

Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil, by Brian Davies. Oxford University Press, 2011. xi + 172 pp. Pb., \$36.95. ISBN: 0199790906

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Like his earlier book on the existence of God and evil (*The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, Continuum, 2006), Brian Davies maintains that the best way to address the problem of evil is to begin with some basic questions. One must first ask: “What does one mean when referring to God?” In Aquinas’ view, one can know that there is a God, but this does not mean one can know the divine nature. With this subtle distinction in mind, Davies claims that, for Aquinas, the problem of evil should no longer be considered a problem.

Aquinas argued that evil is not merely an absence of something (for example, the absence of life in a stone would not be considered evil), but the privation of something that *should* be present in an object (34–37). Evil is not an eternal principle that competes with good (as in Manichean dualism). Neither is evil an illusion (as in pantheism). Evil is real. It is a real lack in something. From this conclusion it follows that no object could be totally evil. That is to say, evil is always parasitical on what is good. Because God can only create what is good, evil occurs *per accidens*. Evil may serve as the occasion for good, but it never serves as the cause of good (66–70).

Many modern philosophers, by contrast, have substantially departed from Aquinas. Though human beings are limited by their cognitive faculties in discerning God’s will, many modern theists have said that God must have “morally sufficient reasons” for allowing evil (the two most prominent defenders of theodicy are John Hick and Richard Swinburne). In this view there is no such thing as gratuitous evil. Nontheists have sharply reacted to this moral exoneration of God by arguing for the reality of gratuitous evil (e.g., William Rowe, J.L. Mackie). Such a defense is heavily burdensome for the theist, if not completely misguided from the start. According to Davies, the Thomist will split the horns of the dilemma by arguing that both views begin on the wrong premise. Because we cannot know the divine essence, it would not make sense to conceive of God as a moral agent.

By denying the reality of gratuitous evils, many contemporary theists argue that God *uses* evil as a *necessary* means to establish a greater good. This contention is in opposition to Aquinas’ philosophy: evil is never willed by God, but only occurs accidentally. Thus many modern theists maintain

that there “are certain *means* by which God is *constrained* while aiming to do what is morally good” (4). Notice that in this view the deity abides by the dubious moral principle that says “the end justifies the means.” In effect, the modern philosophical approach to God and evil unjustifiably anthropomorphizes God. But, if one recognizes what is being talked about in reference to God, then it does not make sense to understand him as a moral subject.

Aquinas’ position seems to be beneficial in the current theist-atheist debate, for it does not place the burden of proof upon the believer to demonstrate that every instance of evil will be used for a greater good. God’s existence is known through other means, not as a result of assessing the proposals of theodacists and their opponents. As Davies rightly concludes:

Some have suggested that the reality of evil is reason, on moral grounds, to say that God either certainly or probably does not exist. Others have maintained that God’s existence can be defended in the light of evil since God is morally justified in allowing the evils that occur. . . Aquinas sides with neither of these positions. He affirms that God exists and that God is good, but he does not try to defend God’s goodness on moral grounds. So, though he thoroughly disagrees with those who reject belief in God, he is not a theodacist. If we take the problem of evil to be expressed by the question, “How can God justify morally for the evil that exists?,” Aquinas would dismiss it as a pseudo-problem. [...] With that understanding in mind, Aquinas would clearly take the problem of evil, as just construed, to be a bogus one. (113)

Like Davies’ earlier published works, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* provides a refreshing alternative to the ongoing debate on God and the problem of evil. More importantly, it should help retire the commonly held assumption that Aquinas was a theodacist.