The good: some elements

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to reflect – referring to Thomas Aquinas or reflecting in the logic of a Thomistic perspective – on the concept of good, whose notion, despite its importance not only in philosophy but also in various other fields, is not easy to define. In what follows, the good is firstly described as a lovable, admirable, and desirable entity. Then the essay proposes a differentiation between good and evil in both the ontological and the moral sense, also addressing the relationship between the ontological goods and good or evil acts. Finally, it is argued that some acts are always evil but no acts are always good.

Keywords: good; morality; good acts; moral philosophy; Aquinas; Moore; Scheler.

That of good is a fundamental concept not only in philosophy, and especially in moral philosophy, but also in human knowledge in general (we use it in jurisprudence, speaking of legal goods; in economics, referring to economic goods; in psychology, when talking about the good of the human psyche; in medicine, referring to the good of the organism, etc.). However, despite our very frequent linguistic reference to the term "good", and despite our common experience of different goods, it is not easy to define what "the good" is.

I will try to consider this concept, not with a global theoretical purpose, but either in Thomas Aquinas,[1] also trying to grasp what he says implicitly (which is often missed), or in the logic of a Thomistic perspective,[2] sometimes *briefly* mentioning some recent (or classic) authors who converge, mutatis mutandis, with Aquinas or with his logic.

[1] For the issues not considered here, I refer the reader to three recent broad treatises on the good in the Thomistic conception: Abbà 2009, especially: 194-198, 204-208, 212-218; Botturi 2009: 285-307; Brock 2010: 37-58. For an overview of some of the main philosophical conceptions of the good, cf. Berti 1983 and (especially on psychoanalytic and twentieth-century concepts) Pagani 1997: 87-94; for more recent works, see Salvioli 2012 and Riva 2012: 7-187.

[2] For lack of space I will be able to give arguments only for some of the thesis expressed, but not for all, and it will be impossible to demonstrate every premises, especially the ontological ones.

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To this end, I will refer to the concept of love. The latter is of course very complex, and it is impossible to achieve a comprehensive overview of it here. However, very briefly, one should distinguish between the following kinds of love:[3]

a) love as emotion, which is either wonder and amazement, or attraction.

In the first case, love comes as amazement, wonder, thankfulness for the other's very existence, it is akin to saying: "I rejoice for your being, it is wonderful that you exist, thank you for existing".

In the second case (which is not the same as the first), it expresses psychological or physical attraction, or both;

b) love as feeling,[4] that is, a sentiment of attachment and benevolence;

c) love as an act of will:[5] this kind of love was described by Aristotle as "wanting the good of the other" (Aristotle 2018: 1380b 31-35; Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 26, a. 4). Telling someone "I love you" means saying "I want what is good for you", "your good is my priority", I want to realize it, to achieve it, to favour it, as I am "disinterestedly interested" in your good.

The difference between love as emotion or feeling and love as an act of will can be also illustrated with two examples. Suppose my son killed someone: even if he disgusts me for what he did and I feel repulsion towards him, I still love him so long as I want, desire and seek his good, his redemption, etc. Suppose instead my daughter was murdered: if (with an act of imperishable moral greatness) I forgive my daughter's murderer, it means that I am capable of loving him even while feeling repulsion and disgust towards him, because forgiveness is an act of love.

1. *The good is a lovable, admirable or desirable entity*

That being said, it could be argued that the good has different meanings and is marked by three characteristics that emerge from its effects (Thomas Aquinas 1969: I, 1): that is, lovability, admirability and desirability.

1. The good is something precious that is the object of disinterested joy or love (Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 26, a. 4), or, at least, it is what should deserve to be loved (even if this may not actually happen) with such disinterested love and should deserve to bring joy for its simple existence. For example, a newborn usually brings us joy

[3] For a broader discussion of love in Thomas Aquinas cf. Pérez-Soba 2001.

[4] Emotions and feelings are related affective reactions, but they do not coincide: see Samek Lodovici 2010: 43-47.

[5] The boundaries between these three phenomena of human life are often blurred.

and emotion or amazement for his or her simple existence.[6] Therefore the good is *a lovable entity*.

2. The good is something valuable that is the object of admiration[7] or, at least, it is what should deserve to be admired (even if this may not actually happen). Think, for example, of the abilities, skills and expertise of an athlete, a musician, a writer, a lawyer, a mathematician, a philosopher, and so on: they are first of all admirable. Therefore, the good is *an admirable entity* (in an sense that is almost aesthetic, so that the good is close to the beautiful in this respect).[8]
3. The good is something that, in the ontological sense, completes (on this cf., for example, De Anna 2017: chapter 3) more or less an entity, and therefore satisfies a human inclination, desire or need (but not only: life, for example, is good for every living being, because every living being tends to self-preservation) and is the object of desire or, at least, it is what should deserve to be desired (even if this may not actually happen). Therefore, the good is a perfective and thus *desirable entity* (Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I, q. 5, aa. 1-2).[9] And, to put it with Brock (who follows Thomas), "a being's perfection mainly lies in its *fecundity*" (Brock 2010: 49).[10]

It should be clarified that an entity is good and therefore desirable, but its goodness is not caused by the fact that it is desired. About this see, for example, Moore (Moore 1903: §§ 40-42) and Bradley (Bradley 1927: 113-124) and their criticism of Mill: the latter posited that if something is desired then it is desirable, meaning that if this thing is desired then it must be desired. However, this non sequitur. In fact, when some utilitarians support this thesis,[11] we can

[6] The example of the newborn is analyzed in Jonas 1979: 234-242.

[7] It is possible to explicit this concept, for example, from Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 27 a. 2.

[8] About the lovability and admirability of the ontological and moral good see also, mutatis mutandis, I. Murdoch, who says (on one side) that the good is indefinable, but also (on the other side) that to perceive goodness is demanded a "loving gaze", cf. Murdoch 1964, reprinted 1970: 33. This loving gaze is "a suppression of self", and "the ability so to direct attention is love" (Murdoch 1969, repr. 1970: 64-65. For Murdoch "Great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound" (64). On the moral importance of the admiration, see, in recent Virtue Ethics, or in authors near to this perspective, for example, Alderman 1982: 127-153; Blum 1988: 196-221; Taylor 1996: 18; Nussbaum 1996: 96; Hursthouse 1999: 35; Slote 2001: for example 4, 18, 21-23, 74.

[9] One can only wish for evil per accidens, namely for the aspect of good that evil presents, cf. Botturi 2009: 295-297.

[10] The good creates other good. On this cf. Jossua 1966: 127-153.

[11] Not all utilitarians make this claim. For example, Bentham's concept is different, cf. Samek Lodovici 2012: 201-221. Cf. this article for the discussion of the agathologies elaborated by Bentham,

say, using Kantian terms, that they mistake the *ratio essendi* for the *ratio cognoscendi* of something's goodness: the fact that something is the object of desire is not *the cause* of its goodness, but the sign and manifestation of such goodness. In other words, X is not good because it is desired, but it is desirable because it is (or we think it is) good (Kymlicka 1990: 15). This is acknowledged also by a utilitarian philosopher like Brink: "we desire certain sorts of things *because we think these things are valuable* […]. It is not that these things are valuable because we desire them; rather, we desire them because we think them valuable" (Brink 1989: 225). For several other reasons (on this, cf. Samek Lodovici 2012), this means that the good precedes desire: it sometimes arouses desire, but at other times its value is not appreciated. For example, it may be good, or even extraordinarily good, to perform an action that some do not wish to perform.

The good can have one, two, or even all three of these characteristics: lovability, admirability, desirability.

Furthermore, for Thomas every being is good (that is, the *bonum* is a transcendental, cf. Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I, q. 5, a. 3) in all three senses mentioned earlier.[12]

In the first sense because every being is precious *qua* created by God who created it and is pleased with it (Thomas Aquinas 1918-1930: 1, 78, 7; cf. *Genesis*: "and God saw that it was good") and is therefore lovable.[13] In particular, human beings were given moral sensibility – the ethical sense – so that, following Lévinas, it can indeed be said that "the miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being" (Lévinas 1991: 89).

Every ability is good in the second sense because every ability is admirable: much, little or very little admirable, but admirable nonetheless *qua* skill, even if it is not always morally good (for example, the skill of a murderer is admirable, but not morally good).

Finally, every being is good in the third sense because every being tends to self-preservation (except in pathological or tragic situations): in a way, every being "desires" itself, or yearns for itself (cf. Botturi 2009).

Furthermore, goods can be exclusive or inclusive.

Exclusive goods are those (think of a meal, a road, etc.) that if owned or

Mill, Sidgwick, Moore and Singer.

[12] It is directly evident from his texts or it can be made explicit from them.

[13] As Palumbo evocatively puts it, one must understand "the *actus essendi* […] in the light of an overflowing and contagious generosity. In a scenario that combines ontology of the good and agathology of being, the *bonum diffusivum sui* infusing the fibers of the real can find proper recognition"; "*Bonum faciendum* could therefore mean: we are involved in a finalistic game, insofar as we are invited to find the meaning and fullness of life by letting ourselves belong – through a recreational act – to the logic of the gift", Palumbo 2017: 121-122.

enjoyed by a subject are not (or to a lesser degree) owned or enjoyed by other subjects. That is, in these goods the participation of X excludes or diminishes the participation of Y.

Inclusive goods, instead, have one or both of the following characteristics:

– their enjoyment is more intense if shared with others, that is, they are goods for which the participation of X increases the participation of Y. An inclusive good acquires added value precisely by being enjoyed together; for example, the common knowledge of truth, listening to a music piece (or watching a film) together, or the sense of sharing in a community;

– their enjoyment is only possible if a subject experiences them together with others, that is, they are goods for which the participation of X allows for the participation of Y. They are goods precisely insofar as they are enjoyed together with other subjects (cf. also Leibniz 1965: 113): for example conversation, dialogue (which is good only if it is not a collection of monologues, cf. Taylor 1989: 167-168), mutual recognition, or friendship (which is a good that cannot exist without the involvement of others).

Now, a being can be lovable and or admirable and or desirable in an ontological or in a moral sense (or both).

2. *The ontological good*

As we have seen, the good is a lovable or admirable or desirable entity (and it may have one or two or all three of these characteristics) in the ontological or moral sense, or in both senses.

Let's first look at the ontological good as opposed to ontological evil.

The ontological good is something (a thing, an action, a person, etc.) lovable and/or admirable, and/or desirable. From the ontological point of view, a good is (or deserves to be) lovable, admirable and desirable. However, as said, a good does not always present all such three characteristics.

On the other hand, ontological evil, for Thomas, has no substantiality: it is simply the lack of something else (cf. especially Thomas Aquinas 1882: q. 1). As counterintuitive as it may be, this thesis – already present *in nuce* in Plotinus (Plotinus 1991: VI, 7, 23) and later developed by Augustine (Augustine 2009: XIV, 11, 1; Id. 1966: VII, 12) and Dionysius (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 1980: 713D-736B) – appears more plausible if one considers, for example, illness, death and suffering: illness is actually lack of health, death is lack of life, suffering is lack of serenity. In a similar fashion, Augustine and Dionysius had already claimed that evil is nothing but the absence of good. Even if it might seem paradoxical and absurd, this means – for these authors – that evil is not a

substance: evil is not the process of deprivation of good, but the *result* of such deprivation. Thus, every substance is an ontological good.[14] This counterintuitive thesis clearly deserves much discussion, but it is not possible to address this issue here.

By the same token, in terms of physical characteristics (which are a subset of the ontological field), evil is the lack of a physical good that by nature belongs to a thing: blindness is a physical evil for a person, but not for a stone, as sight is a characteristic of human nature but not of stones. Also, good is prior to evil, and if an entity lost all its goodness it would cease to exist. For example, life exists as such without death; death takes life away but it could not replace life if life was not there first. In general, any negative thing that happens to a person could not take place if the latter did not have the good of life first.

3. *The moral good*

Let's now move on to analyze the good *qua* moral goodness as opposed to moral evil.

For Thomas Aquinas moral goodness is a *real* property (Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 18) or a quality that does not belong to things *in rerum natura*,[15] but to human acts,[16] especially to the acts of will (Thomas Aquinas

[14] The thesis of the non-substantiality of evil – in Thomas's conception – also holds at the level of the theological consideration of daemons. As already noted by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 1980: 724D-725D, the latter have many positive qualities: for example, they have a very strong will, as opposed to the human's will that is often weak, and an intuitive and infallible knowledge: they ignore certain things (they are not omniscient), but what they know, they know with unmistakable certainty, cf. Thomas Aquinas 1882: q. 16, a. 16. However, they chose the *non serviam*: thus, they maintain their positive qualities (ontological goods), but use them in a bad (morally evil) way. In other words, they live and think and therefore have ontological goods, but they use these goods for the evil.

[15] This is the principal difference with Foot's moral *naturalism*, who says, for example, that the evaluations of plants, animals and human beings "share a basic logical structure and status", and therefore "moral defect is a form of natural defect not as different […] from defect in sub-rational living things", cf. Foot 2001: 27. An analysis of Foot's text can be found in Donatelli, Ricciardi, Thompson 2003.

[16] So, this ethical perspective is different from antirealism, emotivism, expressivism and constructivism. In fact, according to *antirealism*, as expressed by John Mackie, moral properties do not exist: "If there were objective [moral] values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe", cf. Mackie 1977. For *emotivism* and *expressivism* ethical terms that we use do not designate a correlation in things or in human actions, but are exclusively the expression of our emotional states (cf. Stevenson 1937: 25-26) or of our prescriptions (cf. Hare 1981: 21 and 80). On emotivism and expressivism see, for example, Artosi 2007: 3-22 and Bongiovanni 2007: 277-299. For *constructivism*, moral properties do exist, but only as a result of rational human procedures (which for some authors must meet some ideal and hypothetical requirements). Thus, at least according to certain versions of this perspective, moral properties are a matter of consensus (albeit an ideal consensus, that is, the kind that would be reached if all subjects were well

1882: q. 2, aa. 2-3).[17] So, for example, we can say that a social situation of fairness is morally good if it is caused by human action; but, strictly speaking, it is actually positive and not morally good, because only actions – and not situations – are morally good. Similarly, it can be said that a person's character is virtuous, and therefore good, insofar as it produces good acts.

Analogously, moral evil is a property or quality that does not belong to things *in rerum natura*, but to human acts, especially to the acts of will. So, for example, we can say that a social situation of poverty is evil if it is caused by human action or non-action; but, strictly speaking, it is actually negative and not morally evil, because only actions – and not situations – are morally evil. Similarly, it can be said that a person's character is vicious, and therefore evil, insofar as it produces evil or vicious acts.

In other words, things are not evil, not even Nazi lagers are: the evil lies in the actions of those who built them and operated them.

Evil does not lie in things, which are ethically neutral, but in human actions that relate to things. For example, it is possible to make morally good use of a person's cancer, "using" it to learn the causes of this disease and to eradicate it; similarly, it is possible to make morally good use of a lager, for example performing heroic actions filled with love for the internees.

What is good or evil is the free action of rational creatures, and, as for the rational beings called humans, *what is good or evil is the free act by which we relate to things, protect them, use them, produce them, destroy them*, etcetera (this point has been widely addressed in Rhonheimer 2011: 460-463, 474, 495).

To summarize, moral goodness is a property or quality not of things, but of human acts, especially of acts of will, and of a person's character: it is what makes an action or character lovable, admirable[18] and desirable.

From a moral point of view, a good action or character (with his virtues) is always lovable, admirable and desirable: it has all these three characteristics. In fact, it deserves both joy for its existence and admiration for what it is, as well as the desire to emulate it.

informed and balanced), cf. Scanlon 1982: 103-128, Rawls 1980: 515-572. Rawls's thought developed through several phases in this respect. On constructivism, cf. Bagnoli 2007: 257-274.

[17] It is not possible to provide an argumentation of this thesis here, comparing it with those of the other principal moral conceptions, therefore see Botturi 2014.

[18] Recently L. Zagzebski has built a whole moral theory upon the moral good as admirable and on the crucial ethical importance of the admiration (which is different from envy), as the feeling of attraction and emulation for the ethical admirable persons, that carries to imitate them, cf. Zagzebski 2017: especially 30, 43, 51, 59, 158, 166. Zagzebski says also that "a desirable life is a life desired by admirable persons. Exemplars [those persons that deserve ethical admiration] show us what desirable lives are by showing us what they desire", and "those things are desirable which are such for the good person", 158-159. Previously, see, for example Zagzebski 2006: 53-66 and Id., 2015: 205-221.

By saying that the good is a property of human acts, we also grasp the truth of Moore's well-known argument about the naturalistic fallacy (Moore 1903: §§ 7-11). In fact, Moore is right when he claims that the moral good is not a natural property, as it is not ontologically constitutive of organisms: in nature, understood in the physical and biological sense, there is no moral goodness or moral evil, and Moore rightly emphasizes the specificity of morality and its irreducibility to natural entities.

On the other hand, Moore also states that a full definition of something is the list of the parts that compose that thing (for example, says Moore, a horse is composed of head, heart, mane, etc., *ibi*: § 53), whereas the good is a simple notion, that is, it is not composed of parts. Therefore the good can be experienced but not defined (although it is possible to understand in what sense the term is used, which allows for its translation into different languages as "gut", "bon", "bene", etc., *ibi*: § 52). This undefinability is akin to that of colours: for example, the colour yellow can be pointed at or exemplified by means of a perceived yellow, but it cannot be conceptually expressed (a person born blind, who has never had the perception of yellow, will never get an idea of what it looks like, regardless of any attempt to explain it conceptually).[19]

But, on closer inspection, as Bausola notes, even a colour can be described: it is a simple quality that cannot be defined, but can nevertheless be characterized, and thus spoken of, by saying (as Moore himself did) that the colour yellow is indeed a quality – and not, for example, a relationship or a quantity – that is more similar to orange than black (Bausola 1972: 61, note 18).

Furthermore, the fact that morality cannot be reduced to a unity of natural entities "does not exclude that it may consist of a unity of terms" (*ibi*: 61), provided that these terms do not designate existing natural entities.

Also, as Geach pointed out (Geach 1956: 23-42), the comparison between moral goodness and colour is wrong, because it ignores the difference between attributive and predicative adjectives (on this difference, cf. Ross 1930: 65-68). The latter, in fact, are independent of the entity of which they are predicated: no matter if what is yellow is X or Y or Z, in every case yellow always means yellow, that is, yellow always has the same meaning, without any variation. Of course there are different shades of yellow (canary, lemon, gold, etc.) and there are variations in the shades of yellow but, once again, given a certain shade of yellow (say, gold yellow), the meaning of this term does not change depending on the fact that what is golden yellow is X, Y, or Z.

Instead, attributive adjectives are those whose meaning depends on the en-

[19] It can instead be expressed physically, as a certain wavelength of the visible light spectrum, Moore 1903: 55.

tities to which they are attributed: the meaning of good changes depending on whether we are talking about a good book, a good knife, a good lunch, a good deed, etc. And in all these occurrences, the good is not indefinable like the colour yellow. It is definable, but with different meanings: a good book means, for example, an instructive or pleasant one, a good knife is a sharp knife, a good lunch is a tasty lunch, a (moral) good action is an admirable, desirable and lovable action. Goodness is an analogical concept and, in the perspective that we are considering, in its moral sense it is not a natural property but is real, by virtue of a genesis that we will consider in the next paragraph.

As for moral evil, it is a property or quality not of things, but of human acts, especially of the acts of will, and of the human character. It is the property that makes an action or character (with his vices) hateful, detestable, disgusting and undesirable (even though it is possible that someone appreciates and desires evil actions).

Now, every action or propensity (and every character, which is made up of all its propensities) is an ontological good insofar as it exists (we have already noted that – according to Thomas – all that exists is an ontological good), and then can be morally good or evil (a morally good propensity is called virtue, a morally bad one is called vice). It is in relation to their moral goodness or evilness that actions are moral goods or evils.

4. *Relationship between ontological goods and morally good or evil acts*

So what is the relationship between ontological goods and morally good or evil acts? The human being is surrounded by a huge number of ontological goods and, as also Scheler evocatively put it, "I find myself in an immeasurably vast world of sensible and spiritual objects which sets my heart and passions in constant motion and "all that I will, choose, do, perform, and accomplish, depends on the play of this movement of my heart" (Scheler 1973: 98).

For Thomas, these goods (cf. Sanguineti 1986):

1. do not have equal ontological goodness or value, but exist in a hierarchical ontological order:[20] first comes God, then human beings, then animals,[21] plants, and finally inorganic beings;

[20] Very briefly, it can at least be said here that there is an order wherever some entities have relationships of priority and posteriority (which is not only moral but also technical, logical, chronological, spatial, alphabetical, etc.).

[21] Man's ontological precedence over the animal is today disputed by the animalist deep ecology. This is not the place to dwell on the human's specificity, but, at least for hints, see Spaemann: "The ecological movement […] states that man should give up claiming a privileged position, an exceptional place in nature. He must understand that he is not at the center of the world, but a natural being

2. cannot all or always be compatible.[22]

Therefore, reason must understand not only the *ontological* order of ontological goods (their different value, their hierarchy), but also their compatibility. And this order is set by God, so it already exists independently of reason, which has to discover it.

Then, from a moral point of view, the will, to be morally good, must seek to achieve and/or relate to the various ontological goods in a way that conforms to (at least) these criteria:

1. respecting the *ontological order* of the goods (see also Scheler[23]), that is, respecting the priority of some over others, which depends on their different ontological status (in the ascending order there are inorganic beings, then plants, then animals, then human beings, then God);
2. respecting (by performing appropriate actions) the different *ontological status* of the goods (for example, it is appropriate to give one's life for a human, not for a stone);
3. respecting the *order of proximity* of goods that have the same ontological status (my wife is a human being as much as a stranger is, yet she has a stronger right to my solicitude than the stranger, at least if they express the same need);[24]
4. in proportion to the *specificity of every agent* (Aristotle already stated that the virtuosity of an act is also related to the peculiarities of the subject).[25]

These criteria, however, are not enough to know how to act with moral goodness: the intervention of *phronesis* (Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: II-II, qq. 47-51)

among others. He has to deal with other natural beings with the same attention it demands for himself". But "This claim is contradictory. Every natural being is in fact for itself the center of the world. The rest of the world is only environment […]. Man is an exceptional case. […] Only on the basis of this totally exceptional situation man can respect other animals", Spaemann 2012: 326-327. Against the thesis of the only quantitative difference between man and animal literature would be very wide. Limiting me to a single reference, I refer to Grion 2009, cf. especially Pagani in *Ib.*: 147-161.

[22] For example: the ontological good of "health" is not always compatible with the ontological good of "work" because there are some kinds of work that are harmful to health; the ontological good of "the killer's complacency about his skill" is incompatible with the ontological good "killer's victim's life".

[23] Scheler 1973: 89: "any sort of rightness or falseness and perversity in my life and activity are determined by whether there is an objectively correct order of these stirrings of my love and hate […]. It depends further on whether I can impress this ordo amoris on my inner moral tenor".

[24] A Thomist-like argument for this criterion, which touches on the question of the *ordo amoris*, can be found in Samek Lodovici 2010: 154-156.

[25] For example, a generous act is very different for a poor or a rich person.

is often indispensable.[26] Nor it is enough to respect these criteria to be certain of acting with moral goodness (for example, the intention behind the act must also be good: donating something to a relative may meet all these criteria, but if I do so only to gain the relative's trust and then manipulate him, my action is evil, from the point of view of the "first person").[27] However, if the will fails to meet even just one of these four criteria, it commits evil[28] even when producing an ontological good (if I steal somebody's car I acquire an ontological good, but I do so with an evil action towards its rightful owner, who should not be robbed).

So, in order to achieve ontological goods in a morally good way, a person has to use her reason to prefigure or realize in the mind (that is, in reason itself) the *moral* order[29] (respecting the ontological order, the ontological status, the order of proximity of ontological goods, and the specificity of the agent, while deciphering and ordering the various human *inclinationes*, Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 94, a. 2)[30] of the acts of will (and of the acts ordered by the will to other operative sources present in the human being) in relation to the various ontological goods.

In short, the will has to give moral order to its acts (and to the acts ruled by it): if it follows the moral order prefigured by reason (if it was properly prefigured by reason), then the will realizes – in its actions and in those ordered by it to the other operational sources present in the human being – the *moral* order, that is, the moral good. If instead it does not follow the moral order, the will realizes moral dis-order, that is, moral evil.

[26] On *phronesis*, cfr. *Ib.*: 181-196 and 249-264 (see also I. Murdoch 1970: 92: "The good man knows whether and when art or politics is more important than family. The good man sees the way in which the virtues are related to each other").

[27] On the notion of "first person" in ethics, cf. *Ib.*: 19-20.

[28] Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 19 a. 6 ad 1: "bonum causatur ex integra causa, malum autem ex singularibus defectibus".

[29] In an important text, Thomas says in this regard that the moral order is the "ordo quem ratio considerando facit", Thomas Aquinas 1969: I, 1.

[30] The *inclinationes* (whose existence is notoriously controversial: for an argumentation in this regard cf. Samek Lodovici 2010: 231-234 and Pagani 2011,V, 2) are pre-dispositions, orientations towards some ontological ends or goods. In some cases, but not always and not necessarily (it is important to note this), they also generate desires. Although sometimes they may result in attitudes, preferences, etc., the *inclinationes* (thus understood) are not simple preferences, or simple psychological attitudes (the latter meaning – which is misleading in the present context – is used when saying, for example, that "that person has an inclination for such an activity"). Now, it is the task of reason to *order them* (cf. Botturi 2009: 375) and manage them. In fact, an *inclinatio* leads to *ontological* goods, but does not guide the human being towards *moral* good regardless of how it is followed (Rhonheimer 2008: 112-113). In other words, the goods of natural inclinations are "human goods […] to the extent that they are pursued within the order of reason […] as goods of reason", Rhonheimer 2011: 280. On the contrary, for a certain kind of biologism, natural *inclinationes* are normative as such and prescribe how to act ethically, without the need for reason to organize how they are to be followed and ordered.

Thus, while the ontological order of goods exists independently of the existence and actions of a rational and free being, the moral order of the acts of the will (and of the acts which it orders to other operational sources) does not already exist in the world regardless of the will: it would not exist if there was no rational and free being (this concept, *mutatis mutandis*, brings the present argument closer to that of constructivism).[31] The moral order is realized by the will, under the guidance of reason, in the will's own acts and in the acts that the will orders to other human operational principles, including reason itself.

Therefore, in the moral conception that we are considering, goodness and evilness are not properties of natural things, as they would not exist if reason and will did not constitute a moral order or disorder in acts. In this perspective "moral reality is not something that is found in nature, but that 'supervenes'", only by virtue of the action of a rational and free being, "through (practical) reason" (Botturi 2014: 68) and the acts of will: moral properties are objective and intrinsic to human acts, inherent in the acts.

5. *The existence of acts that are always evil and the moral weight of consequences*

What we have seen so far brings us to the moral relevance of the particular circumstances (cf. Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 18, aa. 3, 10-11) of an action,[32] and especially to the very controversial question of the role of the act's consequences.

[31] Cf. the version of constructivism supported in Bagnoli 2016: 1.234: "Constructivism does not deny that there are facts or objects that can be called 'moral' or, more broadly, 'normative'. What constructivism denies is that such facts and objects are "moral" or "normative" in themselves, prior to and independently of the intervention of reason".

[32] Circumstances are secondary elements of an action. Here are the main ones:
- identity of the subjects involved (the people who are respectively the subject and object of the action): murdering a stranger is not the same as murdering one's own child;
- the inner psychological condition of the agent: murdering with full/partial awareness, with much/little coldness, etc.;
- time: murdering during a civil war or during an historical period of social peace;
- place: murdering on the street or after entering the victim's property;
- instrument: murdering with a gun or a dagger;
- mode: murdering sadistically or quickly;
- object: murdering a man or an animal, stealing an apple or a diamond;
- consequences: murdering a man who has/does not have small children and therefore causing/not causing the children's misfortune.

About the different moral relevance of the internal or external circumstances of the human acts see Foot 2002: 11-14, Hursthouse 1997: 99-117.

I do not have the space here to argue extensively for the very controversial thesis that some acts are always evil, under any circumstance: actions that one always ought *not to take* (Thomas Aquinas 1953: 13, 2, 1050; Id. 1888-1906: II-II, q. 33, a. 2). In other words, the *identity* of these actions (such as murder, enslavement, genocides, etc.: on this Samek Lodovici 2004: chapter VI) makes them always evil, even when their aim or intention is considerably positive. So, here, I can simply say,[33] very briefly, that from a consequentialist perspective human acts are morally qualified by their consequences. Now, very often, the consequences of an action are not definitive, but involve other consequences, which produce further consequences and so on *ad infinitum*. According to consequentialism, this entails an infinite deferment also in the acquisition of the morality of the acts themselves. In fact, the consequences of an action acquire their morality in relation to the subsequent consequences they produce, and the latter in turn produce more consequences, and so on. But this means that, in reality, no set of consequences has a moral quality.

Note that I am not referring to the human inability to foresee whether the consequences of an action will be good or bad. This is another problem for consequentialism (cf. *ibi*: 176-186), which I will not discuss as it is not relevant here. I am referring to another problem: not the human inability to foresee and judge the goodness or evilness of the consequences of an action, but rather the fact that the consequences of an action and (according to the metaethical logic of consequentialism) human actions themselves cannot have a moral connotation. However, in this way, it follows that every action (also Hitler's actions) is legitimate and allowed, because actions are neither good nor evil.

One could point out that sets of consequences do have a moral quality, though not a definitive one: they change their moral quality several times, like an object that first is yellow, then black, then green, etc. However, this is not cogent: on the contrary, the point is that (according to consequentialism), consequences do not have a moral quality, like a completely colourless object, because, for this theory, morality depends on the *final* consequences of actions, not on the intermediate. So, the intermediate outcomes of an action could only be morally connoted if there were a set of consequences that is no longer transitory, but definitive and final – that is, only if there was the end of the world.

Nevertheless, if there was a *truly final* state of the world, it would involve the annihilation of being, the nothingness or non-being of the world, and the human being cannot properly annihilate the world (matter is neither created nor destroyed, not even with a nuclear conflagration, but it changes state, configuration, etc.). So, the true final outcome of the world, the definitive ultimate

[33] Adding some topics that are not found in the texts of Thomas.

effect, is indeed non-being. Therefore, if the effects of our actions do not go on *ad infinitum* and there is this final outcome (the annihilation of being), it follows that the effects of all actions end in nothingness: nothingness is the *same* and *ultimate* outcome of all human actions. It is the same because no matter what action the human being takes, its ultimate result (nothingness) doesn't change. Therefore, from the consequentialist point of view (given that both the choice of taking an action and its morality depend on the final outcome of the action itself), it is indifferent for a human being to perform an action or another, to choose action A or action NON-A: every action (also Hitler's actions) or non-action is thus morally allowed.[34]

Furthermore, the circumstances of an action can decrease or increase the evilness of an action that is evil as such (for its identity), but they cannot overturn it: for example, murdering a rich person in order to feed one's family in a condition of extreme poverty (condition is a circumstance) is an evil act, even if this circumstance decreases its evilness. This holds unless the subject finds himself in circumstance of *truly* guiltless unawareness and ignorance of the identity and/or morality of the act:[35] in that case the act is not morally imputable (and, in conditions of *non compos mentis*, it is not properly an act, either).

In a concrete situation, circumstances can turn an action that as such (by its identity) is not evil into an evil one: telling a funny story is usually a good act that contributes to sociality, but if I tell a funny story whose object (object being a circumstance) is a present person, humiliating her, I am performing a bad act. Similarly, generating a human being is good but if I do so in a mode (mode being a circumstance) that is not respectful of the person's dignity, I am performing an evil act (even though one should still rejoice for her existence). And also the consequences (which, as said, are circumstances of the action) of an action that as such (by its identity) is not evil can make it evil in a concrete situation, if they are foreseeably negative or even disastrous.

6. *There are no acts that are always good*

However, the opposite is not true: that is, there are no acts that are always good under any circumstance, actions that one always ought to *perform*. It

[34] Moreover, since matter cannot create or destroy itself, the thesis of the world's annihilation implies the existence of an Omnipotent Being that will annihilate the physical universe itself. Now, if one admits the existence of God, consequentialism has to face another problem, noted by Finnis 1991: 15-16.

[35] Here one could address the question of moral imputability, on which cf. Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 6, q. 19, aa. 5-6, q. 71, aa. 5-6, q. 73, aa. 6-7, qq. 76 e 77; Id. 1882: q. 3, a. 8; De Finance 1967: §§ 242-267; Rodríguez Luño 2001: 197-200, 275-285; Léonard 1991: § 4.2.2 and 4.3.3. See also Foot 1978, reprinted 2002: 4, Id. 2001: 73-74.

might seem that actions such as loving, helping, curing *et similia* would be such acts. But there are times in which it is morally wrong to perform such actions, because in some occasions it is a duty to take other ones. For example, from the moral standpoint, a doctor is evil if he is looking after a patient when he should be saving his child from drowning. Loving others can also be evil, because there are times when one should do something else, such as eating for self-preservation, so as not starve to death (and be able to love).

Even performing actions of love for God is not always morally good. In fact, there are times in which one should not act at all, but instead should sleep, given that self-preservation is (almost always) a moral duty (except when one chooses to give one's life for someone else, or when undergoing therapeutic obstinacy for no valid reason, or when self-preservation is achieved through evil actions: for example, I must not murder another person to eat her flesh, even if I am starving). It is true that the action of going to sleep can be made for the love of God and therefore can be itself an act of love for God, given that God (almost always, except for the exceptions mentioned above) wants human self-preservation; however, sleeping means not acting.

As there are no actions that are good under any circumstance, similarly one mustn't think that there are duties to be fulfilled at all times (Thomas Aquinas 1888-1906: I-II, q. 71, a. 5, ad 3). So, whereas it is always a duty *to avoid* certain actions, that is, those that are always evil, it is not always a duty *to perform* some actions.

Furthermore, there are several moments in life in which we take good actions that, however, are not dutiful.[36]

Indeed, supremely excellent actions from the moral standpoint (for example, to offer oneself in the place of a hostage so that he can be freed, or to give one's life for someone else) are not dutiful.

But even without these examples of extreme actions, many other actions are good yet not dutiful: think of many acts of friendship, many acts of kindness, or even many acts of caring for others. But also walking, listening to music, having fun, reading, etc., can be (more or less often) good actions, while only being dutiful in certain occasions.

[36] When Father Kolbe, in the Nazi lager where he was kept prisoner, offered to go to the "hunger bunker" (where he knew he would die of starvation) in the place of another, he made a choice of supreme love, which he had no moral duty to make.

7. *Conclusion*

In this paper I have considered the concept of good either in Thomas Aquinas, also trying to grasp what he says implicitly, or in the logic of a Thomistic perspective, sometimes also briefly mentioning some recent (or classic) authors who converge, mutatis mutandis, with him or with his logic.

Starting from love's nature, I have focused the good as something lovable, admirable and desirable from the ontological and from the moral point of view.

Considering human being, the moral good is a real property of human acts, especially of the will's acts: it is what makes an action or character lovable, admirable and desirable. A good action deserves both joy for its existence and admiration for what it is, as well as the desire to emulate it.

The relationship between ontological goods and morally good or evil acts is complex. The will, to be morally good, must seek to relate to the various ontological goods conforming to some criteria; anyway the discernment of *phronesis* is often indispensable.

The moral order is realized by the will, under the guidance of reason, in the will's own acts and in the acts that the will orders to other human operational principles.

As seen, some acts are always evil for their identity, despite the positive consequences that they would produce. On the other side, there are no acts that are always good.

The circumstances (including consequences) can turn an action that as such (for its identity) is not evil into an evil one and can decrease or increase the evilness of an action that is evil as such (for its identity), but they cannot overturn it.

Recalling the theme of love, from which we began, we can now conclude: good is capable of generating other good (see Jossua 1966) and the fundamental generator of good is precisely love.

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