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# The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas

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IN MANY medieval thinkers, e.g. Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, the statement can be found: "being and good are convertible" (*ens et bonum convertuntur*).[1] That is to say, "being" and "good" are interchangeable terms in predication (*converti enim est conversim praedicari*).[2] Wherever "being" is predicated of something, the predicate "good" is involved as well.

That must imply that "good" is here not a concept that adds a real content or a new quality to "being", as a result of which "being" is restricted. For in that case there would be no question of convertibility.[3] "Good" is an attribute which pertains to every being, it is a property of being as such, a "mode that is common, and consequent upon every being."[4] In other words, "good" is coextensive with "being", it is one of the so-called *transcendentia*[5] which, since Suarez, are usually referred to as "transcendentals".

[1] Alexander of Hales, *Summa* I, Inq. 1, Tract. 3, q. 3, membrum 1, c. 1, a. 1, "An idem sit bonum et ens"; Bonaventure, *In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1, fundam. 5, "Ens et bonum convertuntur, sicut vult Dionysius", d. 34, a. 2, q. 3, fundam. 4; Albert the Great, *De Bono* q. 1, a. 6; *Summa Theol.* tract. 6, q. 28; Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sent.* 8, 1, 3; *De Ver.* XXI, 2; *In De Hebdomadibus*, lect. 3; *Summa Theol.* I, 16, 3.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *De Ver.* I, 2 obj. 2.

[3] *De Pot.* IX, 7 ad 5: Bonum quod est in genere qualitatis, non est bonum quod convertitur cum ente, quod nullam rem supra ens addit.

[4] *De Ver.* I, 1: modus generaliter consequens omne ens.

[5] Comp. Albert the Great, *Summa Theologiae* tract. 6, q. 27, c. 3: Bonum dicit intentionem communem et est de transcendentibus omne genus sicut et ens.

The transcendentality of good is the important thing to note at the outset. It is the foundation of Thomas' reflection on the good. The medieval doctrine of transcendentals builds on ancient sources, especially on Aristotle's discussion of the relation between "being" and "one" in Book IV of his *Metaphysics,* but still marks a new development in the philosophical tradition. Albert the Great himself notices that "the Philosopher" does not hold that "true" and "good" are general dispositions concomitant with being.[6] And we shall see later on, that the reflection on "good" is a central motive in the elaboration of the medieval doctrine of transcendentals.

Characteristic of the scholastic approach as compared to Kant's transcendental philosophy is that "transcendental" stands opposed to "categorial". What are transcended are the categories, the first particular modes of being, e.g. substance, quality, etc., which determine and contract being. Being itself is not a 'genus', nor are the properties of being, for they run through all categories. All of this may be familiar, but it seems to me that the remark that "the doctrine of transcendentals is classic and yet poorly known"[7] still holds true. A recent study for example, argues that in Thomistic philosophy good is reduced to substantial being. Yet "there are entities which lack all substantial being and thus all 'esse perfectum'. If value were ultimately one with 'esse perfectum', such entities should lack all value; but they can have very considerable value. Value, then, must not be reducible to 'esse perfectum'."[8] Aquinas' transcendental consideration is here completely mis-

[6] *In I Sent.*, d. 46, N, a. 14 (Paris, Borgnet, 1899), t. 26, 450: Dicendum, quod secundum Philosophum, ante omnia sunt ens et unum. Philosophus enim non ponit, quod verum et bonum sint dispositiones generaliter concomitantes ens.

[7] M. Jordan "The Grammar of 'Esse': Re-reading Thomas on the Transcendentals," in *The Thomist*, 44 (1980), p. 3.

[8] J. F. Crosby, "Are Being and Good Really Convertible: A Phenomenological Inquiry," in *The New Scholasticism* LVII, 4 (1983), p. 496.



understood;[9] in fact, "good" becomes a categorial mode of being.

Unlike the categories transcendentals do not exclude, but include each other. Hence the dictum applies: "being and good are convertible". In this article we will thoroughly examine the sense and meaning of this saying, as found in St. Thomas' works.[10] And this inquiry is not undertaken from a mere historical interest in a central theme of medieval metaphysics. Its primary concern is the intrinsic philosophical significance of this thesis. It will appear that the convertibility of being and good contains views on the nature of being which still set one thinking.

## Objections to the Convertibility of Being and Good

"Every being is good." But can such a view be maintained? In a way similar to the medieval procedure several objections may be raised to this thesis.

First, Is not the convertibility of "being" and "good" a striking example of what has been designated since G. E. Moore as the "naturalistic fallacy"? It would appear that the order of "is" and the order of "ought" are confused. In modern philosophy a sharp distinction has been drawn between being and value. And there seems to be ample evidence for this view. To be a human being and to be a good human being are obviously quite different things. In his article *Are Being and*

[9] Comp. *De Ver.* XXI, 1 ad 6: Sicut ens est quoddam essentiale et quoddam accidentale, ita et bonum quoddam accidentale et quoddam essentiale; et eodem modo amittit aliquid bonitatem sicut esse substantiale vel accidentale.

[10] On the notion of "good" in Thomas, see G. Mongelli, "Il bene nel pensiero filosofico di S. Tommaso, in *Miscellanea Francescana* 60 (1960), 241-346; J. Vande Wiele, "Het thema 'Ens et bonum convertuntur', Wording en filosofische betekensis," in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 26 (1964), 186-253; B. Welte, "Thomas von Aquin über das Gute, Entwurf eines Systems", in *Auf der Spur des Ewiger* (Freiburg, 1965), pp. 170-184; En. Smith, *The Goodness of Being in Thomistic Philosophy and its Contemporary Significance* (Washington, 1967).

*Good Really Convertible,* J. F. Crosby holds that "the person as substantial, and the person as having nobility, excellence, dignity are to all eternity distinct dimensions of the being of the person." [11]

Actually Thomas himself raises this objection, when he deals with the question of whether goodness and being are identical. He states it thus: "It seems that goodness differs really from being. For Boethius says, 'I perceive that in nature the fact that things are good is one thing, that they are is another.' Therefore goodness and being differ really." [12]

A second objection sharpens the urge for a distinction between being and good. It is the stock objection to which Thomas himself also refers,[13] the problem of evil. Does not the convertibility of being and good deny the very reality of evil? The proposition "every being is good" has embarrassed many modern thinkers. Two examples may suffice.

The German philosopher Max Scheler asserts, "This proposition is wrong if 'bonum' means more than valuable. For the 'omne ens' is, qua ens, indifferent to good and bad." [14] And the scholastic thinker J. Hessen claims that the original sense of the statement "every being is good" is untenable. This proposition makes philosophical sense only if it means that "being" is susceptible to values, that it may be a subject of values, either positive or negative ones.[15] There cannot be a real convertibility of "being" and "good".

A third objection can be taken from the contemporary French-Jewish thinker E. Levinas. A characteristic of his philosophy is the antithesis between ontology and ethics, between "being" and "good". A Platonic influence can be observed in this opposition. Levinas himself says in the prologue of one of his earliest works that his thought has been guided by Plato's famous statement on the Idea of Good in the *Republic* (VI, 509B).[16] To the question "what the good itself is" Plato answers indirectly, namely by means of an analogy with the sun. The sun not only furnishes to visible things the power of visibility, but it is also the author of their generation and growth, although it is not itself generation. In like manner the good not only furnishes to intelligible objects their being known, but it is also the author of their being and essence, though the good itself is not essence, but transcends essence in dignity and power. The Good is "beyond being".

Levinas' opposition between "being" and "good" has, however, above all a religious background. "The Invisible of the Bible is the Idea of Good beyond being." [17] The Invisible is the Other Who is outside the order of being. Therefore it is in the meeting with the Other that being, understood by Levinas as self-interest, is broken through.

Levinas' thought is directed not only against Heidegger's ontology, but also against the classical doctrine of the convertibility of "being" and "good". It is a *transcendent* view of good over against a *transcendental* view in which good is coextensive with being.

Now it is remarkable that the reflection on the divine names plays a prominent part in medieval discussions of transcendentals.[18] For in this reflection a problem arises, requiring further consideration. In Scripture "good" is said of God, a term which is transcendental. *The Gospel according to Matthew* (19, 17) says, "One is good, God". God is outside every 'genus', He transcends all finite reality.[19] So medieval thinkers had to face the question of the relationship between "trans-

[11] *Art. cit.*, p. 494.
[12] *Summa Theol.* I, 5, 1 obj. 1.
[13] *Ibid.*, I, 5, 3 obj. 2.
[14] *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge,* English transl. by M. S. Frings (London, 1980), p. 217, fn. 141.
[15] "'Omne ens est bonum'. Kritische Untersuchung eines alten Axioms," in *Archiv für Philosophie* 8 (1950), 317-329.
[16] *De l'existence à l'existant* (1947).
[17] *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier, 1972), p. 78.
[18] Comp. Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, dist. 8, pars 1, q. 3.
[19] Comp. *Summa Theol.* I, 3, 5.

cendent" and "transcendental". This is precisely the structure of Thomas' treatise on the good in his *Summa Theologiae*. First (I, q. 5) he deals with "goodness in general" and then (q. 6) with "the goodness of God."

## Aristotle's Definition: "The good is what all desire"

The contemporary objections are, as shown, not strange to Thomas. What is his response to this challenge and what are his own arguments for the convertibility of being and good? A starting-point for his reflection is Aristotle's definition of the good, as quoted at the beginning of the *Ethics*: "the good is what all desire" (bonum est quod omnia appetunt). In this determination good is related to the appetite. Good is what is desirable.

This relational moment is in itself important, but still a source of confusion. Hence it is held that the modern idea of value differs from the Thomistic 'bonum' "in being the idea of something absolute, whereas 'bonum' is something relational to an 'appetitus', it is being insofar as it is 'appetible'." [20] In this interpretation, however, the peculiar character of the definition of "good" has been neglected.

"Good" cannot be defined in the way formally required in a definition, by being reduced to something more common and prior. Since good is transcendental, there is not anything anterior to it. Hence it can only be elucidated indirectly, namely through something consequent, its proper effect.[21] Such a definition "a posteriori" is given by Aristotle. Therefore its meaning is not that something is good because and insofar as it is desired, but rather the opposite. Through the effect the cause is revealed, that is, the essence of good itself. Thomas'

[20] J. F. Crosby, *art. cit.* p. 476.

[21] *In I Ethic.*, lect. 1, 9: Prima autem non possunt notificari per aliqua priora, sed notificantur per posteriora, sicut causae per proprios effectus. Cum autem bonum proprie sit motivum appetitus, describitur per motum appetitus.



predilection for Aristotle's definition comes from its manifestation of good as an end (*finis*): "Since good is that which all things desire, and since this has the aspect of an end, it is clear that good implies the character of an end." [22] The proper influence of the final cause is to be desired.[23] The good raises, i.e. moves the appetite. So "the name good signifies not only a relation, but it signifies something upon which a relation is consequent along with the relation itself." [24]

Aristotle's definition is, as indicated, only a starting-point for further reflection. As such it functions in the different ways in which Thomas approaches the nature of the good and its convertibility with being.

## Good As the "Actuality" of Being

A first approach focusing on the idea that being is "actuality" can be found in the *Summa Theologiae* I, 5, 1. The argument consists of four steps which lead to the conclusion that "good" and "being" are identical. They are very enlightening for an insight into Thomas' line of thought.

"Good" is first identified with "desirable" (*appetibile*) with a reference to Aristotle's definition, just discussed. The second step is that "desirable" is identified with "perfect" (*perfectum*). "Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect, for all desire their own perfection." This step deserves particular attention. Here Aquinas does not connect "good" with *perfectivum*, as in other passages,[25] but

[22] *Summa Theol.* I, 5, 4: Bonum cum sit quod omnia appetunt, hoc autem habet rationem finis, manifestum est quod bonum rationem finis importat.

[23] *De Ver.* XXII, 2: Influere causae finalis est appeti et desiderari.

[24] *Ibid. XXI*, 6: Ipsum nomen boni . . . significat id ad quod sequitur respectus cum respectu ipso.

[25] See *De Ver.*, XXI, 1: Sic ergo primo et principaliter dicitur bonum ens perfectivum alterius per modum finis.

with *perfectum* which connotes something absolute.[26] What is perfective of something else, has to be perfect in itself. Hence every thing is good in so far as it is perfect, for as such it is desirable.

With the notion of "perfect" Thomas had dealt in the previous question 4 of the *Summa*. "Perfect" is what lacks nothing. It is defined by Aristotle in his *Physics* as "that beyond which there is nothing" (*cuius nihil est extra ipsum*).[27] It has nothing outside of itself; there is nothing that can be added on. Perfect has the character of "complete". The term 'perfectum' originally signifies the termination of a process. Perfect is what has been completed, what has attained its end (*perfectum est quod attingit ad finem ejus*).[28] What is this fulfillment?

That is revealed by a third step: "perfect" is identified with "act". "But everything is perfect so far as it is actual (*in actu*)." A thing is not completed until it has its own act.[29] A potency without act is imperfect, because a thing is then lacking its end. Perfection demands a reduction from potentiality to act. A thing is through the act what it can be and ought to be. Therefore every act is a perfection and a good.

The final step is that "actuality" is identified with "being". Thomas' argument goes on: "Now it is clear that a thing is good so far as it is a being (*ens*); for being (*esse*) is the actuality (*actualitas*) of every thing." With this step the analysis has arrived at the ontological foundation of the convertibility of "being" and "good".[30] For to be is to have actuality, to have

[26] *In De Hebdomadibus*, lect. 4: In bonis creatis est duplex bonitas . . . Alia vero bonitas consideratur in eis *absolute*, prout scilicet unumquodque dicitur bonum, inquantum est perfectum in esse et operari.

[27] Phys., III, 6, 207a 9 (Thomas, lect. 11, 385).

[28] *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis*, c. 1; *In De Divinis Nominibus* c. 1, lect. 2, 47; *In X Metaph.*, lect. 5, 2028.

[29] *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 53: Nihil enim completur nisi per proprium actum.

[30] Cf. *De Ver.* XXI, 2: Necesse est, quod omne ens sit bonum ex hoc



actuality is to have perfection, and to have perfection is to be good.

"Being in act constitutes the essence of the good."[31] However, this very basis is a real obstacle for our understanding of the dictum "being and good are convertible". In many respects this perspective is strange to us, for it entails an understanding of being running counter to our modern idea of reality. We are inclined to regard "being" as mere presency and not as a perfection. Is it something more than the bare fact of existing? Is being as such not indifferent, as Scheler claims, to good and bad?

Therefore it is the meaning of being which is determinative for the thesis of the convertibility. The novelty of Thomas' interpretation is that being has to be understood as actuality. Aquinas wants us to conceive of "being" as act, that is, as that through which a thing achieves its perfection. Being is the completion of everything,[32] it is the realization of its potentialities. Through its own act of being a thing is what it can be. Every being as being is therefore good. The transcendental "good" is in a literal sense an expression of the meaning of being.

But granted that "being" is a perfection, must it not mean that a fortiori acts with a fuller content, such as e.g. "life" and "wisdom", are perfections? Such an objection raised by Thomas himself (*Summa Theol.* I, 5, 2 obj. 4) is an indication that the purport of this understanding of being has not yet been sufficiently grasped. Being is not merely one act among many. It retains the status of act relative to all else that is

ipso quod esse habet . . . et ita relinquitur quod bonum et ens convertuntur.

[31] *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 37: Esse igitur actu boni rationem constituit. Cf. *De Malo* 1, 1: Ipsum esse maxime habet rationem appetibilis; *Summa Theol.* I-II, 18, 1: Unumquodque tantum habet de bono, quantum habet de esse.

[32] *Quodl.* XII, 5, 1: Esse est complementum omnis formae, quia per hoc completur quod habet esse, et habet esse cum est actu.

called " act ". It is the realization of whatever nature one considers. " Life and wisdom, Thomas replies, are desirable only so far as they are actual. Hence in each one of them some sort of being is desired." [33] For this reason " being " was called the most perfect of all in the previous question,[34] it includes all perfections. No value can be outside of being. " Every excellence (*nobilitas*) of any thing belongs to it according to its being. For man would have no excellence as a result of his wisdom unless through it he were wise." [35] With a personal emphasis rather unusual in his works Thomas states, " That which I call being (*esse*) is the actuality of all acts, and for this reason it is the perfection of all perfections ".[36]

The philosophical significance of this perspective is that reality is considered intrinsically meaningful. The good does not come to a thing from the outside, but it pertains to what is the most intimate in it, to its being. Hence being and good are convertible. This convertibility, however, does not exclude at all a non-identity within that which is, as will be seen more clearly in the last section. But this opposition is quite different from the distinction between being and value in modern philosophy, because it occurs on a transcendental level. Being can be divided with itself, it can lack the realization of its own possibilities. It is then deprived of its destination. This deviation from the norm, this perversion is the very character of evil. It is not a pure negation, but deficiency of the good that a thing ought to have.[37] Thomas' reply to the stock objection to the convertibility, based on the " reality " of evil runs as follows:

[33] *Summa Theol.* I, 5, 2 ad 4.

[34] *Ibid.*, I, 4, 1 ad 3: Ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium; comparatur enim ad omnia ut actus. Nihil enim habet actualitatem nisi inquantum est, unde ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum et etiam ipsarum formarum.

[35] *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 28.

[36] *De Pot.*, VII, 2 ad 9.

[37] *Summa Theol.* I, 48, 5 ad 1: Malum privatio est boni, et non negatio pura . . . defectus boni quod natum est et debet haberi.



" No being is said to be evil, considered as being, but only so far as it lacks being. Thus a man is said to be evil, because he lacks the being of virtue." [38]

This solution has been much criticized. It is, however, especially a philosophy viewing being as act and as ultimate perfection which is able to probe the genuine opposition between good and evil. When good is transcendental, there cannot be a *malum metaphysicum*. Evil is not some kind of being nor is it, as with Levinas, preservation of being which should be broken through. It is privation, lack of being and consequently of goodness. An evil thing lacks the actuality of its own potentialities, it lacks what it ought to be.[39]

## Good As the " Conformity " of Being, and Man

" Good " and " being " are really the same. Yet, as is underlined in *Summa Theologiae* I, 5, 1, they are not simply synonymous terms. Their convertibility should not be considered as entailing their equivalence. These terms refer to the same reality, but differ in idea, in thought. " Good " adds something which the term " being " does not itself express, namely the idea of desirableness (*ratio appetibilis*). What good adds, is the relation to the appetite. In this way Aristotle defined " good " as " what all desire ".

This relational aspect marks a second approach to the question, Why are being and good convertible? It can be found in Thomas' treatise *De Veritate*. The first disputed question is, " What is truth? " Thomas' tackling of this subject is quite remarkable. He does not discuss, as Anselm of Canterbury does in his dialogue *On Truth*, the meanings of truth in diverse areas in which truth is said to be found. Aquinas examines the prerequisite conditions in every investigation of what a thing

[38] *Ibid.*, I, 5, 3 ad 2.

[39] Cf. *De Pot.*, III, 6: Secundum autem quod malum est, non est actu, cum unumquodque dicitur malum ex hoc quod potentia est privata proprio et debito actu.

is. He attempts as it were to grasp the beginning of our thought, namely through the method of re-duction, by reducing our concepts to a first one. It is one of the few medieval texts in which a "transcendental method" is applied.

In every question as to what something is, we reduce the thing in question to a more common term, to which we add a specific difference. We may go on to ask with regard to this more common one what is it? and again we answer with a more universal term. This regress, however, cannot continue infinitely. Otherwise we would never arrive at knowledge of things. There must be something which is not known through anything else, but which is immediately evident to the intellect.[40]

That which the intellect first conceives and to which it reduces all its concepts, is "being" (*ens*). This insight is the prerequisite condition to any investigation of reality. Without this nothing can be understood.[41] Consequently all other conceptions must be regarded as an addition to "being". But how can something be added to it? For being is all-embracing; outside of being is nothing. Only in this sense, that other concepts express a mode of being which the term "being" does not yet itself express.[42]

This expression of being may occur in two directions. In one way, so that the mode expressed be some *special* mode of being (*specialis modus entis*). This particularization takes place in the ten categories which Aristotle listed. A second way of expression concerns a mode consequent to every being *in general.*

[40] *De Ver.*, I, 1: Sicut in demonstrabilibus oportet fieri reductionem in aliqua principia per se intellectui nota, ita investigando quid est unumquodque. Alias utrobique in infinitum iretur, et sic periret omnino scientia et cognitio rerum.

[41] *Ibid.*, I, 1: Illud autem quod primo intellectus concipit quasi notissimum et in quod conceptiones omnes resolvit est 'ens'. Cf. *In I Sent.* 8, 1, 3: Primum enim quod cadit in imaginatione intellectus, est ens, sine quod nihil potest apprehendi ab intellectu.

[42] *De Ver.*, I, 1: Sed secundum hoc aliqua dicuntur addere super ens, in quantum exprimunt modum ipsius entis qui nomine entis non exprimitur.



These expressions transcend the categories, they are "transcendental".

This general mode may concern that which follows upon every being in itself, or that which follows upon every being in relation to something else. That order can be negative, namely according to the division (*divisio*) of one thing from another. This is expressed by the word "something" (*aliquid*), a term which according to Thomas literally says "some other thing" (*quasi aliud quid*) and which indicates the distinction of a being from what it is not itself. Besides this, however, there is a more positive relational mode of being, the "conformity" (*convenientia*) of one being to any thing else. How is such a relation possible? It requires "something" which is not only characterized by its division from anything else, but whose nature is to accord with every being. Such a being is the soul which, as it is said in *De Anima* (III, 8, 431b 21), "in some way is all things". But in the soul there is a cognitive power and an appetitive power. The term "good", then, expresses the conformity of being to the appetite. What it adds to "being", is the relation to the human appetite, that is, the will.[43]

The order of Thomas' exposition in *De Veritate* I, 1 is just the opposite of that in *Summa Theologiae,* I, 5, 1. The latter starts with the notion of "good" and ends with its reduction to "being". In the former "being", "taken from the act of being (*actus essendi*)", is the first concept and the argument focusing on that upon which a relation is consequent, concludes with the transcendental "good".

In this analysis we can notice an "anthropocentric turn". It is in relation to the human faculties of cognition and appetite that the transcendentals "true" and "good" are derived.

[43] *Ibid.*, I, 1: In anima autem est vis cognitiva et appetitiva; convenientiam ergo entis ad appetitum exprimit hoc nomen 'bonum', unde in principio Ethicorum dicitur quod "bonum est quod omnia appetunt"; convenientiam vero entis ad intellectum exprimit hoc nomen 'verum'.

It appears, then, that the convertibility of "being" and "good" contains a statement about human nature. A human being is not just "something" (*aliquid*) beside other beings in the world. Peculiar to man is that he is himself by extending to all being in his knowing and willing. A human being is characterized by what we may call a "transcendental openness", owing to which he is conformable to every being. Therein the ontological goodness manifests itself.

The human will is not determined to any particular good. The nature of the will is its directedness to good as such;[44] its formal object is unlimited. On this spiritual openness the freedom of the human will is based. Human acts are really free acts. Human action is therefore the domain of the moral good. The gathering of being in human being is attended with the emerging of moral good. "Human acts are identical with moral acts."[45]

## Good and the Relation to the Origin

Up until now we followed two approaches to the convertibility of "being" and "good". These are interchangeable terms, first, because something is called "being" (*ens*) by reason of its "actuality", the "perfection of all perfections"; and, secondly, because being "accords with" the human appetite. On account of the first approach it is obvious, however, that the human will is not the cause of the goodness of things. The "anthropocentrism" in the medieval doctrine of transcendentals is of a kind different from that in modern philosophy. "Our will is not the cause of the goodness of things, but is moved by it as by its object."[46]

This leads us to Thomas' third approach to the thesis of the

[44] *Ibid.*, XXIV, 7: Natura vero rationalis ordinatur ad bonum simpliciter.

[45] *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 1, 3.

[46] *Summa Theol.* I, 20, 2: Voluntas nostra non est causa bonitatis rerum, sed ab ea movetur ab objecto.



convertibility. It is an approach characteristic of medieval thought. In medieval philosophy the question of the origin of being, of the source of the goodness of things is posed. The convertibility of "being" and "good" has a religious background, briefly indicated by Thomas in his *Commentary on the Sentences*: "Although being and good differ in thought, . . . yet they are really convertible, because all being (*esse*) is from the Good and towards the Good."[47]

The origin of things is not understood in a radical and integral way, unless it is conceived as "creation". For the terminus of the creation is being as being. That which is has been called into being out of nothing, it is *creatura*. And as such it is good.[48]

The source of being in an absolute sense can only be that which is itself complete act and consequently pure goodness, the divine goodness. Every agent acts for an end. God, however, causes other things, not from need but from generosity: He intends only to communicate His perfection, which is His goodness.[49] In the pregnant wording of Augustine (*De Doctrina Christiana* I, 32): "Inasmuch as God is good, we are; inasmuch as we are, we are good." Owing to the relation to this divine Origin, for a creature to be is to be good.[50] Being itself is a similitude of the divine goodness.[51]

Every being is good, because it is willed and loved by the Creator. "The love of God infuses and creates goodness in

[47] *In I Sent.* d. 1, Exp. textus: Quamvis bonum et ens different secundum intentiones, quia alia est ratio boni et entis; tamen convertuntur secundum supposita, eo quod omne esse est a bono et ad bonum.

[48] Cf. *In I Sent.* 8, 1, 3 obj. 2: Dicitur enim bonum a 'boare', quod est vocare.

[49] *Summa Theol.* I, 44, 4: Omne agens agit propter finem . . . Sed primo agenti, qui est agens tantum, non convenit agere propter acquisitionem alicujus finis, sed intendit solum communicare suam perfectionem, quae est ejus bonitas.

[50] *De Ver.*, XXI, 5: Esse creaturae non haberet rationem boni, nisi praesupposito ordine ad creatorem.

[51] *Ibid.*, XXII, 2 ad 2: Ipsum esse est similitudo divini bonitatis.

things." [52] That sheds new light on the relational aspect which, as we saw, the term "good" adds to "being". It is ultimately through the relation to the *creative* will that the goodness of being is constituted. This accounts for the desirableness of being itself and its relatedness to the human will.

In *De Potentia* III 6 Thomas against "the error" of the Manichees argues that all beings as beings are to be reduced to one principle, which is good. This argument, typical of the third approach to the convertibility, can be put in a broader historical context. There is evidence that the convertibility of "being" and "good" was formulated for the first time in reaction against the religious movement of the Kathars. This movement spread throughout Western Europe from the middle of the 12th century on, especially in southern France. It taught a typical Manichaean doctrine, characterized by a sharp dualism. Two creative principles oppose each other: a good one, cause of the spiritual world, and an evil one, cause of the visible and material world.[53]

It is generally recognized that the first medieval treatise on transcendentals is the *Summa de bono* of Philip the Chancellor, written about 1230. In the prologue the author states that he will mainly deal with the "good". And indeed the *Summa* is centered on the transcendentality of this principle. Undoubtedly, this intention has to be related to the explicit reference in the prologue to the 'Manichaei' "who ignore the nature of common principles".[54] So the beginning of the doctrine of transcendentals may be regarded as the philosophical response to the challenge of the Kathars. "Being and good are convertible."

[52] *Summa Theol.* I, 20, 2: Amor Dei est infundens et creans bonitatem in rebus.

[53] See R. Nelli, *La philosophie du Catharisme. Le dualisme radical au XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1975).

[54] Cf. H. Pouillon, "Le premier Traité des Propriétés transcendentales *Summa de bono* du Chancelier Philippe," in *Revue néoscolastique de philosophie* 42 (1939), 40-77. A critical edition of the *Summa de bono* has not been published yet.



But against this foundation of the transcendentality of "good" an objection has been raised in a study on the doctrine of transcendentals. K. Bärthlein argues that, when the goodness of being rests upon a relationship to God, precisely by this relation "good" would lose its transcendental character. For "good" does not concern being as such any more, but solely created being, that is, being already restricted to the categories. Moreover, neither is the other term of the relationship a transcendental entity, but rather a transcendent one, namely God. Therefore, the medieval doctrine of transcendentals "has not constituted itself as a really transcendental philosophy." [55] This criticism necessitates a further consideration of the relation of "good" to God.

Why is God called "good"? Is it because He is the cause of goodness in things? This opinion is rejected by Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae* I, 13, 2. If the words "God is good" signified no more than, "God is the cause of good things", it would follow that the name "good" would be said of Him as properly the name of something posterior to Him, by way of a secondary sense. "Good" is not a name which is said of God negatively or which signifies His relation to creatures, but it is said of God "absolutely and affirmatively". Good is predicated substantially of God. "So when we say 'God is good', the meaning is not, 'God is the cause of goodness', or, 'God is not evil'; but the meaning is, 'Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God', and in a higher way. Hence it does not follow that God is good because He causes goodness; but rather, on the contrary, He causes goodness in things because He is good." [56]

[55] K. Bärthlein, *Die Transzendentalienlehre der alten Ontologie, I: Die Transzendentalienlehre im Corpus Aristotelicum* (Berlin/New York, 1972), 11 ff.

[56] *Summa Theol.* I, 13, 2: Cum igitur dicitur, 'Deus est bonus', non est sensus, 'Deus est causa bonitatis', vel 'Deus non est malus', sed est sensus, 'Id quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis praeexistit in Deo', et

God is goodness. All other things have received goodness. The relation of things to their divine origin, expressed in the Judeao-Christian idea of "creation", is explained by Thomas philosophically in terms of "participation". He subscribes to Aristotle's criticism of this Platonic notion: there are no separate selfsubsisting Forms of natural things. But Aquinas recognizes the legitimacy of this doctrine with regard to what is most common (*maxime communia*),[57] that is, to the transcendentals. Explicit arguments for this application are not given. But it is not difficult to grasp these reasons. The doctrine of participation enables conceiving the transcendence of Goodness and the transcendentality of good together. God is good by virtue of his Essence. All that is created is and is good, in so far as it participates in what is essentially good, the exemplary cause of every goodness which Plato called "the Idea of Good". So Thomas claims that "in this respect the opinion of Plato can be held".[58]

Finally it appears that the thesis of the convertibility of being and good does not stand in opposition to the view that the Good is "beyond being". For Thomas the transcendentality of good is not incompatible with the transcendence of the One Who is (essentially) good.

## Good as End

"Good" is something desirable and thus it becomes the end of the appetite. "Good" has the aspect of a final cause. Conversely, the end has, because it is desirable, the aspect of

hoc quidem secundum modum altiorem. Unde ex hoc non sequitur quod Deo competat esse bonum inquantum causat bonitatem, sed potius e converso quia est bonus bonitatem rebus diffundit.

[57] *In De Divinis Nominibus*, proemium.

[58] *De Ver.* XXI, 4: Et quantum ad hoc opinio Platonis sustineri potest. Cf. *Summa Theol.* I, 103, 2: Bonum autem universale est quod est per se et per suam essentiam bonum, quod est ipsa essentia bonitatis; bonum autem particulare est quod est participative bonum.



"good". Therefore, "'Good' and 'end' have the same nature, since the good is that which all desire."[59] In this connection, however, a question might be raised: When being as such is good, when the convertibility of being and good is an original "datum", why should the good still require to be striven for, why should it still retain the character of an end? The peculiarity of "good" consists in its constituting a dynamic. The expression of this dynamic is that, although "being" and "good" are convertible, yet "being absolutely" and "good absolutely" are not identical in any created reality.[60] This non-identity proceeding from the structure of finite being is put forward by Thomas in his reply to the above-mentioned objection, namely the statement of Boethius, "I perceive that in nature the fact that things are good is one thing, that they are is another."

In *Summa Theologiae* I, 5, 1 ad 1 Thomas argues that something is "being absolutely" (*ens simpliciter*) by the act according to which it is primarily distinguished from that which is only in potency. This act is the very substantial being of each thing. Therefore, it is by its substantial being that everything is said to have being absolutely. But by any further act, by acts added to being absolutely it is said to have "being in a certain sense" (*secundum quid*). E.g. "to be white" signifies being "in a certain sense", since this act is added to something already actual.

With regard to "good" the converse applies. "Good" expresses perfection and has therefore the character of being "ultimate" and "complete". For this reason what has being "absolutely", that is, substantial being, is not good "absolutely", but only "in a certain sense", for insofar as it is actual,

[59] *In II Metaph.*, lect. 4, 317: Eadem enim ratio boni et finis est; nam bonum est quod omnia appetunt, ut dicitur in I Ethic.

[60] *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 20: Non igitur cuilibet creaturarum idem est esse et bonum esse simpliciter, licet quaelibet earum bona sit in quantum est.

it has some perfection. A thing is said to be good "absolutely", viewed in its complete actuality, that is, in having the ultimate perfection which it ought to have.

In this way, therefore, regarded in its *first* actuality, a thing is being "absolutely" and good "in a certain sense"; regarded in its *complete* actuality, it is good "absolutely" and being "in a certain sense". Hence the saying of Boethius is to be referred to the distinction between being good absolutely and being absolutely.

The significance of this reply is that it permits us to see the limits of the thesis of the convertibility. Every being as being is good. But Thomas admits that in an absolute sense there may be a real distinction. A thing can be called "good" both from its being (*esse*) and from some added property. By reason of the first goodness, being is convertible with good, and conversely. But by reason of the second, good is a division of being.[61] An unvirtuous man is "good in a certain sense", insofar as he is a being; yet he is not "good absolutely", but rather evil, because he lacks the perfection he ought to have. The plenitude of being (*plenitudo essendi*) belongs to the essence of good.[62]

Every being strives to be complete in goodness.[63] Wherein does this completeness, goodness in its absolute sense, consist? According to Thomas, as a thing is related as it should be to everything outside itself,[64] by which it is perfected in relation

[61] *De Ver.* XXI, 2, ad 6: Aliquid potest dici bonum et ex suo esse et ex aliqua proprietate vel habitudine superaddita. . . . Ratione igitur primae bonitatis ens *convertitur* cum bono et e converso, sed ratione secundae bonum *dividit* ens. This real distinction has been misunderstood by J. F. Crosby, *art. cit.* p. 479, when he holds: "Nevertheless, it is still true to say that in Thomistic philosophy good is reduced to substantial being, for the 'actus superadditi' are conceived as inhering in the substance, and as being continuous with it, and really completing it."

[62] *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 18, 1.

[63] *De Ver.*, XXII, 7: . . . appetat naturaliter se esse completum in bonitate.

[64] *Ibid.*, XXI, 5: . . . ut debito modo se habent ad omnia quae sunt extra ipsum.



to other beings. This consideration leads us again to an important philosophical insight. Let us summarize. "Being" and "good" are convertible, because being is perfected in *itself* by its first act of subsisting. At the same time, however, there exists a non-identity between being and good "absolutely" which appears to lie in the order towards *other* beings. So the convertibility of the "plenitude of being" and "good" in the absolute sense contains the need of *being-itself* in *relation* to other beings.

And this relationship is not, as with Levinas, an estrangement from a thing's own being, but rather its completion. For the act which renders being "absolutely good" is the completion of the "actuality" of being—the central moment in the first approach to the convertibility of being and good. This completion concerns the faculties and powers of a thing, it consists in its activity. Actuality requires activity.[65] This is the act through which a being attains its complete goodness, referring itself to other beings. Operation is the "second act", striven for by every thing as its end.[66]

The final end, to which a thing is directed in its activity, cannot be anything else than that which is essentially good, the divine goodness.[67] This was also the Origin of things—the central moment in the third approach to the convertibility. The Origin and End of all things prove to be identical. So, as Thomas points out, reality is dominated by a circular motion:

[65] See *De Spiritual. Creat.*, a. 11: Sicut autem ipsum *esse* est *actualitas* quaedam essentiae, ita *operari* est *actualitas* operativae potentiae seu virtutis: *Summa Theol.* I, 54, 1: Actio enim est proprie actualitas virtutis, sicut esse est actualitas substantiae, vel essentiae.

[66] *De Ver.* I, 10 ad 3: Secunda perfectio est operatio, quae est finis rei . . . Ex parte secundae consurgitur in ipsa ratio bonitatis, quae consurgit ex fine; *In II De caelo*, lect. 4, 334: Quaelibet enim res appetit suam perfectionem sicut suum finem, operatio autem est ultima perfectio . . . operatio autem est actus secundus, tamquam perfectio et finis operantis.

[67] *Summa Theol.* I, 44, 4: Divina bonitas est finis omnium rerum. Cf. the series of arguments in *Sum. cont. Gent.* III, 17.

"Sic in rebus quaedam *circulatio* inveniatur, dum a bono egredientia, in bonum tendunt." [68] The circular motion is the most perfect motion, because its starting point is united with its end. There is nothing that can be added on.

The circulation-doctrine is a central but neglected feature of Thomas' thought.[69] The application of this view to *created* reality is all the more striking, because at present the straight line is usually thought to be the most adequate symbol of the Christian interpretation of reality in its dynamic. Medieval reflections show us another picture, based on the idea that the Origin and End of all things, the Alpha and Omega, are the same, namely goodness itself.

That from which the things come forth, turns out to be their final end. In this circulation a special position pertains to the human being—the central moment in the second approach to the convertibility. Owing to his transcendental openness man alone is able to refer himself explicitly to his Origin. Only he addresses himself expressly to God in his acts of knowing and loving. It is in the rational creature that the circulation of reality is completed.

In the analysis of good as an end we noted successively: "activity" as second act, God as final end, and the particular importance of human acts. It becomes clear, then, that in the process towards good as an end the three approaches to the dictum "Being and good are convertible", we discussed, are integrated: being as actuality, the "conformity" of being and man, and the relation to the Origin, the Good itself. And it is the doctrine of the transcendentality of good which underlies this comprehensive philosophical view.

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[68] *In IV Sent.* 49, 1, 3, 1.

[69] Cf. my paper "The Circulation-motive and Man in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas," to appear in: *The Act of the 6th Internatl. Congress of Medieval Philosophy*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982.