Part III

Practical Philosophy

Introduction

Practical philosophy deals with our fundamental normative and evaluative principles, especially with regard to human action and character. Accordingly, in medieval philosophy it comprises philosophical ethics and moral theology (given their inextricable theoretical connections), as well as foundational issues in political and legal thought. The vast medieval literature is represented in this part by four major, "perennial" aspects of medieval thought on the subject, i.e., such considerations that are still quite directly relevant to our thinking on the same issues. The first section presents the characteristic medieval conception of the metaphysical foundation of objective value (and thus of objective value-judgments), which can be briefly referred to as "the idea of the convertibility of being and goodness." The second section deals with issues of the freedom of the will, insofar as it is principally free acts of the will that embody moral goodness or evil. The third section presents two competing conceptions on the issue of the ultimate human good, i.e., human happiness. Finally, the fourth section deals with the foundational issues of legal theory, insofar as laws of human society are supposed to regulate human conduct in the interest of the common good.

The first section begins with two selections from Augustine. The first, from his *Enchiridion* (literally, "Handbook" – a brief summary of the basic tenets of the Catholic faith), explains the fundamental idea of the convertibility of being and goodness: everything there is, insofar as it is, is good (and, of course, everything that is good, insofar as it is good, is). This is the Neoplatonic idea that rescued the young Augustine's thought from the clutches of Manicheism (a dualistic religion founded by the prophet Mani in the third century, teaching that everything in the world is the result of the battle between two equally powerful ultimate principles of good and evil, light and darkness, which in some form or other was very influential among Christians of Augustine's time), and made him realize how it can provide an answer to *the problem of evil*. For although Manicheism provides an easy answer to the question of the origin of evil in the world (as resulting from the intrusion of darkness into the realm of light), it obviously goes against the orthodox Christian idea of divine omnipotence (identifying God with light, and Satan with darkness). But if one embraces

the orthodox Christian idea of God, then the problem inevitably arises: how can there be evil in the creation of an omnipotent, omniscient, and loving God?

The idea of the convertibility of being and goodness provides at least part of the solution of the problem. For if God brings His creation out of nothing by giving being to every thing, then, by the very same act, He provides each creature with its own goodness, endowing it with the perfections allowed and demanded by its nature. (Of course, creatures cannot receive perfections that are not allowed by their nature: a rock cannot have life, a plant cannot have human intelligence, and an ant or a human being cannot have the perfection of divine nature.) Since creatures are necessarily of limited perfection, they cannot have the absolute *immutable perfection* of divine nature, and so they cannot have all possible perfections allowed and demanded by their nature all the time. Hence, necessarily, time and again they can become defective, falling short of their possible perfection, i.e., they may become plagued by some natural evil, such as illness, or some other natural defect, in general, some *privation*, the lack of some perfection that they could and ought to have by their nature. But these defects are not caused by God, indeed, as Augustine argues, they are not caused properly speaking by anything. Defects cannot directly be caused by an *efficient* cause (that by its activity gives being and hence goodness); they can only have a *deficient* cause, i.e., one that fails to produce its proper effect (as, for example, a birth defect is the result of some genetic deficiency).

This, however, does not mean that *nobody* is responsible for *any* evil occurring in God's creation, as Augustine explains in the next selection from his *De Civitate Dei* ("City of God"). Although natural defects cannot be blamed on anyone, *voluntary* defects *are* to be blamed on those agents who are able to choose between good and evil on account of their free will. Thus, moral evil, for which voluntary agents are duly held responsible, originates in a specific sort of defect, namely, the defective use, or rather abuse, of their God-given free will, when they deliberately subject themselves to some inordinate desire, choosing what they ought not to choose. By contrast, therefore, moral goodness consists in the proper direction of the will, which is realized when a voluntary, rational agent is acting rationally, desiring and choosing what it ought to desire and choose according to right reason. So, moral evil, and its opposite, moral goodness, in this framework simply turn out to be specific cases of metaphysical evil and goodness, namely, the lacking (*privatio*) or having (*habitus*) of the proper direction of the will.

The subsequent two selections in this section from Boethius and Aquinas, respectively, provide a more detailed, sophisticated analysis of the same fundamental idea of the convertibility of being and goodness that these authors approach already armed with the conceptual apparatus of Aristotelian logic and metaphysics. Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus*, reproduced here in full, is a rather enigmatic short treatise seeking the solution to a problem raised in its subtitle (or alternative title): *How is it possible that substances are good in that they are, although they are not substantially good?* According to one tradition, the question was raised by a friend and disciple, John the Deacon (who was to become Pope John I), in connection with one of the theses of a larger work, now lost, called *Hebdomades*, so called after the arrangement of its treatises into groups of seven (in Greek, *hebodmades*), imitating Plotinus' *Enneades*, the treatises of which were organized into groups of nine (in Greek, *enneades*), by Plotinus' disciple, Porphyry (the author of *Isagoge*, referred to in the first part of this volume).

In any case, Aquinas certainly found Boethius' answer to the question, in terms of distinguishing God from creatures on the basis of the metaphysical composition of creatures (in particular, the composition of their essence with their existence) as opposed to divine simplicity, to be a "perfect match" to his own ideas on the same issue. (Although it is debated

in the modern literature whether Boethius actually did mean what Aquinas takes him to mean.[1]) It is no wonder, therefore, that Aquinas wrote a detailed running commentary on Boethius' work. But that commentary would have been too long for the purposes of this anthology.

However, the brief question from Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* presented here, which explicitly draws on Boethius' doctrine, provides a very clear, succinct discussion of the main concern that quite naturally arises in connection with the interpretation of the very idea of the convertibility of being and goodness.

The issue can be put in the following way. It seems to be one thing for something to exist and another for it be good. For obviously not everything that exists is good. Therefore, "being" and "good" do not seem to be convertible terms. Aquinas' response carefully distinguishes what these terms – or rather the concepts they express – signify, namely, the act of existence of the thing, from the conditions of their predicability without qualification, on account of their difference in connotation. The concept of being merely signifies the actuality of the thing of which it is true. The concept of goodness, however, connotes the perfection of the thing, i.e., it signifies not only the actuality of its substantial being, but also the actuality of all those superadded qualities that make the thing perfect in its kind. The thing, therefore, can be called a being absolutely speaking merely on account of the actuality of its substantial being. (And it can be said to be a being in a certain respect or it can be said to be somehow on account of its further, accidental actualities.) But it cannot be called good, absolutely speaking, merely for the reason that it exists, absolutely speaking, for it can be called good only if it has all those superadded perfections in actuality that are needed for its goodness, absolutely speaking. Without those perfections, the thing can be said to be good only with respect to its substantial being, i.e., insofar as it exists at all or with respect to some of the perfections it actually has. However, just because something has existence, absolutely speaking, it does not mean that it is good, absolutely speaking, even if it has some goodness in it, namely, at least its existence. As a result, even if it is not true, absolutely speaking, that anything that exists is good, it *is* true that anything that exists absolutely speaking *is* good with some qualification, namely, insofar as it exists.[2]

The second section of this part is devoted to considerations of the primary source of the specifically moral good and evil, namely, *free will*. Again, the enormous medieval literature on the freedom of the will, and especially its relation to the theological issues of divine providence, predestination, and grace in the salvation history of individual humans and mankind as a whole (as it was first sketched out in Augustine's monumental *De Civitate Dei*) can hardly even be touched on in this introductory survey of medieval philosophy. These selections are therefore merely meant to call attention to some distinctive features of medieval thought on the more directly philosophical aspects of the issue of free will, although, as will be obvious even from these short selections, the philosophical considerations in this area in medieval philosophy are almost always inextricably bound up with theological considerations.

The first selection is Augustine's famous description of his agony right before his conversion, often referred to as Augustine's discussion of the "divided will" or "two wills," on account

1 For a detailed discussion of the issue see Ralph McInerny, *Boethius and Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990).

2 The further intricacies of the idea, along with its profound metaphysical and theological implications are amply discussed in an excellent collection of modern essays: Scott MacDonald (ed.), *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

of his philosophical puzzlement over his state of mind at that time. Whether the will is free is not a question for Augustine; he is never bothered by issues of causal determinism: for him, the human soul by its very nature is an autonomous agent, which is certainly influenced, but is never fully determined, by external causes. What puzzles and deeply disturbs him, therefore, is rather when he finds himself unable to want something, indeed, unable to want something that he wants himself to want (namely, his full commitment to chastity and religious life in general): "The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed; the mind commands itself, and meets with resistance," as he says. He finds the explanation for this "bizarre situation" in a "sickness of the mind," when it is divided against itself, not being able to fully commit to what it sees it ought to do. This "sickness" is in fact the only genuine, intrinsic hindrance to the freedom of the will, which therefore can only be fully possessed if the mind regains its integrity, when it is cured of this sickness by committing itself to what it ought to do with the aid of the grace of God.

The selection from *Consolatione Philosophiae* contains Boethius' equally famous and enormously influential discussion of the issue of the compatibility of the freedom of the will and divine providence, another potential constraint on the freedom of the will. The problem, very briefly, is this: if God foreknows what I will do tomorrow, as He certainly does, given His omniscience, then tomorrow I cannot but do what He now knows I will do. But if I will *have to* do it, then I have no choice, so my will is not free. Boethius' ingenious solution, in terms of distinguishing absolute and conditional necessity, as well as his subtle discussion of divine eternity, served as the starting point for all later discussions of the problem.

The next selection reproduces in full Anselm's short treatise "On Free Will." Perhaps the most peculiar thing about Anselm's discussion to the modern reader is the idea, already present in Augustine, but most fully expounded here, that the freedom of the will does not require several alternative possibilities among which the will could choose. On this conception, even if the will cannot choose anything except what it actually does, it is still free, provided that choosing this one possible choice is still the result of autonomously choosing what one ought to do. Indeed, the perfect freedom of the will is exercised precisely when it can only choose what it ought to choose, for it is morally (not physically) incapable of making a sinful choice. This is the freedom of saints, good angels, and God. So it is no wonder that several centuries later, even in a radically different philosophical setting, the will endowed with this sort of autonomy would be called "the holy will" by Immanuel Kant.[3]

So, the freedom of the will consists in its autonomy, or self-determination, which is fully exercised when the will chooses what it ought to choose according to right reason. But should this mean, then, that it is reason that determines what the will ought to choose? In other words, is reason a power superior to the will? The last selection of this part presents Henry of Ghent's negative answer to this question, carefully arguing for the Augustinian "voluntaristic" position, as opposed to the Aristotelians' (especially, Aquinas') perceived "intellectualism."

The selections of the next section are meant to illustrate the "internal" debate of the Aristotelians, contrasting the Averroist philosophers' view of "immanent" happiness achievable in this life through Boethius of Dacia's short treatise on the supreme good with the theologians' conception of "transcendent" happiness achievable only in the beatific vision, through the selected articles of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. It is to be noted, though,

3 For a more detailed discussion of the issue along these lines, see Gergely Klima, "The Primal Choice: An Analysis of Anselm's Account of Free Will," *Sapientia et Doctrina* 1/2 (2004), pp. 5–13.

that the philosophers' "immanent" conception ultimately targets the same transcendent object, namely, the contemplation of the divine essence, but in a way that is thought to be achievable in this life.

A similar balancing act – which, as we could see, is typical in practically all aspects of medieval thought – between immanence and transcendence can be observed in the last two selections, dealing with some foundational issues in medieval legal thought. For medieval thinkers, legality, or legal justice, just like morality, is in no way a matter of convention, even if the actual implementation of their objective standards in a society is always dependent on the actual social circumstances. As we can see from the selections from Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, the implementation of the norms of legality through legislation results in positive law, i.e., the laws posited by the legislative authority of society. However, what justifies the legality or justice of this positive legislation is natural law, inherent in the demands of securing the common good of human society. And this common good is the precondition of the flourishing of individual humans in society, the needs of which in turn are determined by human nature as such.

It is quite important to notice here the dynamic aspect of Aquinas' thought, often ignored in contemporary discussions of natural law (as the foundation of basic human rights). Precisely because positive law is merely the temporal implementation of the unchanging norms of natural law, positive law cannot remain static in a changing society, but needs to be adjusted in accordance with the changing social circumstances. For what is a just positive norm in one situation may become unjust simply on account of the changes in society. Although Aquinas is certainly not a revolutionary, he is definitely committed to the idea of revising positive legislation precisely on account of the unchanging demands of justice in a changing society.

But all of these considerations concerning natural law and positive law presuppose in a theological context the clarification of the relationships between the natural and supernatural sources of the unchanging norms of justice, namely, natural law and divine law (including, for example, the precepts of the Ten Commandments or the Two Precepts of Charity: cf. Matthew 22: 37–40). The last selection, from John Duns Scotus, presents the Subtle Doctor's highly nuanced view on the issue, arguing that in some sense even the Ten Commandments can be regarded as pertaining to natural law, in stark contrast to later views, which would see in the divine law nothing but the possibly arbitrary commandments of a supreme, absolute monarch. However, that conception already points away from the highest achievements of typically medieval thought, which was always in search of a harmonious continuity and balance between immanence and transcendence, the natural and supernatural aspects of human life.

Goodness and Being

35

Augustine on Evil as the Privation of Goodness

Chapter 10. The Supremely Good Creator Made All Things Good

By the Trinity, thus supremely and equally and unchangeably good, all things were created; and these are not supremely and equally and unchangeably good, but yet they are good, even taken separately. Taken as a whole, however, they are very good, because their *ensemble* constitutes the universe in all its wonderful order and beauty.

Chapter 11. What is Called Evil in the Universe is But the Absence of Good

And in the universe, even that which is called evil, when it is regulated and put in its own place, only enhances our admiration of the good; for we enjoy and value the good more when we compare it with the evil. For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil. For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present – namely, the diseases and wounds – go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance, – the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils – that is, privations of the good which we call health – are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.

Chapter 12. All Beings Were Made Good, But Not Being Made Perfectly Good, are Liable to Corruption

All things that exist, therefore, seeing that the Creator of them all is supremely good, are themselves good. But because they are not, like their Creator, supremely and unchangeably

good, their good may be diminished and increased. But for good to be diminished is an evil, although, however much it may be diminished, it is necessary, if the being is to continue, that some good should remain to constitute the being. For however small or of whatever kind the being may be, the good which makes it a being cannot be destroyed without destroying the being itself. An uncorrupted nature is justly held in esteem. But if, still further, it be incorruptible, it is undoubtedly considered of still higher value. When it is corrupted, however, its corruption is an evil, because it is deprived of some sort of good. For if it be deprived of no good, it receives no injury; but it does receive injury, therefore it is deprived of good. Therefore, so long as a being is in process of corruption, there is in it some good of which it is being deprived; and if a part of the being should remain which cannot be corrupted, this will certainly be an incorruptible being, and accordingly the process of corruption will result in the manifestation of this great good. But if it do not cease to be corrupted, neither can it cease to possess good of which corruption may deprive it. But if it should be thoroughly and completely consumed by corruption, there will then be no good left, because there will be no being. Wherefore corruption can consume the good only by consuming the being. Every being, therefore, is a good; a great good, if it can not be corrupted; a little good, if it can: but in any case, only the foolish or ignorant will deny that it is a good. And if it be wholly consumed by corruption, then the corruption itself must cease to exist, as there is no being left in which it can dwell.

Chapter 13. There Can Be No Evil Where There is No Good; And an Evil Man is an Evil Good

Accordingly, there is nothing of what we call evil, if there be nothing good. But a good which is wholly without evil is a perfect good. A good, on the other hand, which contains evil is a faulty or imperfect good; and there can be no evil where there is no good. From all this we arrive at the curious result: that since every being, so far as it is a being, is good, when we say that a faulty being is an evil being, we just seem to say that what is good is evil, and that nothing but what is good can be evil, seeing that every being is good, and that no evil can exist except in a being. Nothing, then, can be evil except something which is good. And although this, when stated, seems to be a contradiction, yet the strictness of reasoning leaves us no escape from the conclusion. We must, however, beware of incurring the prophetic condemnation: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil: that put darkness for light, and light for darkness: that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."[1] And yet our Lord says: "An evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil."[2] Now, what is evil man but an evil being? for a man is a being. Now, if a man is a good thing because he is a being, what is an evil man but an evil good? Yet, when we accurately distinguish these two things, we find that it is not because he is a man that he is an evil, or because he is wicked that he is a good; but that he is a good because he is a man, and an evil because he is wicked. Whoever, then, says, "To be a man is an evil," or, "To be wicked is a good," falls under the prophetic denunciation: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil!" For he condemns the work of God, which is the man, and praises the defect of man, which is the wickedness. Therefore every being, even if it be a defective one, in so far as it is a being is good, and in so far as it is defective is evil.

1 Isa. 5: 20.
2 Luke 6: 45.