosophy, in this article we face this problem first of all “from below”, trying to understand the meaning of physical evils in living nature, especially in animals (pain, aggressive interactions). Secondly, in thinking of the enormous amount of moral evil in the human world, we consider the biblical faith in original sin as illuminating. We examine some points of Thomas Aquinas in this regard, especially his thesis that the physical cosmos is not affected by original sin and that the loss of man’s primitive happy situation involves a contradiction between his spiritual aspirations and his mortal nature subject to limits and suffering. This situation is remedied by the help God gives man through his ordinary Providence, which includes a personal struggle against evil, and above all through his salvific plan which we know thanks to the biblical faith.

Keywords: physical evil; moral evil; life; animal pain; aggression; human person; original sin; divine Providence

1. Introduction

The beauty and order of the universe are a source of wonder and easily lead to a religious response of thanksgiving to God. The existence and spread of evil causes, on the contrary, suffering and discouragement in the face of life, and some cases breaks religious feelings. Why, we have often asked ourselves, does God allow the destructive power of evil, if He is Omnipotent and maximally good? Why do we live in a wonderful physical world, but at the same time hostile or at least indifferent to human interests? And, above all, why so much malignity in human beings, why are there crimes, wars, and oppressions, even without denying the positive aspects of our life, such as science, progress, heroism, and virtues?

The always unpleasant appearance of evil and misfortune in people, even more so if they are just and innocent, is a cause of perplexity. If we think that this has to do with some essential features of nature and man, it becomes a fundamental question that points to the meaning of life and existence. That is why in believers the question is ultimately addressed to God as Creator of the universe and of man, not only in a speculative way but by putting their faith at stake.

This is not a new question. In the book of Job (Bible 1999) it is starkly posed as a protest, though ultimately humble, of the innocent man wounded to death by misfortune. Classically, however, man has seen in religious beliefs and God not so much a reason for outrage in the face of human evils, but rather the opposite, a reason for hope and a source of consolation (McLeish 2020). All religions are in a certain way a response to the problem of evil in its cosmological and human sense. In the Christian religion, God shows himself as Savior: he saves precisely from evil.

Religion, considered in its manifestations of supplication to God, with a basic attitude of trust in a beneficent and powerful Being to whom we are indebted for so many goods, in one way or another supposes a radical response to the problem of evil, and much more so when this evil consists in the oppression derived from human injustice. The believer
trusts that God will restore justice. Excluding the need to seek revenge, good believers trust that God will not let the righteous go astray and will not, in the end, allow evil people to have their way, that is, to prevail and that the sufferings they cause in human beings will be the last word. Anyone who reads the Psalms and the Prophets notices at once that this is the tenor with which the believer invokes God.

However, if this is so, the objection addressed to God, even as a humble protest, arises from seeing that the sufferings of the innocent, whether due to human faults or natural causes, are there and that divine protection, although it exists and is concrete on many occasions, does not exempt them from suffering and therefore puts them to the test. Since God does not directly cause evils, because he is not evil, the question spontaneously arising is why God permits them, a question implying that he could prevent them. If he could not, he would not be God. And since he often prevents them with favors and miracles, it is also worth asking why he does not always do so.

If the question we are referring to is situated in a religious context, the first thing to be said is that it is not possible to obtain an immediate answer. The answer has to be delayed, but the religious context demands not to lose confidence and faith in God. The question can emerge but in a humble and sapiential way. Even Christ from the Cross exclaimed: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Bible 1999, Matthew 27:46).

In this sense, the last reaction of Job seems reasonable. In his “discussion” with God he recognizes that he spoke too much and that he cannot give an answer to the problem, as his friends and even Job intended (Bible 1999, Job 40:4–5; 42:2–6). This attitude directs his attention more than anything else to God’s omniscience, justice, and omnipotence, without doubting his benevolence. It is similar to saying: God may have his reasons for permitting these things, reasons that one cannot understand, but without ceasing to have confidence in him, because of his wisdom and goodness. We presuppose, within traditional theology, that God is interested in everything that happens in the world because he is its Creator. Nothing in the world is indifferent to God.

Job’s sapiential renunciation of this question does not mean that we remain confined in ignorance. We can understand something of God’s plans, of his will and action in human life, although never completely, since we lack the overall vision, or if we have it, it is not robust enough or perhaps it is not completely profound.

The first step should be to seek a more complete vision of reality, as far as possible, in order to be able to situate the experience of the evils in this framework and to ask fundamental questions. This means going to the level of philosophy and theology. We have to search for the meaning of the world in which we live, to ascertain what human existence entails, and also consider what God has already completed in the world, what he expects of us, weighing also the unsatisfactory answers to the problem of evil (which would only make it more acute). Moreover, it must be kept in mind that the universe and the human world are still in a process of formation and that many things have yet to happen in the future. In Christian theology, the history of humanity and the world points to an eschatological end in which God has the last word.

The overall view sheds light on particular cases, although it cannot give a reason for them in their concrete aspects (van Inwagen 2006, pp. 56–74). We could ask ourselves why God permits wars and how he can bring some good out of them with his Providence, but that will not suffice to know concretely, for instance, why God permitted the First World War and how he intervened with his Providence to help men in that painful circumstance.

The speculative answer to the problem, it’s often said, even if it were true, would not mean a consolation for the sufferer. Even so, in a certain sense, it can be comforting, if it offers some light and hope. Evil is better endured if it has a meaning, which is the opposite of experiencing suffering as pointless (Frankl 1992). The speculative and the practical side of things are connected. Thus, theoretical and practical nihilism accompany each other.

Philosophical debates on this topic are innumerable (Possenti 1997; Peterson 1998; van Inwagen 2006; Ward 2007; Goetz 2009; Søvik 2011; Echavarria 2013, 2017; Tooley 2021; Beebe 2023; other authors will come out in the rest of the article). Some scholars argue the
incompatibility between the presence of so many evils in the world and the existence of an omnipotent and good God, or at least claim that those evils make God’s existence unlikely (Mackie 1982; Rowe 2001; Trakakis 2023). This position, according to Lactantius, was held in antiquity by Epicurus (Lactancio 2020; De Ira Dei, 13, pp. 20–21). The theistic position holds, on the contrary, the compatibility between God and evil in the world, which means explaining why evil originates in the universe created by God and why the Creator allows it. In modern times, Leibniz’s “theodicy” (justification of God) is classic in this respect (Leibniz 1952; Echavarría 2011).

According to most Christian authors, God allows human misdeeds because he respects personal freedom (Plantinga 1974; Conesa 1996) and also knows how to obtain greater goods out of evils (Hick 1977; Stump 1985; Swinburne 1998; Mbonimpa 2016, on Swinburne). Other responses attenuate God’s attributes such as Omnipotence and Omniscience (Griffin 1976; Jonas 1996; Hygen 1973). Davies (2006) disagrees with positions wherein God is imagined as a moral agent who would have certain obligations (anthropomorphic view). According to Fabro (2023), the problem is philosophically unsolvable. Only biblical faith can illuminate the mystery of evil. Anti-theodicy authors consider speculative attempts to resolve this problem to be futile and counterproductive (Tilley 1991; Surin 2004).

Other philosophers tried to “justify” the necessity of the existence of evil. Hegel introduced the powerful force of negation (opposition, destruction) into the very structure of being (the dialectic of Reason), as a necessary condition for the maturation of the absolute Spirit (Polo 2006). Here evil is incorporated into God’s self-becoming through the dialectical processes (Sanguineti 2022, on Hegel and Polo). The Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson also suggested some presence of the possibility of evil within God himself, while acknowledging His transcendence (Russo 2010).

In this paper, we will not tackle the usual technical discussions on this problem, which undoubtedly have profound and very subtle aspects. In some cases, interesting answers are proposed, but not in others. Even so, by focusing attention on God, sometimes the study of evil as a natural phenomenon is neglected, which implies, in our view, the need to resort to the philosophy of nature. In many cases, there is no sufficient attention to human responsibility in the origination of evil, though Christian authors take into account theological issues such as original sin and eternal life. Perhaps a “bottom-up” perspective could be helpful to better understand the problem of the divine “permission” of evil (Murphy et al. 2007).

In the following pages, we will focus on the theme of evil within the context of life, in a Thomistic-inspired philosophy (Maritain 1942; Possenti 1997; Polo 2006, 2019; Franck 2009, 2019; Davies 2011; Echavarría 2012; Knasas 2013; Hanink 2013; Mbonimpa 2016; Sanz 2020; Fabro 2023; Roszak 2023; Macdonald 2023), though it is not our aim to expound Aquinas’ entire conception of evil (the main sources of Aquinas’ doctrine of evil, apart from the Bible, are Aristotle, Dionysius, Boethius, and St. Augustine). On certain aspects concerning original sin, we will follow some specific points discussed by Aquinas more closely.

2. Physical Life: Natural Goods and Evils

Good and evil appear and disappear together and constantly in living things. Physical transformations, characterized by the intermittent acquisition and loss of properties, are in themselves neither good nor bad but are part of the harmony of the cosmos. However, when the possession of some perfection (quality, relation, capacity, etc.) is linked to some vital function, as happens in any living organism, then that possession is considered physically good, and if something is lacking contrary to that function, then physical evil appears in nature for the first time. In this view, everything favoring life is good (the inanimate is said to be “good” if it facilitates life) and that which hinders it is considered bad.

The teleological account of life belongs to the Aristotelian philosophy and has been revalued by many authors (Marcos 1996; Lennox 2001, 2021; Lennox and Bolton 2010; Leunissen 2010; Chase 2011; Boylan 2023). Vital purposes are understood in relation to biological functions. The good thing for the living being is to exercise its vital functions,
and not to be able to do so is that which we call bad. That is why organisms can be healthy, fall sick, undergo defects, and death is their ultimate evil. The inner teleology of living things explains why they always defend themselves against the risks threatening their life and why they always seek that which sustains them (such as nutrition).

Life, then, is an intrinsic good, for the sake of itself. Even if living things may be useful for other creatures, they are valuable in themselves, however insignificant they may seem. However, living organisms eventually perish. According to the structure of the cosmos, living beings live and die, due to organic defects or environmental causes. Aristotle thought that species were perpetual precisely because of indefinite reproduction (Aristotle 1963, 1968a, 1980). This gave a meaning to the living world, thus conceived as not only stable but perpetual, together with the whole cosmos. Even if individuals were passing through, the value of life was maintained in the supposedly everlasting universe. The distinction between particular goods and evils and the good of the whole thereby emerged. Individual evils were compatible with the global good of the universe and, what is more, they contributed to its harmony.

Some forms of life are richer and others poorer (i.e., more elementary), to the extent that new vital functions appear, often superimposed on the previous ones. Obviously, this distinction is not rigorously mathematical, because life forms are very complex. On the other hand, in the incoming forms of life, some depend on others, and some live at the expense of others or need them to sustain themselves. Life is a web of interconnections, and this is very good and is a cause for admiration.

In short, life is superabundant, and the more it is, the better, although it is by no means necessary. Unicellular organisms do not need multicellular organisms, nor do plants need animals. The whole universe of life is gratuitous, such as a gift or an overwhelming set of gifts. The universe, thus, seems to be ontologically very good, which coincides with the expression repeated several times in the first chapter of Genesis in each creative phase: “And God saw that it was good” (Bible 1999, Genesis, 1).

Contrary to the Aristotelian vision, however, life as a whole is vulnerable (Santamaria Egurrola 2022). Nowadays we know that all living species are transitory, as the universe itself in its galactic structure. Biological species are fragile and become extinct if the ecosystem that allows them to survive disappears. Throughout the history of the earth innumerable species have become extinct to give way to others; evolutionary processes, though full of contingencies, eventually offered a space to the human species. Though neither the human species nor life as a whole is guaranteed perpetuity.

The fragility of life is shocking to us. A universe without life, or in which the present life would disappear altogether in the future, would seem meaningless to us. What sense would it make for life to appear in the universe and then be reabsorbed? That is, once life appears, we “do not understand” why (with respect to meaning) it should disappear unless it gives rise to something better. This perplexity affects both the non-believer and the believer. If God is the Creator and life is good, what sense does it make to create a universe in which life would ultimately be extinguished?

The physical root of natural evils in the Aristotelian philosophy derives from the corruptive hylomorphic structure of nature, according to which things are generated, but also destroyed (here we use the word corruption in the Aristotelian sense equivalent to physical destruction or decay). In modern physics, the root of decomposition is the “entropic structure” of the physical world, not incompatible with Thomistic hylomorphism. Some authors have related entropy to the origin of natural evil (Russell 1984; Stoeger 2007; Russell 2008, pp. 226–48). In the classical view, as noted above, since the universe maintains a stable order, individual decompositions did not affect the overall harmony of the cosmos. In contemporary physics the problem is more acute since entropy affects the order of the universe as a whole (Sanguineti 2002).
3. Animal World

3.1. Sensitive Life

Sensitivity to life appears for the first time in the animal world. Sensation, i.e., sensitive consciousness, implies a higher form of life. Thus, the cognitive experience of one’s own body in interaction with the environment arises. According to this condition, a good life is felt pleasantly, and what is bad for the organism is felt with displeasure, though not always and in everything, but only regarding some functions. Pleasure ultimately is nothing but feeling life itself, since pain means feeling a biological dysfunction (Sanguineti 2007, pp. 61–69).

Evil in animals, then, acquires the coloration of pain and suffering. Pain has to do with an injury to the body (physiological or vegetative pain), whereas suffering arises as a negative emotion or feeling corresponding to the deprivation of a correct link to some biological activity or relation (e.g., grief over the death of a companion) (Sanguineti 2017).

Sensation makes the living a subjective organism, i.e., not only a living body, but one that notices its life, thereby deserving the name ‘subject’ (Jonas 2000). The individual is the core of cognitive consciousness because neither the species nor the species as a whole “feels”, but only the individual.

Moreover, since animals live in interaction with each other, it is not surprising that they also sense the significant aspects of this relationship. In the most developed forms of animal life, as far as we know, others’ subjectivity is also experienced (empathy). Some animals suffer psychologically when other individuals affectively united with them suffer (for instance, the mother for her offspring).

3.2. Finite Animal Life

Let us now consider the meaning of evil in animal life in relation to death. The vegetative and animal life is contingent (in the Thomistic sense of contingent: the possibility of disorder and destruction) and has a limited duration. Individuals are passing through, they “serve” to perpetuate the species (Aquinas 1984, In II de Anima, lect. 7), as far as possible, or to allow others to live at their expense. This is not a cruelty of nature, but just the proper order of physical life. Individual living beings are a function of others, or a function of the totality of the world of life. Even if millions die continuously, as in fact happens, this has meaning if the group, or a part of the group, or the species survive, or if something better happens in the living world.

Any living being unconsciously tends to live as long as possible and defends itself against endogenous and exogenous obstacles, resisting death whenever its life is in danger. Death, painful or not, affects individuals, not the group, nor the species, nor the order of the universe, which follow their path in the history of nature. That is why the disappearance of single organisms is evil only in a relative sense.

However, as we pointed out above, we are perplexed by the eventual extinction of life predicted by astrophysics. This poses for us, intelligent beings, a problem of meaning. Notice that only human beings are concerned with the meaning of life, with good and evil as such, not only individually, but universally. Animals feel inclinations, but they cannot transcend their feelings. They ignore the natural ends of their instincts.

3.3. Pain and Suffering in Animal Life

Evil as pain has a function in the dynamics of animal life. Physical pleasures and pains are important stimuli in animal life. Thomas Aquinas ascribes them to the so-called concupiscible appetite, which alludes to the attraction of what is pleasant and thus generates desire (Aquinas 1998, Summa Theologiae, abbreviated ST, I, q. 81, a. 2). Animals live to feed, mate, shelter, defend themselves, always attracted by physical pleasures and trying at all costs to avoid what is painful.

In other words, the animal instinct towards what is good takes the form of an original tendency towards what is pleasurable, together with an unequivocal repulsion towards what is painful, though other nuances of animal emotions arise among different circum-
stances (passions, in the Aristotelian vocabulary). Physical pain in this sense is good since it has a defensive and adaptive function. However, in itself it is negative, and in many cases has no concrete utility, but only signals a dysfunction of the corruptible body. This is the case, for example, in some unavoidable pains caused by diseases, catastrophes, or accidents, and even more so when they are chronic.

Why should animals suffer? This question, which is often posed in relation to the Creator (couldn’t God create an animal world without pain, and wouldn’t that be much better, knowing that God makes things better?), could be addressed as well to the evolutionary mechanisms of nature, which at the level of complex second causality (admitting the Thomistic distinction between the First Cause and the second causes) “brought forth” pain as a necessary strategy for animal survival, endowed with adaptive value as well, since it allows learning and corrections (see on this subject Geach 1977; van Inwagen 2006; Murray 2008; Southgate 2008; Søvik 2011; Dougherty 2014; Sollereider 2019; Schneider 2020).

In Thomism, the physical root of natural evils is the hylomorphic and contingent structure of nature (things can lose their natural forms). In current physics and biology, such a root is related to entropy and the non-deterministic behavior of complex systems. The dynamics of adaptive complex systems, in their various levels of self-organization, are the source of the richness and potentiality of the phenomenon of life. This makes evolution and the appearance of emergent forms possible but allows decay and corruption as well. For some authors, this would be the “reason” why God creates a universe in which disorder (randomness and physical evils) is the price that must be paid for the universe to explore its potentialities in the global dynamism of living beings (Corey 2000; Polkinghorne 2005, pp. 69–79; van Inwagen 2006, pp. 113–34; Ward 2007, pp. 38–56; De Vito 2016; McLeish 2020). Physical evil arises when high-level emergent systems fail to control the underlying physical causalities in their interaction with environmental conditions.

Physical pain is only one of the many dimensions of animal life. It is fundamental and very complex, as can be seen when studying the neuropsychological dynamism of pain and analgesia in the animal (and obviously human) nervous system. It is one more ingredient in animal life, but always secondary, in that it is related to biological functions (development, expansion, reproduction, locomotion, protection). It exists, though hardly understandable in its negativity, precisely because animal life has the perfection of sensibility. Just as in physical life there are natural evils and not only goods, it is coherent, in this sense, to feel some physical evils (not all) as something rejectable. Pains here and now are never good with regard to individuals, although they may be good with respect to future benefits and for the benefit of others.

Arguments rejecting God’s existence because of animal suffering do not for that reason make sense of it. They often focus on the negativity of animal pain in such a way as to make it unintelligible, since even from an atheistic point of view why nature itself should be so harsh and “cruel” is incomprehensible. Then a nihilistic conclusion could be drawn (animal life would be meaningless), or at least the premise could lead to a resigned acceptance of how ‘badly done’ the evolutionary world we live in would be.

An implicit premise of these arguments is usually the idea that pain is the worst of evils or even evil as such. In these pages, we considered pain’s intelligibility in relation to evil as physical harm (which is not equivalent to just feeling it with pain). Moreover, pain and evil are related to life. Good and evil are not like two opposite poles, which would be a sort of Manichaeism since evil is subsidiary to good (it is its deprivation).

In the anti-theological arguments to which we have referred, there is usually a certain dose of anthropomorphism. Animal pain is real, contrary to what Cartesians thought, but it does not have the drama or the scope present in human experience. It does not have the drama produced by the intellectual awareness of one’s pain and that of others, which makes one wonder about its meaning and thereby suffer for not understanding it. Harrison (1989) minimizes the existence of pain in animals, to the point of practically denying it, a position that seems untenable to us.
However, we do not have the possibility of experiencing the quantity and qualitative modality in which animals feel physical pain according to their different species, so we have no choice but to project upon them our sensibility (Rolston 1992, pp. 271–73). Since they do not have the rational means to defend themselves against pain and physical ailments and thus prolong their lives, as we can do, they are usually susceptible to dying more quickly as soon as mortality factors arise (epidemics, famine, disease, accidents).

These considerations do not intend to undervalue animal pain. In today’s scientific culture, we have gradually discovered the extent of animal pain, whereas the rationalistic worldview led to ignoring or minimizing animal affectivity (and even that of other ethnic groups, as in the case of racism). In any event, animal life, for the most part, is not substantially painful. Let us now look at another dimension of evil present in animal life.

3.4. Cooperation and Aggression

Animal life is rarely solitary. It includes cognitive and affective relationships with other animals, especially of one’s species, and also with some others (in this article we use the word ‘animals’ in the sense of non-human animals). It is not easy to deal with this sociobiological topic since we tend to see animals’ psychology, again, with an anthropomorphic lens, because the adequate experiences we have are our own. We find it difficult to understand animal behavior from the first-person perspective. Though clearly, animals cognitively grasp others (instinctively, lacking reflection) as individuals with whom to co-exist (as one sees in animal groupings), in a cooperative way, or also as strange individuals representing a possible danger to their life or, conversely, in many species, as animals of prey that will benefit the predator’s sustenance (to hunt and eat it).

In animal life, aggression arises in emotional and, consequently, behavioral ways. Aquinas ascribed it to the irascible appetite, meant to face obstacles opposed to some goods (“arduous good”) or to defend one’s life from aggressors (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 81, a. 2), from which a rich variety of animal emotions (fear, ferocity, audacity, anger, jealousy) is born, together with the development of animal intelligence (practical, not abstract or speculative), which Thomas Aquinas assigned to the estimative faculty (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 76, a. 4). Difficulties help develop intelligence more than pleasures because they lead to the search for means.

Animal behavior develops around goods such as one’s safety, food, sexual partner, breeding, territory, den, and social group. These goods are not simply given by nature since animals normally have to find them. They have to choose, build, defend, or use their goods. This gives rise to a psychological dynamism constituted by innate tendencies (instincts), but at the same time is flexible, adaptable, and educable. They operate stimulated by perceptive moments and triggering of emotions, from which a certain action or strategy of actions is generated.

These actions, always situated in an ecological context, involve interactions with other individuals. Stable affective ties, positive or negative, regulate these interactions. Actions are aimed at some desired and often difficult goal, which requires solving problems, overcoming difficulties, and choosing among several possibilities. Animals participate in this process with cooperation, as in parental relationships, in herds, etc., but they can also be competitors, for instance in order to control a territory or in mating. In many cases, animals take benefit from others in a variety of ways (mutualism, parasitism, commensalism, etc.), such as predation (Rolston 1992, pp. 253–55).

Sometimes the object of these strategies includes damaging other animals (killing them or taking something from them). If the latter defend themselves (in flight or attack), a fight ensues in which aggressiveness is deployed. This is developed differently in each species according to the sort of environment and adversaries present (Palacio 2003; Chapi Mori 2012).

Natural evil appears in the animal not only as pain, then, but as that which can harm it, especially when the harm comes from a cognitive aggressor, or when one animal aggressively harms another. The relations between animals are, thus, positive and negative,
obviously without reflection or thought. Animal behavior is cognitive and affective, lacking
the typical human responsibility, derived from free deliberation and intellectual under-
standing. In their instinctive behavior, animals have no control over their natural ends.
Intentional animal actions are not deliberate. To kill or harm an animal for biological needs
or as an instinctive reaction to aggression pertains to the logic of animal behavior.

3.5. Animal Morality?

Are animal aggressions and damages moral evils? Are animals guilty if they cause
harm to another, for instance, killing, injuring, or “stealing”? Even with common sense,
we understand that this is not the case since non-human animals are not free and are not
responsible for their actions. This same conduct performed by humans and directed to
harm others would be immoral, for reasons that focus on the singular value of persons, as
we explain below.

The act whereby an animal kills is not morally evil or reprehensible. Here the aggressor
is not guilty. And nature is not “wrong” because it includes animal aggressions since
individual animals are not an absolute end in themselves. Aggression and the fact that
some animals feed on others is part of the harmony of the animal world, though “hard”
from the perspective of human sensibility, but adequate in the context of an imperfect living
world, whose core is the species, not the individuals. That is why the fact that humans feed
on animals or, in general, treat them with criteria of utility (not exclusively), is not morally
reprehensible, provided they do so with wisdom and prudence and not to satisfy whims or
perverted desires.

We presuppose the essential distinction and not only of degree between the human
person and non-human animals, as understood by Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy,
based especially on the human endowment of universal rationality and freedom (Mallea
1999; Sellés 2007). Empiricist philosophy, dominant in philosophical studies of animals,
does not admit such a distinction, and therefore cannot admit the distinction between
natural good and moral or personal good. Thomistic philosophy instead is placed here
between the reductionist account of animals as things, typical of modern rationalism, and,
at the opposite extreme, the position of equaling them to humans, involving the linguistic
abuse of applying words such as “rights” and “persons” to non-human animals (Frias
Urrea 2014).

Let us now turn to the concept of morality, since this point has to do with what we
call good and evil and with what God wills, causes, permits, rejects, etc. Morality is the
dimension according to which some acts are just or unjust, good or bad (precisely in a
moral sense) because the agents freely and consciously deprive someone of a good that
corresponds to the dignity of the person (life, freedom, things) (see below, in n. 4, an
expansion of this point). Human reason is able to acknowledge personal values and goods
and formulate the moral obligation to respect them in normative terms (moral law). If
we admit this notion of moral evil, then only man can perform morally evil acts. Among
animals, therefore, there is no moral dimension, which does not mean that we can treat
them arbitrarily.

If instead, we were to understand morality as positive (or negative) affective behavior,
based on perceptions (sympathy, helping others, love, non-violence), then animals would
have morality, as some argue (Rowlands 2012; Moritz 2014), but to be consistent we would
have to admit that they can also commit “immoral” acts (e.g., when they kill out of pure
rage, or out of hunger). It would actually be a pseudo-morality since it does not arise from
freedom, but simply from emotionality.

Should animals have morals (an emotional one, and “reasons” according to the emo-
tions), then criminal behavior would have “moral relevance” in the sense of being a
behavior due, for instance, to a strong emotionality. One would try to prevent such kind
of conduct as one does with ferocious animals. In short, one should behave regarding
others as one does with animals, without giving relevance to the singular value of persons.
Neither the great dictators and murderers’ behavior in human history, nor that of their
adversaries, would have had any rational assessment. They would have been just like any other conflict between animals, in which eventually the strongest win.

These considerations are especially important today since ethology has demonstrated the extraordinary richness of animal life. This fact arouses in us a certain perplexity because in some way one sees his or her virtues and vices reflected in animals, as if by a certain perceptive illusion. We lack an adequate vocabulary to designate acts whereby, for instance, a dog saves its owner from danger, a mother bear takes care of her newborn, a worker bee sacrifices herself for the common good of the hive, a female praying mantis eats the male that has fertilized her, and males and females sometimes kill their offspring or those of competitors.

An anthropomorphic vision, somewhat amusingly, makes it seem to us that there would be good and bad animals, faithful and industrious, others that steal, cheat, or murder, and others having strange sexual behaviors. It is a mistake, however, to assign moral categories to this variety of behaviors. Rather, they show intelligibility in the context of purposes of the affective and cognitive animal life within complex social relations, even if in this field there is still much to investigate.

3.6. What Is the Divine Plan?

Natural evils in animals are intelligible insofar as they are related to the dynamics of their cognitive, affective, and social condition, and their tendencies (survival, reproduction, pleasure, aggression). Animal individual life is a function of species and groups (individual life is short and has an end) and ultimately is subordinated to the totality of the world, of its life and evolution. Yet, the extraordinary living world is contingent (= not necessary) and is relatively disorganized. It does not have the unity of an organism. It is rather an adaptive complex evolving system (Sanguineti 2015). Even so, the totality of life on earth could disappear due to ecological causes, as well as the earth itself due to cosmological causes.

What is the sense of sentient life in the universe in relation to the Creator’s design? This question implies posing a theology of animal life and ultimately of creation (Linzey and Yamamoto 1998; Clough 2012; Linzey and Linzey 2019). Some authors minimize the problem of physical evils in animal life or make some sense of it (Rolston 1992). Others think that God cannot but create an imperfect universe and respects its laws, yet leading it to a happy ending (McLaughlin 2019). Process theology attenuates the divine power of being able to control physical evils (McDaniel 1998). Others think that the evils of the physical world are a consequence of some moral evil, perhaps angelic (Plantinga 1974, pp. 57–62), or a penalty for original sin applied retroactively to the physical world (Dembski 2009) so that the entire creation would be in a fallen state (Lloyd 1998). These hypotheses are not very convincing, but much less tenable is the position of Moritz (2014), who assigns moral culpability even to animals so as to explain their suffering prior to human sin. We will return to these points when we examine Thomas Aquinas’ position on animals.

In our view, there is little point to wonder if perhaps a world in which animals did not suffer and did not harm each other would not be better, in order to ask why God did not create it that way in the beginning. We cannot know whether this possibility really would be better, although, in the Christian view, it is a transitory situation that will be concluded with the final glorification of the entire creation (Sollereder 2019). The physical universe is in a process of being made and, in part, unmade, but this situation is not final. However, we do know that the order of the universe created by God, with all the imperfections it presents in the animal world, is harsh but fascinating, and it makes sense, even if we do not fully understand it, especially because of its global and particular contingency. On the other hand, the atheistic alternative does not give it more meaning, but, on the contrary, obscures it even more.

4. Human Moral Evil and the Problem of Meaning

Regarding moral evil as specific to man, its basis in natural evils cannot be ignored. We are animals and we have an animal evolutionary heritage. It is not surprising, then, to
discover in human life the natural evils derived from decomposition, sensitivity, aggressiveness, and instincts, which in humans are rather inclinations. The classics, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, taught us to deal with these evils with our reason (wisdom, prudence, and other virtues). Otherwise, human life becomes brutal and savage, which in animals is natural, but not in human persons.

Men and women feel disgust in treating each other as if they were just animals because humans have the dignity of reason (classical vision), and because they are persons (modern vision). Though we have discovered the richness of animal life, the superiority of humans is awesome (sciences, arts, technology, culture). Putting man together with animals on an equal footing obscures the dignity of persons and degrades them to an unbearable condition.

The relationship of human inclinations to what is good and evil is extended almost to infinity thanks to our rational condition (our observations in this section n. 4 respond to widely well-known topics belonging to Thomistic anthropology and ethics; see, for instance, Wojtyla 1979; Norris Clarke 1993; Polo 2016; Lombo and Russo 2014). The human intellect grasps the good and the bad in a completely universal way (as we are doing in this paper), in spite of possible errors. That is why one asks not only what is good and bad for oneself here and now but for others as well and even for animals and plants, in universal terms, i.e., for everyone and in every time and place. And that is why man asks why God allows natural evil not only in our life but also in animals. We are interested in knowing what sense it makes for them to suffer, not only in a practical way, so as not to mistreat them, but also in a speculative way. The animal suffers but does not question its suffering. We do question it, personally, and also universally.

To ask oneself what is good and bad in things, people, actions, and not only whether one likes them or not, is equivalent to inquiring what they are and what value they have, in spite of not always having the right answers. This metaphysical approach has two consequences. First, it creates a distance between us and things, and even our actions, since we can ask ourselves whether they are objectively good or bad. This is the root of freedom, which enables one to love or not to love things upon considering their value. Secondly, the universal understanding of what is valuable in our relations with other creatures allows man to universally love things, persons, tasks, and activities if one perceives them to be good and therefore lovable, and to reject them if one sees them as bad.

There are no restrictions to specific things in this ontological relationship. Man can love anything in the universe in order to contemplate it, for its practical uses, or to accompany others in friendship. Just as intelligence is open to the being and the truth of everything, so the will (=capacity of love) is open to their goodness, which coincides transcendentally with their ontological content (Aertsen 1996).

However, how does one know what is good and what is evil? First, man knows natural goods according to what was considered in the previous sections of this paper. Human intelligence presents things as lovable: one’s own life, the use and enjoyment of things, marriage, family, sciences, art, work, friendship, social relations, cultural goods, and religious goods. Since man knows these goods intellectually, and not only emotionally and sensibly (though this is not excluded), he/she is free to love them, to seek them or reject them, and maximally to look for harmony among the array of so many lovable goods.

Second, humans know what is morally good through the intellectual apprehension of their free actions regarding personal goods. Moral evil (the unjust or immoral action) arises wherever humans freely and consciously harm others in those goods (life, freedom, things, activities, relations), e. g., committing a murder or a theft. The core of this point is the intrinsic value of persons as ends in themselves (not absolute, because they are created) and not in order to other (created) things (Aquinas 1961, Summa contra Gentiles, abbreviated CG, III, cc. 111–13; Aquinas 1929, In II Sententiarum, dist. 44, a. 3; Maritain 1942; Norris Clarke 1993).

Personal dignity is intrinsically linked to freedom, even more than intelligence. Freedom is the self-possession of one’s actions (plans, projects, life) and, in this sense, it must
be respected as a value in itself. Here precisely lies the dignity (=value) of persons. Even if this point is not easy to explain, everybody understands at least with common sense (moral conscience) that killing a person is not the same as killing a non-human animal (a fly, a fish). The personal human condition (freedom, capacity for self-awareness, spirituality) makes each person worthy or worthwhile in him(her)self, not for his/her qualities or only insofar as he/she is useful to the human species or a group or nation.

Human persons are thus essentially moral beings. Persons are faced before their actions within the dimension of moral inner obligations related to whatever is lovable (things, persons, the world, God). Immoral actions are called sins from the theological perspective in that they imply a disorder contrary to what God wisely and lovingly wants for men and women (which is manifested in the moral inner law and the personal moral conscience).

In this paper, we take this ethical and theological background as a necessary assumption for our study. Hence, we presuppose that God, being the Creator of the universe and of persons, positively wants human moral behavior to be right, rejecting moral evil. God permits moral misdeeds because he does not want to destroy free will (Plantinga 1974). He created free persons ordered to flourishing, which in Aquinas’ theology consists in the intellectual and loving union with God as the highest form of spiritual life (Aquinas 1998, ST, I-II, q. 3, a. 8).

The value of the human person “in herself”, and not as a part of nature or of the species homo sapiens is coherent with the immortality of the human soul, i.e., with the fact that personal life does not end with death. If it were to end, the meaning of death would not be different from the meaning it has for animals (the good of the species or the good of nature as a whole). Clearly, materialism cannot endorse this thesis, which is intrinsically linked to the spiritual character of the person and, ultimately, to her personal order to God.

It is irrelevant here if these theses are claimed only by the biblical faith, or even by a specific philosophical perspective (present in Socrates, Plato, Thomas Aquinas). We mention them since they are pertinent to the problem of evil. In the atheistic and materialistic view (two often associated positions), the problem of evil becomes much more arduous than in the theistic and spiritual framework.

Breaking down the steps involved in the materialistic position:

(a) The materialistic account assimilates human life to the animal level. Humans are just passing and accidental. Though unlike animals, persons are aware of this condition, which increases suffering and leads to resigned sadness, ultimately to indifference in the face of life (like Epicurean apathèia) and, in the worst case, to nihilism.

(b) The homologation of man to animals leads obscures the notion of freedom. Moral evil, then, loses meaning. There would be no real injustice, just as it makes no sense to say that there are unjust animals. All the injustices perpetrated by men throughout history, together with the present ones, would lose significance. The death of people victims of humiliation and crimes would have no meaning and, thus, there would be no motivation to live honestly in this life.

(c) If, on the contrary, freedom and moral evil (not reduced to animal emotionality) are acknowledged, the problem of evil becomes even more problematic in the atheistic position, because then the countless injustices throughout history become irreparable in a definitive way. This itself is, in turn, demotivating, and would incline to thesis b.

(d) If the problem of evil in the world leads some people to embrace atheism, this does not solve the problem, but rather exacerbates it, as stated in a, b, and c. Another possible answer today would be transhumanism, which points to an immortal future, overcoming aging, and perhaps suppressing moral evils. Utopian as this may seem, it would not solve the problem either, because only the privileged of the future, who would overcome the miserable life of homo sapiens, would be happy. We return to this point at the end of our study.

This does not mean that believing in the existence of God and happy future immortality would easily solve the problem of evil. We are faced with a mysterious and harsh reality, in many ways heartbreaking. We only note that, at least, the hypothesis of the existence of
God and of the post-mortem life (the non-believer can see it at least as a hypothesis, which for the believer is a conviction) offers hope and a more positive vision in the face of evil than the opposite thesis.

Non-believers have sometimes argued that belief in God is an invention to provide an illusory response to the problem of evil and death. The alternative, however, does not offer a better solution, but simply calls for resignation, and this is because death, evil, and injustice are always shocking and intolerable, and do not succeed in completely uprooting our intimate aspiration for life, goodness, and justice.

5. Human Evils Are Excessive

The human capacity to freely love the good of others and to be concerned for the welfare of society and of the world, in a continuous struggle against evil or against what is considered evil, is enormous. This capacity arises from the essential relationship of our will to what is good in an absolutely universal sense (good as understood and loved), not in abstract or ideal terms, but regarding everything (real, possible, virtual).

However, it follows, by contrast, that man’s capacity to will and to do evil is also painfully immense (Calder 2020). We do not mean to exaggerate or to claim that man can become diabolical (in some cases it is possible). However, we do note that in the human being there is a lack of inner harmony. An excessively strong tendency to certain goods taken as absolute priorities leads man not to care about the harm he may cause to others, to the earth, and even to him(her)self (Burris 2022).

It could be claimed that this instability is an inheritance of animal instincts, from which aggression among humans arises (Renfrew 1997). This is true, but it is amplified by desires and ambitions that go far beyond the animal natural goods. It is amplified by desires to dominate, to possess, and to feel pleasure, which are considered in the Christian tradition as the threefold concupiscence (power, money, pleasure). Criminal acts arise from this moral root, which is like a deviation of the human tendency towards the good. There are even worse cases, in which a certain ideology can lead to the purpose of destroying almost all of humanity.

Aggressive antagonism among animals never has these traits and, in fact, ultimately sustains the equilibrium of ecosystems. Man, on the other hand, uses his rationality to do evil and attains malignity as such (to do evil gratuitously, out of hatred, cruelty, for having certain ideas, or for pure amusement). Aristotle pointed out that lawless and virtue-deprived men are much more cruel, lewd, savage, and harmful than any other animal because they use “virtues” such as cunning, fortitude, shrewdness, and the construction of weapons for evil purposes (Aristotle 1968b, Politics, I, 1253 a 30–38).

Moral human evil, when unleashed on a large scale, has no limits unless it is eventually suffocated by material forces (but people can rectify their behavior). The multiplication of wars, oppressions, tyrannies, humiliation, massacres, slavery, tortures, sadism, and genocides in human history is overwhelming, and even more so when it is ideologically self-justified. It is so even in recent times and now, despite technical and cultural progress all over the world.

The systematic capacity to do evil derives from man’s superiority, especially thanks to his technological mastery over material things and his dominion over time, which allows him, when he has the power to do so, to persevere in evil and cause injustice sine die (forever), if something does not stop him by force (Aquinas 1998, ST, I-II, q. 30, a. 4, on the infinity of concupiscence). If they wanted to, humans with their technical power could destroy the planet and the whole of humanity. So great an extent of evil power is inconceivable among animals.

The consideration of this harsh reality is horrific when one thinks of the colossal number of innocent victims of these evils throughout history. It horrifies us because we have an appreciation for the human person deeply rooted in our nature. In the literature on the topic of God and evil, allusion is sometimes made to these “especially horrendous” evils, such that it is difficult to think that life is worth living for their victims (McCord
Adams 1999). These evils raise the problem of God and evil in a much more incisive way. Why does God allow so many innocents to suffer at the hands of very evil people?

It is true that those responsible for the most horrendous evils are often certain persons, sometimes a powerful minority. Moral evil (in its agents and, consequently, in its victims) usually manifests itself most strongly when people have the power and freedom to perpetrate it. However, at the same time, not infrequently these evils occur because a large number of people permit them or cause them by their passivity, complicity, false ideas, fear, or multiplied injustices.

Humanly speaking, it seems impossible to remedy these evils, even if we struggle against them with technology, laws, medicine, politics, economics, and education. However, men do not agree on what is good and what is bad and on where the priorities lie (freedom? economic security? welfare?), and the same can be said of the means to avoid evils, especially moral evils. This complicates things, and even more so when the struggle against evil falls into the hands of perverse ideologies causing distress with a pretended purpose of liberation and purification.

Remedies can be worse than diseases. Men are often mistaken in these matters, both in diagnosis and in therapies. And this is itself already a new manifestation of evil: the fact of not knowing what is wrong and how to remedy it, with the consequent human divisions. Neither relativism nor dogmatism can overcome this problem. Neither immobility nor forceful action to eradicate the alleged evils is successful.

Nevertheless, there is an innate love of good in every man, at least in the form of an absolutely indestructible desire. We all experience a spontaneous repugnance in the face of natural and moral evils, especially regarding the latter. Good and evil, therefore, are mixed in the human heart, with the addition of ignorance and passion. Yet, we do not intend to give a pessimistic picture of the situation of humankind. The human being is wonderful and human achievements are amazing. However, moral evil exists, and nothing seems to stop it, even if we do our best to mitigate or eliminate it.

6. Why So Much Evil in Human Life? Natural Explanations

In view of what has been presented in the previous section, the question about the origin of so much evil arises. Is it that man is so badly made? Why? This question is prior to asking about God’s permission of evil. Regarding physical evils, the answer is simpler. These evils have natural causes that we know very well. They have to do with the limitations of natural things. Then, why does God create a physical framework containing necessary natural evils? This question has been partly answered in Section 3, at least with respect to animal life (not human life). With respect to moral evils (Sections 4 and 5), the answer is more difficult.

We reiterate and specify the question: why is there in all men an incurable propensity to evil? If it is incurable, it is rooted in our nature. This fact does not imply a pessimistic anthropology. Humans tend to the good and are not totally corrupted, and they almost always react against evil, at least to lament it, and they try to prevent it. However, this tendency is mitigated and if it is not reinforced with virtues, it ends up being tragically twisted.

The question concerns human nature. Why is there in all men an incurable propensity to evil? If it is incurable, it is rooted in our nature. This fact does not imply a pessimistic anthropology. Humans tend to the good and are not totally corrupted, and they almost always react against evil, at least to lament it, and they try to prevent it. However, this tendency is mitigated and if it is not reinforced with virtues, it ends up being tragically twisted.

Vices, such as addictions, are habits that enslave the will towards evil in some field, thus contaminating the intelligence, sensibility, tendencies, and conduct, and it is worse when these habits are socially solidified through laws, norms, and social customs, and are ideologically justified in culture. Evils are thus passively admitted and can last for centuries, and even the sensitivity in the face of them can be lost (think, for instance, of...
the evils of slavery, drug trafficking, and mafias), so much so that if good people want to uproot them, they often provoke brutal reactions.

Two basic answers can be mentioned in the study of this problem. One answer is theological and very well-known. We refer to the Christian belief in original sin. Leaving aside the answer in other religions, the second type of answer tries to explain rationally the origin of human moral evil.

The explanations of the second group are very numerous depending on the authors. Some are philosophical and more recently they present themselves as scientific. Classical philosophical explanations usually point to human moral frailty due to our corporeal nature. The push of sensible forces would impede the full mastery of reason. In some way, we find these explanations in Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotle (Aquinas 1964, In I Ethic., lect. 4 and 5). Most men place happiness in sensible well-being (Aquinas 1961, CG, III, c. 5). In Modern philosophy, Max Scheler supported the thesis of the weakness of the spirit in the face of strong vital impulses (Scheler 2009). These positions can explain why humans are morally mediocre and why very virtuous people are few, but they fail to give a reason for human evil as posed in this article.

More acute is the modern thesis that incorporates evil in natural and human processes as a factor of progress (except in pessimistic or nihilistic positions). This theory is problematic in that pretends to give a “positive” intelligibility to evil. In a theological framework this would “solve” even the problem of God and evil, but at the cost of introducing evil into the Divinity itself (Pope Benedict XVI, in an audience on December 2, 2008, noted that this is basically a return to the ancient Manichean dualism of good and evil: Benedict XVI 2008). In Hegel, as we have seen, evil has to do with the finitude of ‘positions’ that deny themselves, in an incessant dialectical process in which the Infinite (God, the Absolute) is always working (Polo 2006).

In non-theological frameworks, according to some modern philosophers (Hobbes, Marx), moral evils have their origin in a structural antagonism among human beings assumed as an original fact. The origin of evil is psychological (each person, or each group, seeks its interests), giving rise to social conflict, treated very differently in liberal (competition, cooperation) or socialist (in Marx, class struggle) approaches. In liberal theories, oppositions are seen as a factor of progress in a context of freedom (Kant, A. Smith), while in social-communist movements the aim is to overcome them by means of state super-dominance, which historically generated totalitarian regimes based on violence. Ultimately, an (unrealizable) utopia is proposed, which may end in a tragic dystopia.

It is difficult to believe that the various proposed social, economic, and political systems will really overcome conflict, which to a large extent is the origin of moral evil. Worse still is the idea that conflicts, wars, and violent revolutions would be the inevitable means to achieve social or national goods (peace, order, freedom, welfare) or other ends.

Most frequent in the current naturalistic horizon is to attempt a biological explanation of human evils. Evolutionary strategies imply that the evils (risks, defects, dangers) coming from the organic and environmental limits of the living things are faced with adaptive and selective mechanisms, within a framework wherein individuals, though tending to survival, are just moments of passage in the context of evolution and the equilibrium of terrestrial biological systems. Living beings are vulnerable, but precisely vulnerability, imbalances, and obstacles give biological systems a dynamism that allows organisms to defend themselves, learn, and adapt. Within this framework, evolutionary mechanisms make their work.

In nn. 2–3 we pointed out that the conjunction of natural goods and evils was inherent to the phenomenon of life. The world of life is contingent, i.e., not univocally necessary, as we said above (flourishing, variations, diseases, aggressions, defense, cooperation, death, reproduction, new species, extinctions). This was clear in the classic authors, and modern biology adds nothing new in this sense. However, thanks precisely to the limits and risks, evolution allows life on earth to renew itself, though it is always threatened by environmental catastrophes.
Human moral evils have, on the other hand, a biological basis (psychosomatic, neural), as do moral goods and virtues (Moll et al. 2008). Such a foundation does not fully explain them, especially regarding spiritual goods and evils. Nevertheless, it does provide a platform that makes them possible and influences their development.

The underlying neuropsychological basis of animal life offers an explanation according to the material cause (in the Aristotelian sense) of their instinctive behaviors, their aggressiveness, their emotions, their parental and social relationships, and the “altruism” in some species. As pointed out in n. 4, these bases, transferred to *homo sapiens*, can explain in part why evolved human beings find it difficult to control their appetites (anger, sensuality, brutality, savagery), control that they achieve little by little in history thanks to the processes of civilization (traditions, family, laws, ethics, institutions, etc.).

Some moral defects more related to the neurophysiological basis of our character, such as addictions, sensual debauchery, strong aggressiveness, laziness, excessive emotionality, and especially cognitive and affective pathologies, can be explained by appealing to neural factors, for instance when higher cortical area related to executive functions fail to control brain circuits involving emotions and moods (Glannon 2011; Tovar and Ostrosky 2013).

Nonetheless, the systematic malignity of what we called “horrendous” moral evils above, due to perverse ideologies, ambitions of power, and deep and persevering hatreds, are to be traced back to the human spiritual part, i.e., to the will, which in these cases is perverted. This “high level” lacks an adequate biological explanation, although it does shape the brain in the same way as virtues do in a positive way.

Thus, the mystery of those constant human imbalances persists. On the whole, they seem insurmountable and give a special instability to society, to families, and millions of persons. These tremendous situations of distress can sometimes be caused by personal mental disorders (as in some serial criminals), but on many other occasions, they have their origin just in the will, i.e., in a malign use of freedom. In any event, in one way or another, they are present in all human beings, at least as a weakness in the face of love and justice, with temptations and evil inclinations. Only a utopian vision could lead to believe that in the future these evils should eventually disappear. Transhumanist futurism thinks the opposite, on which we make a brief comment in n. 9.

7. Before and After the Original Sin

What does God do to remedy this sad condition? Excluding faith in divine Revelation, as it appears in the Holy Scriptures and is assumed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is difficult to give a satisfactory philosophical answer (theodicy) to this problem, even if we appeal (in general) to divine Providence, which cannot be known by human reason alone (Franck 2009; Knasas 2013).

Christian faith in the original sin in the persons of Adam and Eve affords a reason for the entrance of evil into the human world. This is consistent with the thesis that God created man and woman in an optimal situation, from which they declined by an initial free break with the Creator. van Inwagen (2006, pp. 84–94) appeals to original sin as the most plausible explanation for the enormous amount of moral evil in the world.

7.1. Prelapsarian Human Enhancement

Let us take a closer look at some of Thomas Aquinas’ theological observations on this subject, which we find extremely interesting. We read in the *Summa contra Gentiles*:

“The human race universally suffers various hardships, both corporal and spiritual. Among the bodily, the greatest is death, to which all the others are ordered, i.e., hunger, thirst, and things of this kind. Among the spiritual, the most important is the weakness of reason, which results in man arriving at knowledge of truth with difficulty, and falling easily into error, so he cannot entirely overcome bestial desires, but is often obscured by them”.

(Aquinas 1961, CG, IV, c. 52; Thomas’ translations are ours)
This situation, according to the Thomistic view, could be explained by the corruptibility of material things and by the dependence of human reason on the powers of sensibility. Yet, noting the rough opposition of these weaknesses to the human spiritual orientation to truth and goodness and following the Christian tradition, Aquinas claims that in the prelapsarian condition (=before the fall) God stably granted man not only the sanctifying grace, but also some spiritual gifts (intellectual, volitional, but non-physical) that allowed him to dominate the natural physical corruptibility and animal sensibility and thus to achieve a special rational and virtuous dominion over himself and over creation (Aquinas 1961, CG, IV, cc. 51–52).

These gifts (which later tradition called preternatural, not “supernatural”) implied a habitual enhancement of human nature, not required by the physical basis and its laws. They were placed in the framework of what man could achieve with his virtues and rationality (science, prudence, wisdom), plus a special protection of divine Providence. Human work and arts (technique) are not excluded here.

It does not matter here whether the prelapsarian state lasted a short or long time. Clearly, there was not enough time for its potentialities to be made explicit. We can take it counterfactually, as Thomas does in part, to indicate how terrestrial human life would have been in the absence of original sin.

Physical nature before sin, according to Thomas Aquinas, was not different from the present one. It had the same laws and structures before and after the original sin. This thesis is supported with great emphasis by Sollereder 2019: the physical world is not in a fallen state. Had he not sinned, man counting on grace and the superadded gifts would have been smart and prudent enough to avoid the harms that could befall him in his dealings with corruptible things (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, qq. 94-102). He would have been mortal physically, but likewise capable of avoiding his bodily corruption (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 97, a. 1). Thomas rejects conceiving the gift of immortality as a special force inherent in the body. Humans could prevent illness in that state (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 97, a. 2), even if they would need to nourish themselves to prevent death (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 97, a. 3). Humans could avoid pains by acting with their reason, but not because their body would have had a constitution different from what we know after the fall (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 97, a. 2, ad 4). The senile decay would not occur in that state (Thomas Aquinas 1929, In II Sententiarum, dist. 20, q. 2, a. 1).

Thomas disqualifies, then, the idea that, before the original fall, God would have created a different, “more perfect” physical universe, excluding death or decompositions in the world of life. He rejects the claim that in the absence of the original sin animals would not have been fierce or kill, calling this opinion “totally irrational” (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 96, a. 1, ad 2), while maintaining instead that “by man’s sin the nature of animals has not been modified” (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 96, a. 1, ad 2; see Aquinas 1950, In de Divinis Nominibus, IV, lect. 20). However, in the prelapsarian state men would have been able to dominate wild and dangerous animals (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 96, a. 1), probably, we venture to say, in a wiser way compared with what we have achieved throughout history.

Since the original fall did not imply any biological change in the physical world and in human nature (the added gifts were not biological), it can be concluded that there is no incompatibility between the thesis of original sin (and the previous state) and modern evolutionary biology, just as there was none with the ancient physics that assigned natural causes to death and physical defects. This point is nicely developed by (Macdonald 2021, 2023).

Admittedly, it is not easy to imagine counterfactual situations to the original fall (thinking about what would have happened if Adam and Eve had not sinned). However, reflection on this topic has helped to address questions about what is good and bad in man. Accordingly, the value of work as a natural good can be claimed, so that only its penalties can be considered as a consequence of original sin (Escrivá de Balaguer 2019, n. 57). In the state of original innocence, man would have to learn and progress in science and mastery of things, but without suffering and without evil inclinations (Roszak 2023).
In a similar way, the positive value of social authority can be better understood, so that the desire to dominate in the negative sense (to use people at the service of the dominant) arose only after the original sin (In II Sententiarum, dist. 44, a. 3; Devia 2022). Slavery, which is contrary to human dignity because it is opposed to personal freedom, arose only after the original sin as a perversion of the power of dominion over other people (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 96, a. 4). Slavery contradicts personal dignity, because “a man by his nature does not order himself to another as to his end” (Aquinas 1929, In II Sententiarum, dist. 44, a. 3, a. 1).

In summary, man was primitively called and enabled to seek God and to dominate created things gently and wisely. Significantly, the fourth Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass in the Catholic Church says it clearly: “you entrusted him with the care of the universe (curam universi) so that, serving you alone, his Creator, he might have dominion over all creatures”. Surely there would have been personal sins in that state, because man was not impeccable, but probably, in our opinion, those sins would not have the tremendous social repercussions humankind is now experiencing.

7.2. An Inner Conflict

Arguing the beauty of the human body created by God (internal and external senses, a certain specific brain structure) in proportion to the spiritual soul (Aquinas 1965a, Q. De Anima, q. un., a. 8), Thomas deals with the contrasting difficulty of physical decay (death, weariness, sickness, bad sensitive inclinations), opposed to the good execution of intellectual operations. Facing the objection that God could have created a human body free from these inconveniences, he rejects it on the grounds that we must consider just what God made in nature:

“Nor can it be obviated [referring to the difficulty of the existence of physical evils] by the fact that God could have done otherwise: because in the institution of nature, the question is not what God could have done, but what the nature of things permits to be done”.

(Aquinas 1965a, Q. De Anima, q. un., a. 8)

Thomas Aquinas has confidence in nature, created by God:

“In things that are above nature, we must believe in the authority [of divine faith]. But when there is no such authority, we have to follow the condition of nature”.

(Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 101, a. 1)

At the same time, as we saw above, the Creator initially endowed man with special gifts so that his life on earth would be congruent with the requirements of his spiritual soul (Aquinas 1965a, Q. De Anima, q. un., a. 8). Then, if somebody asks why God could not have made a better world for man, the answer is that indeed the Creator made it so at the beginning. Man ruined it through his primitive moral grave disorder.

The essential point here is the relationship between the human soul and the body. Physical human evils in a certain sense are both natural and unnatural (Aquinas 1965b, De Malo, q. 5, a. 5). They are natural because they arise from the corruptible structure of the physical world (death, disease, catastrophes, privations), but they are unnatural because, in the primitive condition, man could have easily mastered them with his intelligence, work, technical and intellectual virtues, in addition to the moral virtues (Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 72, a. 1, ad 6; Rosenberg 2006). Now we partly dominate those evils with these same resources (agriculture, livestock, medicine, technology), but imperfectly and often abusively because of moral vices (indolence, injustices, lack of solidarity, crimes).

Accordingly, the spiritual and immortal human soul in the fallen state does not find in the material body a proportionate co-principle, in Thomas’ view. That is why the Creator at the beginning had endowed human nature with the aforementioned gifts, in order to create a peaceful harmony between the corporeal condition (and its situation in the world) and the spiritual level (elevated to divine grace).

After the original sin, the human soul lost the spiritual strength through which was able to dominate corporeal nature easily and wisely. According to Franck (2019), it is wrong
to understand original sin as a simple return of man to the state of ‘pure’ nature, since the post-fall state involves many moral habitual evils. Original sin really injured human nature.

Even so, death and physical and moral difficulties are natural from the biological viewpoint. However, at the same time, they involve a strong contradiction with our spiritual nature (Aquinas 1965a, Q. De Anima, q. un, a. 8; Aquinas 1998, ST, I, q. 97, a. 1; II-II, q. 164, a. 1; Aquinas 1961, CG, IV, cc. 80–81). The human person is as if torn by its contrasting tendencies because it has a suffering and mortal body, strongly contrary to the spiritual desires for happiness and perpetual life. The mortal and sensitive body experiences feelings that do not always respond to what one intimately aspires to (desires for justice and peace), and the spiritual will is itself also weak in its inclination to the good.

“As the harmony of original justice is dissolved, the various powers of the soul tend toward diverse things”.

(Aquinas 1998, ST, I-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad 2)

These disintegrating tendencies are contra naturam, because they are opposed to the rectitude of reason (Aquinas 1998, ST, I-II, q. 82, a. 3, ad 1). The inner split in human nature is not placed, as in Hegel, in the very core of reality, but only in the vitiated part of the human spirit. This is the cause of all the hardships that the human race continually suffers, which increase as the crimes and human violence multiply.

Thomas Aquinas sees this as a penalty condition (Aquinas 1998, ST, II-II, q.164, a. 1, ad 1) and, what is more, observing the tremendous and irrational human evils, and placing himself even in a purely rational perspective, he takes them as probable signs of a primitive infection of human nature (Aquinas 1961, CG, IV, c. 52).

These anthropological explanations of the prelapsarian and postlapsarian condition of humans in Aquinas may seem dualistic, in the negative sense of the word. However, this is not the case if we consider the initial gifts as a normal part of the divine creative plan, a unitary plan that intrinsically associated human nature with its elevation to the order of grace (Sanz 2020). Not surprisingly, Aquinas asserts:

“The soul is united to the body naturally, because by its essence it is the form of the body. Therefore, to be without a body is contrary to the nature of the soul”.

(Aquinas 1961, CG, IV, c. 79)

This thesis, not at all Platonic, allows Thomas to argue the necessity of the resurrection of the dead (though it is not a physical necessity).

If there is here a possible temptation to dualism in the negative sense, it appears in the context of the fallen state, in the experience of the inner conflict between the spirit and the earthly condition. However, this condition will not last forever. In the eschatological future the physical cosmic framework, including all forms of life, according to the Christian faith will be transformed to be in harmony with the glory of the resurrected, i.e., with their glorious bodies (O’Callaghan and Sanguineti 2016).

### 8. The Struggle against Evil and Divine Providence

Human history can be understood in a certain way as the history of men and women who, with religion, politics, education, science, institutions, law, technology, and medicine, struggle tirelessly against all kinds of evils and limitations. It is a history full of achievements and at the same time of many sufferings and injustices. It is neither a completely bad nor a completely good history, but together with the evils many goods arise in infinite ways, and, in turn, the goods that are achieved bring with them new difficulties and abuses.

How does the Creator intervene in this scenario? It is not easy to give an intuitive answer to this question. Without yet mentioning the divine redemptive plan according to the Judeo-Christian tradition (Old Covenant, Prophets, Jesus Christ, the Church), true believers can claim that God does not leave man to his own devices, because with his Providence the Creator cooperates with humans in their struggle to survive and attain a good life, not occasionally, but with a plan for each person and for all humanity, which we
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can reasonably conjecture or know with the help of faith. According to this plan, God does not eliminate the human historical, personal, and collective dimension, but counts on it.

First, as Creator, God has instilled in the human soul the desire for good and the moral capacity to distinguish it from evil (moral conscience, knowledge of basic ethical norms). In light of the original fall, it can be inferred that what God most detests and does not merely permit is disordered human action, the radical origin of all human evils. Consequently, what he most desires for the world is the human moral good performed by people in their life when they act righteously and freely (without freedom there is no merit, no responsibility). All other goods, traditionally called temporal (health, wealth, security, power, fame, well-being), even though they ensure a certain (unstable) happiness in life, are perverted when persons or social groups (nations, empires) focus their efforts on them, to the point of perpetrating moral evils (injustices, lust for power, despotism, oppression, wars, killings, hatred).

The happiness temporal goods give, even when they are just, is unstable and lasts for a limited time. This limitation is positive because it helps people not to seek these goods unconditionally, as if they were absolute. The evils coming from created things, including the probable dissolution of the present order of the universe in a remote but finite future, serve “pedagogically” so that man does not place his absolute happiness in any good of this world. If he does, he is on the way to nihilism, as personal death itself demonstrates.

Human victory over evil is unthinkable without a horizon of transcendence. Without a good and omnipotent God, there could be no hope of good triumphing over evil. And neither would there be room for hope if this mortal life were for every human being the definitive fate. By counting, through faith in God, on the assurance that the ultimate human destiny is in a fully happy eternal life that responds to human aspirations and is congruent with the righteousness of the will exercised in this life and perfected by the help of God, the worst human evils of this life are no longer seen as the ultimate word, even in the case of the death of innocents who could not make merits in this life (a brilliant development of these points can be seen in Goetz 2009, especially on pp. 457–85).

Belief in an omnipotent and good God, then, does not become an occasion for scandal when contemplating the deficiencies of this world, but rather a reason for hope for the person who suffers in the midst of evils. Even more so when we know that God is not only good, but also generous and merciful, and at the same time just. The goods expected in the afterlife only has less relevance if there is little trust and faith in God, and if one attempts a rational control of moral evils in this life, in the same way as one can easily master technical achievements.

One of the best classical philosophical treatises on this subject is The Consolation of Philosophy, by Boethius, written in prison before his death sentence (Boethius 1999). The author is a Christian, but his arguments are philosophical, based on a Neoplatonic, Stoic, and Christian faith regarding God’s Providence. Boethius tackles the problem of the scandal of human evils and the apparent triumph of the wicked compared to the goodness and omniscience of God. Book IV especially refers to the compatibility of God’s goodness with the existence of evil in the world.

Boethius’ main argument is that, as far as true goods (justice) are concerned, only good people are the authentic winners. Evil people, despite their apparent and unstable triumphs, fail to achieve happiness and become powerless to do good, so that their wickedness is reduced to a nullity, even if they cause many innocent people to suffer. Their life is a failure (unless they convert).

According to Boethius’ exposition, God knows how to administer his Providence wisely, assigning or allowing temporal goods and evils both to good and bad people, in a way that seems to be mixed and without order (Boethius alludes to the classical notion of good or bad fortune, i.e., luck), for reasons that we mostly ignore because we do not have an overall view of things nor a deep knowledge of each personal life.
Sometimes, God grants temporal goods to encourage or permits temporal evils in order to purify, correct, or even punish, taking into account the goods or misfortunes generated from these situations not only in persons who enjoy or suffer them but in many others who enter into relationship with them, even in successive generations. To Boethius’ commentary, we can add that God does not grant or permit them as if from outside, or as if the recipients were passive, but relies on human initiatives, efforts, and reactions.

God’s Providence is coherent with his creative plan. It is ordinarily executed through second causes, according to the contextual variations and inequalities coming from contingent causes and human history, together with their progress and deficiencies. In a way unnoticed by us, he intervenes in the web of indeterminate events (indeterminate because of chance or free actions), in what can be called ordinary special divine Providence (miracles, on the other hand, are extraordinary interventions). This happens when he grants favors to those who ask for them with prayers, or even without their requests, according to divine plans that we cannot know (Sanguineti 2021). However, we do know God’s redemptive plan as seen in the Holy Scriptures and the history of salvation.

God’s providential action takes care of the good of all humanity and of social groups (e.g., nations), and in a special way he cares for each singular person, whom God loves for herself and not in function of something else, unlike his attitude regarding animals (Aquinas 1961, CG, III, cc. 111–13). The primacy of the person in Thomas Aquinas can be read in the following text (which could be extended to other possible persons existing in the universe):

“Only the intellectual nature [we could also read: persons] is willed by itself in the universe, and all other things are willed in function of it”.

(Aquinas 1961, CG, III, c. 112)

The thesis is coherent with the soul’s immortality. The ultimate human destiny is a never-ending personal bliss. This means that persons are something absolute, even if they are not God. However, the fact that persons are the center of the universe (not in a spatial or physical sense) does not diminish the value of non-personal created things, rather enhances them.

Special divine providence is hidden and unverifiable, except in the case of miracles, but this does not make it irrelevant. On the contrary, if it were subject to human control, it would be manipulable and would imply a divine “interventionism” obstructive of freedom. God acts when he wants, but he knows what he is doing, and does not act capriciously, rather wisely and lovingly, counting on time, even if he does not wish to break the natural course of events, though sometimes he does. As Goetz (2009, pp. 480–81) points out, if God with his Providence were to intervene systematically to prevent injustice and the consequent suffering, criminals would soon learn that their evil actions were ineffective and so would never act badly, but this kind of divine interventionism would render human freedom useless because everyone would be forced to do good and avoid evil.

The objection that God could at least intervene to diminish the amount of moral evil is not valid, Goetz adds, because that is precisely what he does with his ordinary Providence, in a measure that we cannot verify precisely because it is at the service of freedom, personal initiative and the good of faith and trust in divine protection. In this context, the struggle of good against evil is waged. It is waged by God who wants to concur with man in his actions in a context of love and faith (including hope).

9. The Ultimate Victory

The difficulties and hardships in human life are a powerful stimulus for men to strive for the good in every order, so much so that it is difficult for us to imagine a happy world without suffering, in which all good things would be given without further ado. It seems to us that in such a world we would be passive and would not grow in science and virtues. We have the feeling that if we were satisfied with everything, life would become flat and without incentives.
A positive attitude towards life and its challenges is smart and healthy, not on the basis of a simply voluntaristic or defiant effort, but rather because this order of things comes from a deep divine creative plan before which we have to be grateful. In the face of evil, the Creator gave us the capacity to react in order to conquer good things in spite of all the obstacles and suffering. Having a transcendent, non-materialistic vision, we can adopt a positive outlook in the face of physical and moral evils, even when they seem to prevail and take away hope.

In the face of this reality, two approaches would be inadequate. One would be to place one’s hopes in a kind of immanent messianism leading to think that in the future the human species, or an ulterior transhuman species, would conquer the “lost paradise” of what we called preternatural gifts (immortality, absence of pain and injustice, dominion of the cosmos). Since the time of the Enlightenment, certain progressive cultural trends arose aiming at the total suppression of ignorance, slavery, disease, pain, poverty, misery, and impotence. We are surprised today by how much progress has been made since the end of the 19th century to achieve unprecedented well-being in a part of humanity (if only it were all of it) thanks to technological progress. Though the tendencies to moral evil are still in force and the improvement is only technical and medical, involving many challenges as well.

Those who reduce evil to physical suffering, and good simply to pleasure, imagine that the “naturalized heaven” of the transhuman future would be a kind of perpetually pleasurable conscious “post-Darwinian” state that would be achieved through neurochemical resources operative in genetically reprogrammed post-human organisms (Pearce 2018, 2023). The underlying model in this mirage, which would provide a blissful eternity, is the pleasurable state attainable today with certain drugs or with erotic experiences. This seems to be like a sublimation of sensual animal pleasure which, coupled with intelligence, would give rise (nobody knows how) to all kinds of aesthetic and creative experiences. The previous history of nature based on the pains/pleasures dynamics becomes paradoxical: why so many pains arrive in the end at a state of supreme felicity (not moral, but based upon technical control and sensitive pleasure)?

The other inadequate approach would be depressive pessimism, together with the Epicurean posture of trying to cope as well as possible with the evils of this life. Evil here could not be overcome. One should have to become used to dealing with it, and in any case diminish one’s sensitivity to suffering so as not to make one’s life too bitter.

In this exposition, open to the dimension of religious faith, and especially to the Christian creed, moral evil was presented as directly opposed to God. It entered the human world through original sin. Since we have referred to God’s Providence, it seems natural that the Creator should intervene in a special way to repair the situation of the fallen man, aiming above all to destroy sin, the root of evil, but to destroy it through love and freedom. According to the Christian faith, this intervention culminates in Jesus Christ. There is no space here to develop this theological point. However, if we ask what God does in the face of human suffering, it does not seem correct to ignore what he has accomplished in his redemptive plan, aiming precisely to free man from evil.

What is most striking here is that Jesus Christ performs his redemptive action, as man but also as God (Son of God), precisely by assuming all human hardships, except sin, as an act of self-giving love addressed to God the Father and humankind. In renouncing temporal goods (honor, power, physical life and pleasures, possessions), Christ performed a free human action strictly opposed to sin, through which humans seek in those goods unconditional happiness.

By assuming the pain that this entails (his Passion on the Cross) out of love, Christ demonstrated (in deeds, not through words) that the acceptance of human pain and injustice for the love of God has a positive meaning. Isn’t it true that any sacrifice for the love of a good makes sense and is worthwhile? Thus, a value is given to human suffering, without suppressing it in this life, but with the hope of resurrection in eternal life. By defeating sin,
through his sacrifice of love on the Cross Christ conquers death, the root of physical ills (Bible 1999, 1 Corinthians, 15, 55–57).

This divine way of overcoming evil is mysterious and profound. Christ does not eliminate it by destroying freedom or the order of nature and history. He overcomes evil by sharing human evils in his flesh and not simply by showing solidarity with human beings. He does not simply set himself as an example of stoic resistance to evil, but by allowing the union of personal sufferings to the saving Cross to have value as a meritorious collaboration to what he has completed to repair sin and open the way to sanctity (McCord Adams 1999, pp. 166–68; Polo 2015). Throughout his life, Jesus Christ performed many extraordinary miraculous healings to demonstrate his power to spiritually heal humans. He did not banish pain in this life, not even human weaknesses to do good, in order to maintain the need to overcome evil with the help of virtues, human efforts, and divine grace (Stump 2010).

It can be said, then, that the present world, together with the need to constantly oppose evil, is still being made. Evil is defeated little by little, in each one, amid the vicissitudes of history, and will definitively be defeated at the end of time, when Christ reigns in glory. It will be a victory of love, stronger than evil and pain. The absolute happiness of those who have won, even if they have suffered much in this life, will signify the ultimate identification between self-conscious shared life and bliss (shared in the sense of not purely individual). All creation, even living beings inferior to man, will be renewed in a way that we cannot imagine and that will never end (Sollereder 2019, pp. 156–78; Schneider 2020).

10. Conclusions

We present as conclusions the steps we have followed and that constitute the core of our arguments:

(a) The physical world with its hylomorphic structure presents a conjunction of natural goods and evils in living beings. Biological complexity and evolution introduce a special dynamism in this framework. In animals, the pair good/evil is shown in the duality of pleasure/pain and, in some species, in conflicting aggressiveness. The core of vegetative and animal life is not the individual, but the order of species and the whole ecosystems, while sensations and feelings (pain and pleasure) are individual. The whole living world is an enormous and gratuitous good. Even so, it is contingent, not necessary.

(b) In human persons, because of their spiritual nature, along with their orientation to the universal good, there is the possibility of moral evil in unlimited proportions. The extent and intensity of moral evil in history find a plausible explanation in the biblical faith in original sin. Neither biological nor philosophical explanations of the most horrendous human evils are sufficient.

(c) According to Thomas Aquinas, the original fall did not alter the physical world, but it injured human nature by depriving it of divine grace and preternatural spiritual gifts. The physical structure of the human body was not changed. However, human persons experience an existential contradiction between their aspirations toward a just and happy life and their mortal nature coupled with the disharmony of their tendencies.

(d) God helps each person in the continuous struggle against physical and moral evils, without altering the dynamism of nature and history, through ordinary divine Providence, and sometimes through extraordinary Providence. The ultimate destiny of the human person is not the brief mortal life, but the eternal happy life for those who, with divine help, have defeated moral evil in this life. The fragility and limited duration of temporal goods and the possible cosmic disorganization in a remote future help man not to place the absolute end of life in created things. Human life with its evils would be meaningless without the perspective of eternal life.

(e) In the Christian theological framework, the eschatological future will renew the natural creation and the human universe in intimate harmony. The present physical and human cosmos can be considered as on the way to the ultimate ending.
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