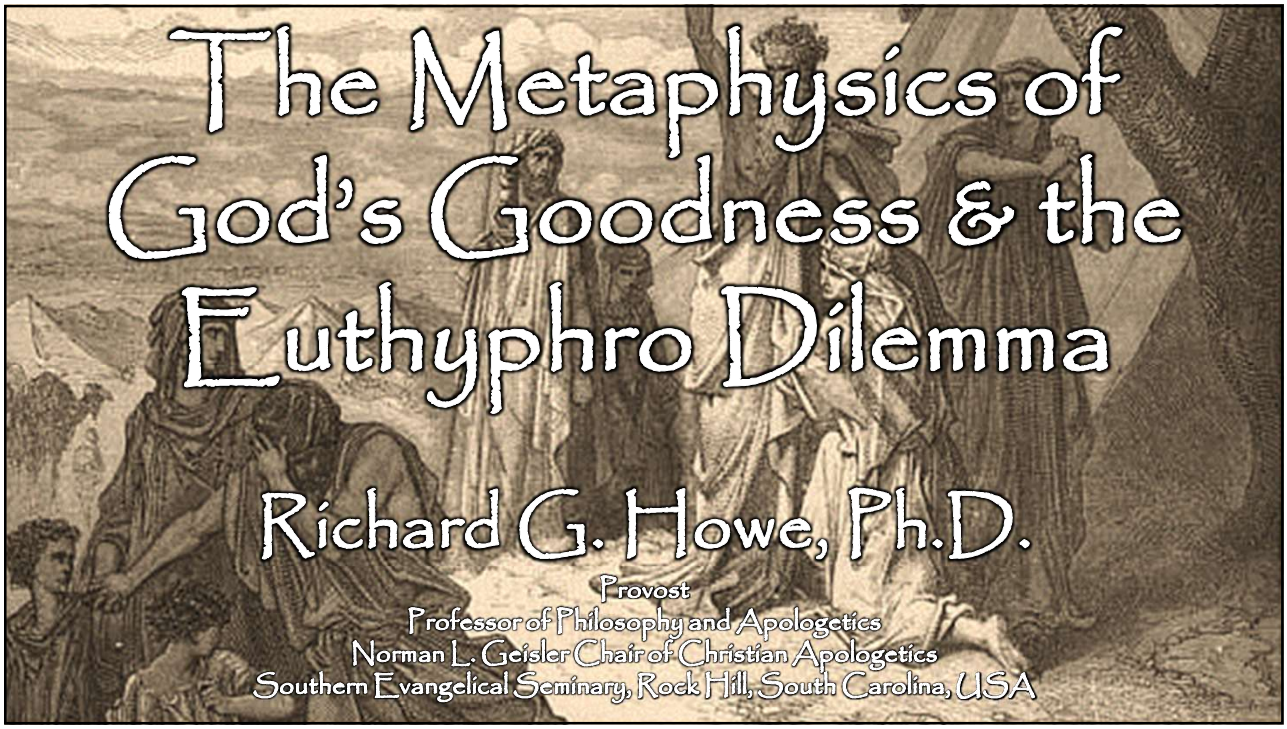
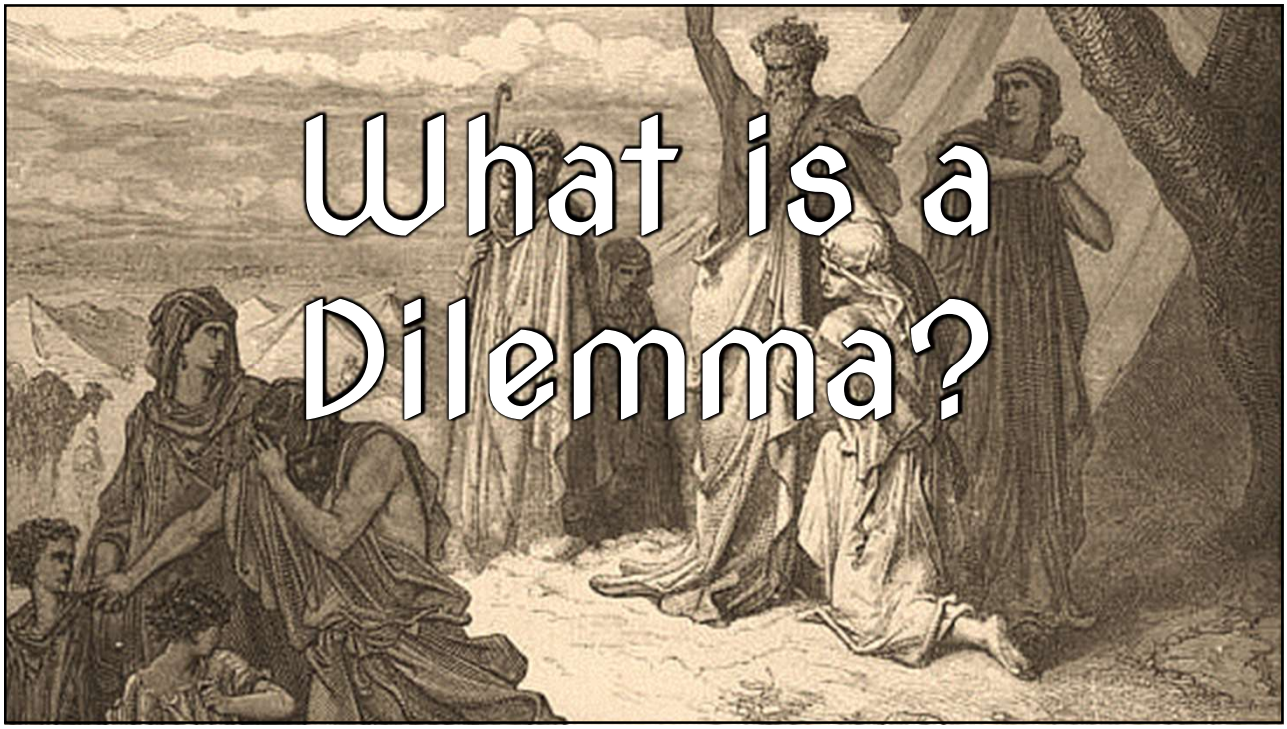
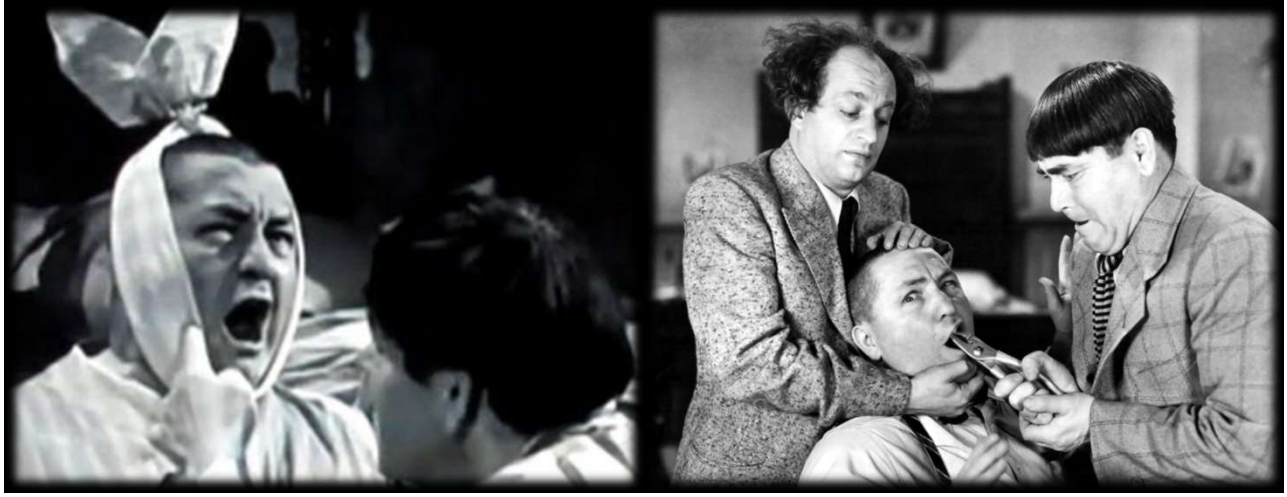

The Metaphysics of God's Goodness & the Euthyphro Dilemma
Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.
Provost
Professor of Philosophy and Apologetics
Norman L. Geisler Chair of Christian Apologetics
Southern Evangelical Seminary, Rock Hill, South Carolina, USA


What is a Dilemma?

A dilemma is a choice between two options:

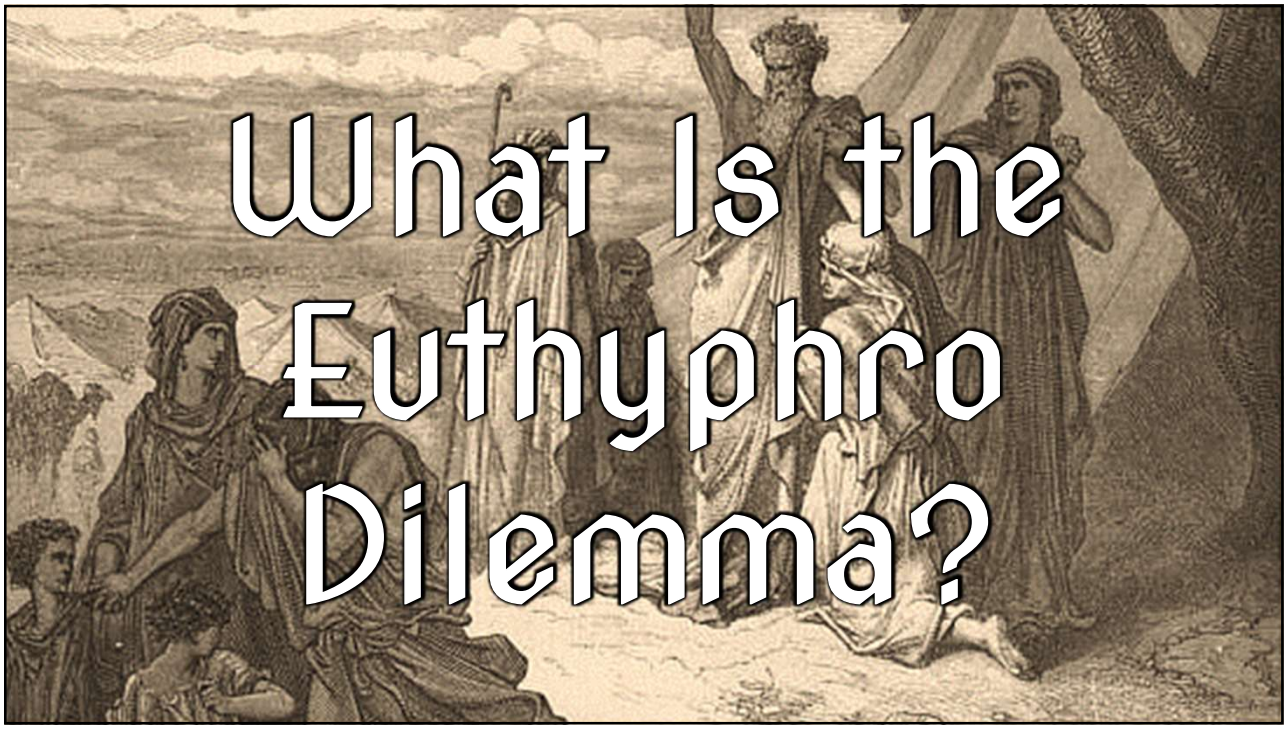
either when both options are desirable but only one can be chosen ...

or when both options are less than desirable and one must be chosen.

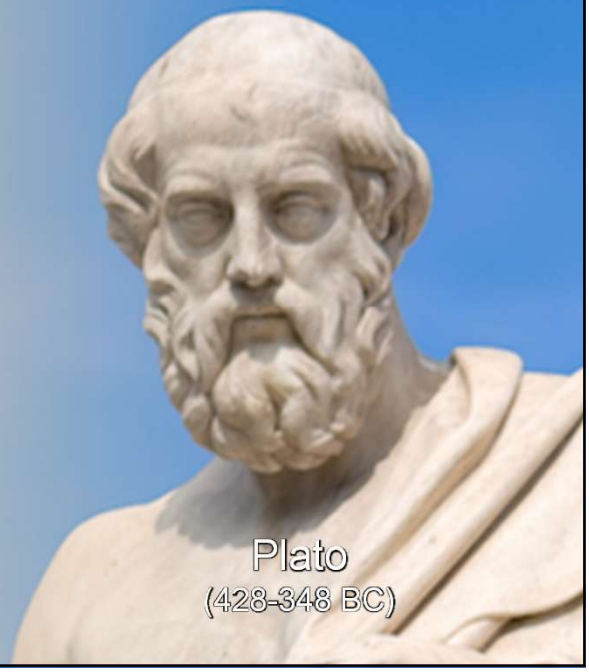


When there are only two possible choices, then it is a true dilemma.

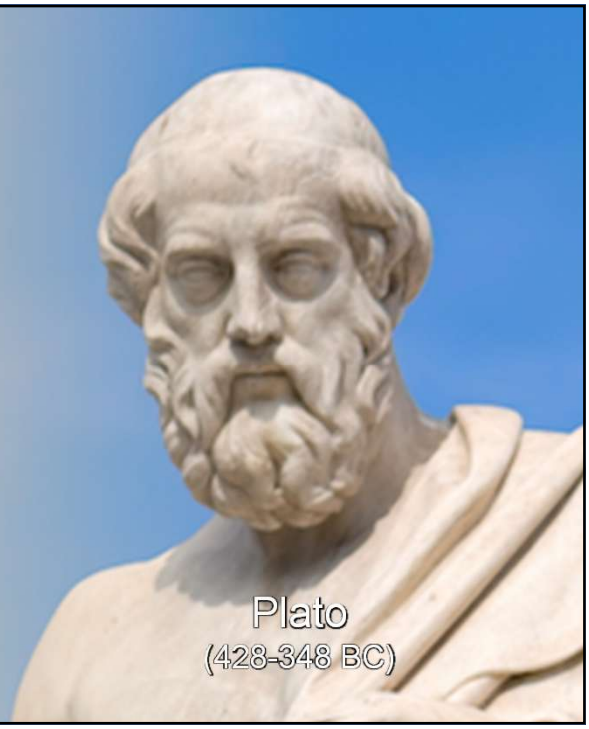
If a dilemma is passed off as a true dilemma when in fact there is a third (or more) option, then this is a false dilemma.



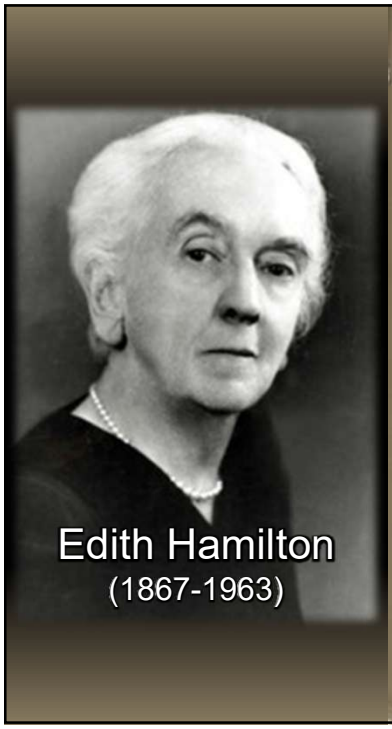
The name 'Euthyphro' comes from the title of a dialogue written by Plato.



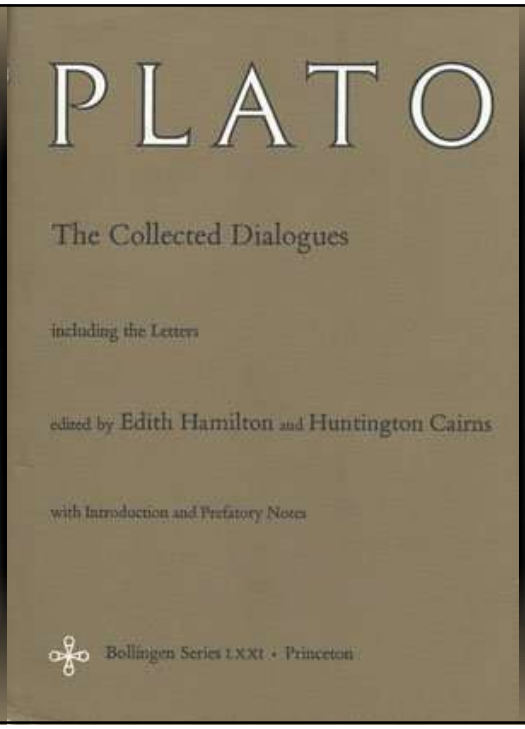
Socrates meets Euthyphro along the way heading to court to prosecute his own father for murder.

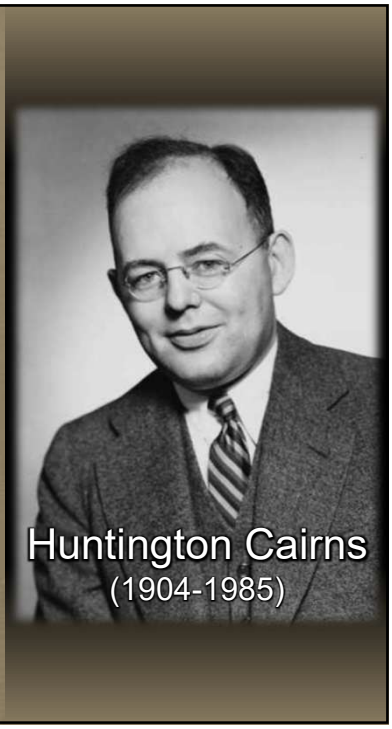


Plato
(428-348 BC)



Edith Hamilton
(1867-1963)

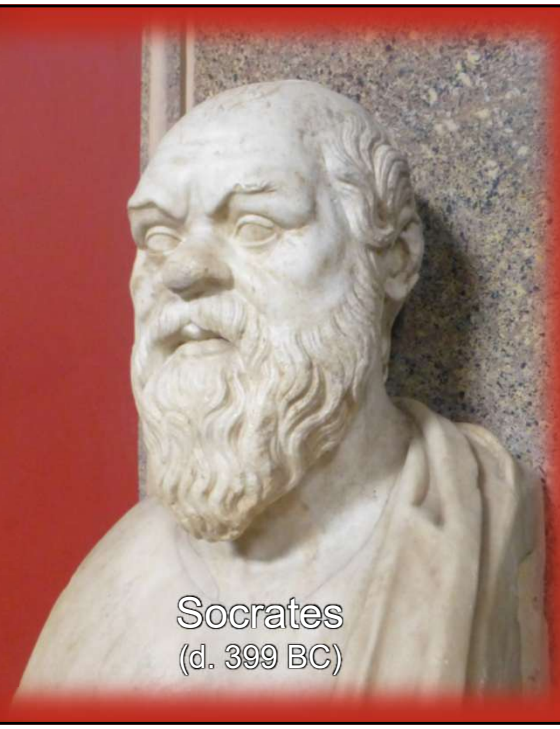




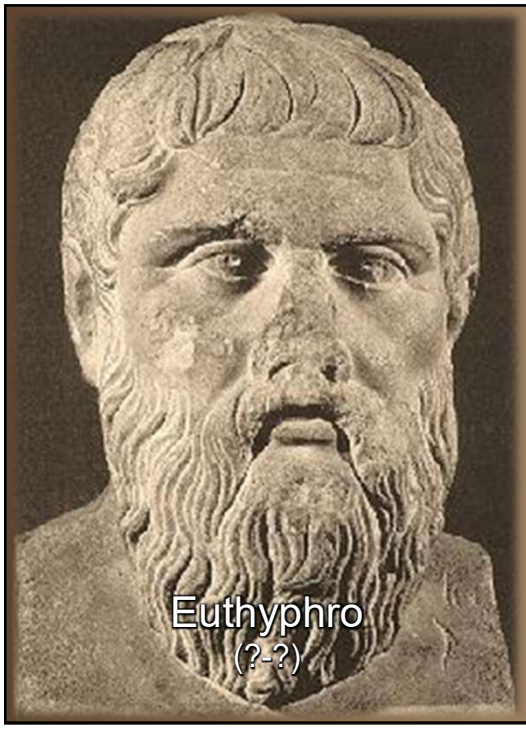
Huntington Cairns
(1904-1985)

"So, in the name of heaven, tell me now about the matter you just felt sure you know quite thoroughly. State what you take piety [εὐσεβὲς, eusebes] *and impiety* [ἀσεβὲς, asebes] *to be with reference to murder and all other cases. Is not the holy* [ὅσιον, hosion] *always one and the same in thing in every action, and, again, is not the unholy* [ἀνόσιον, anosion] *always opposite to the holy, and like itself? And as unholiness does it not always have its one essential form* [ἰδέαν, idean]*, which will be found in everything that is unholy? ... Then tell me. How do you define the holy* [ὅσιον, hosion] *and the unholy* [ἀνόσιον, anosion]*?"*

[*Euthyphro*, 5d, trans. Lane Cooper (© 1941) in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1962), 173]



Socrates
(d. 399 BC)



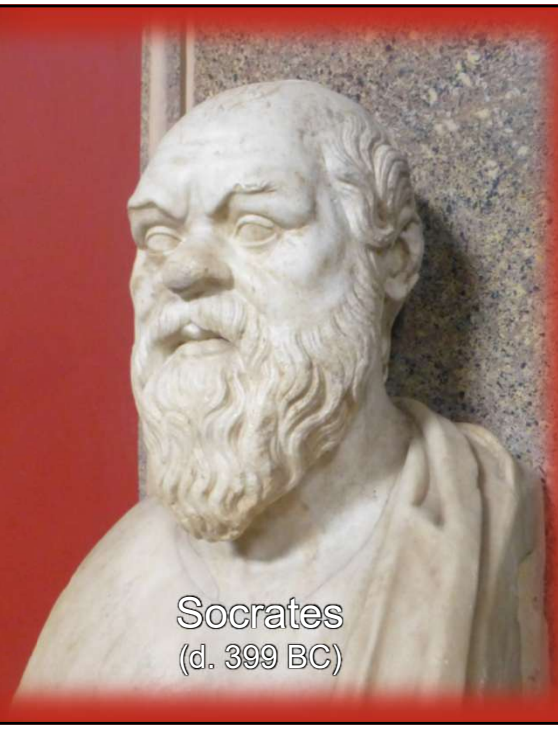
Euthyphro
(?-?)

"Well, then, I say that the holy is what I am now doing, prosecuting the wrongdoer .... And not to prosecute would be unholy."

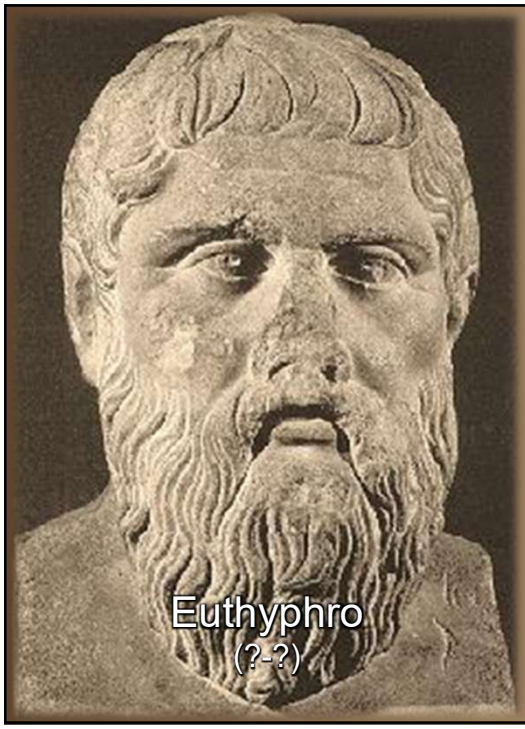
[*Euthyphro*, 5e, trans. Cooper]

"Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. ... Show me what, precisely, this ideal is."

[*Euthyphro*, 6d, trans. Cooper]



Socrates
(d. 399 BC)



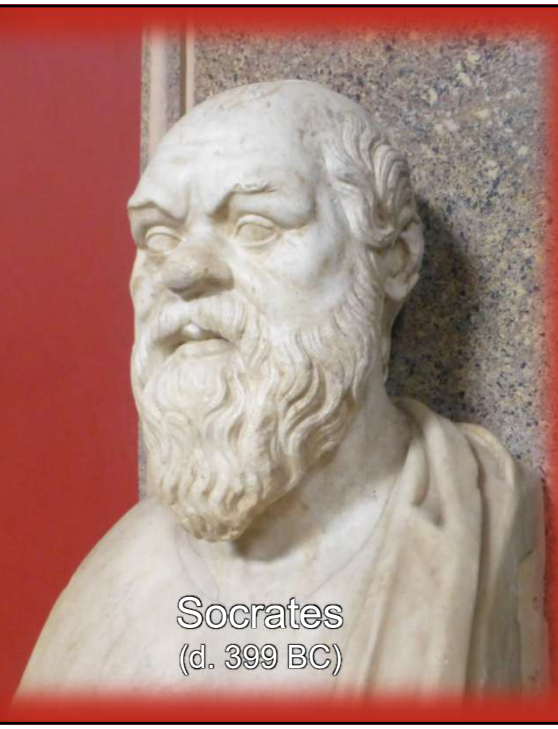
Euthyphro
(?-?)

"Well, then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy."

[*Euthyphro*, 6e, trans. Cooper]

"Is what is holy, holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?"

[*Euthyphro*, 10a, trans. Cooper]



Socrates
(d. 399 BC)

In its contemporary version, the Euthyphro Dilemma asks:

Is X good because God wills X

or

does God will X because X is good?

Sometimes the Euthyphro Dilemma is worded:

Is X good because God commands X

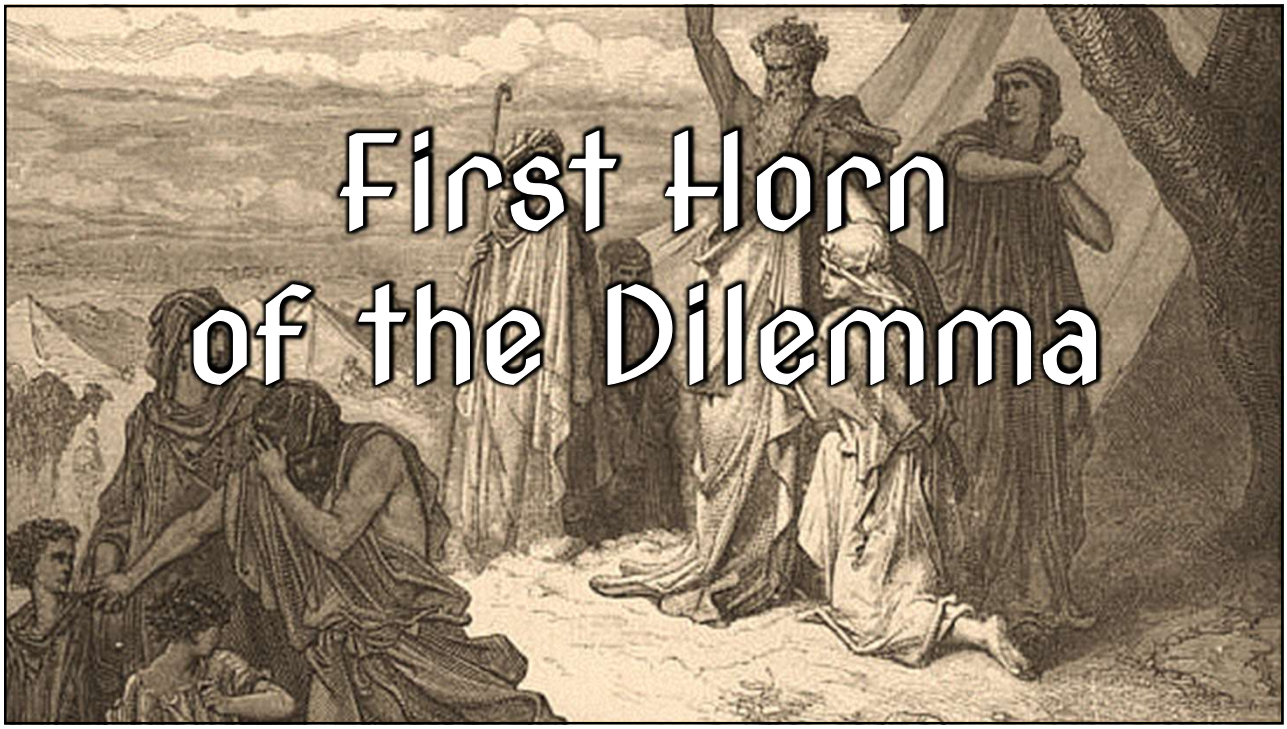
or

does God command X because X is good?

These two options seem to be exhaustive.

The Euthyphro is usually offered as a true dilemma.

Since neither option is desirable, the options are sometimes regarded as the "horns" of the dilemma.



Is X good because God wills it?

This option has come to the known as the

Divine Command Theory.

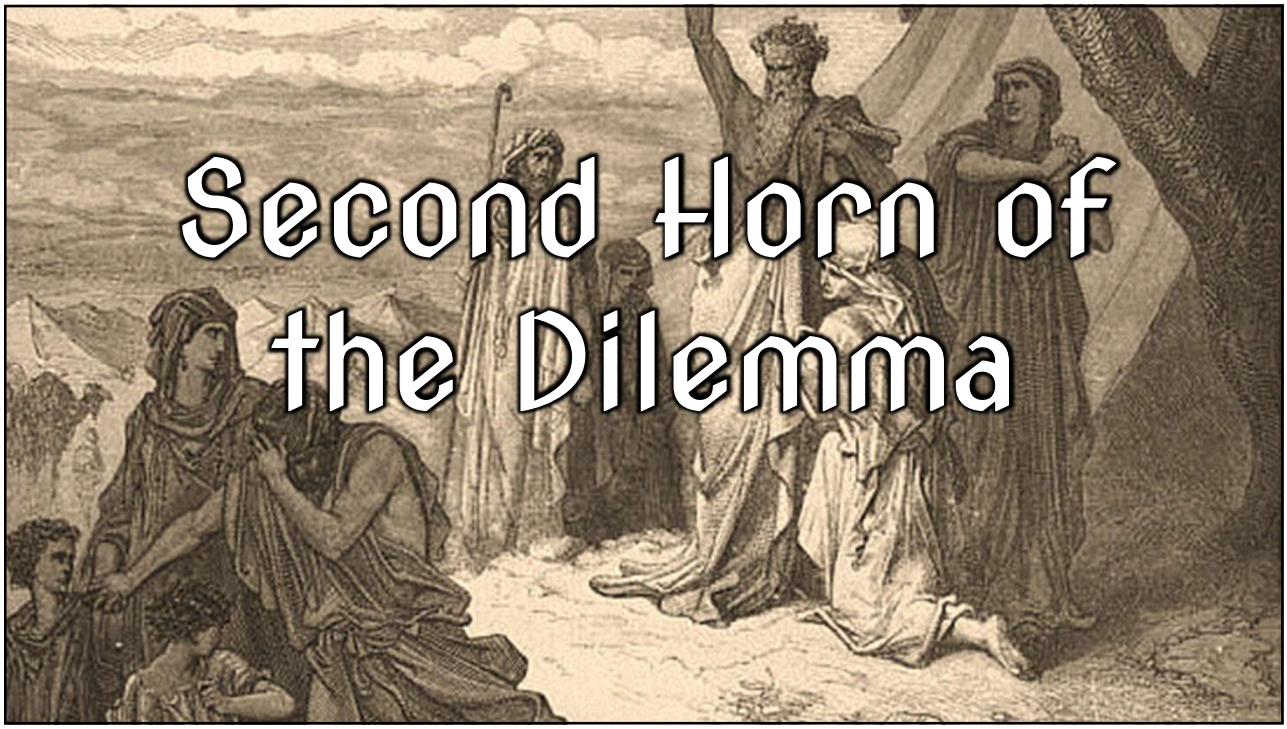
Note that some use the expression 'Divine Command Theory' as referring, not to what makes some action good, but what makes the action obligatory.

Suggested Problems with the First Horn

First, if X is good because God wills it, then this would seem to mean that God could make something good by willing or commanding it.

Thus, if God willed rape (or racism, or murder, or any other sin) then it would be good.

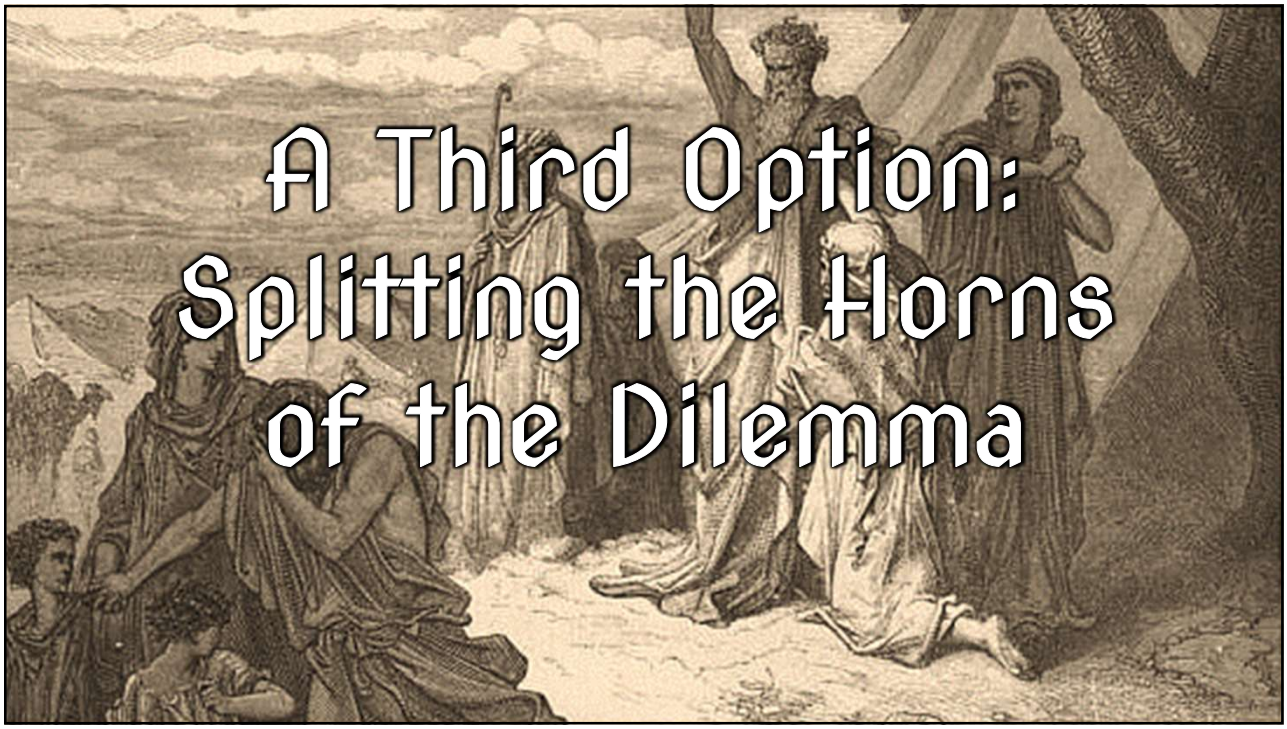
Second, if X is good because God wills it, then this would make the statement "God's will is good" to be "God's will is what God wills" which is an empty claim; what philosophers call "trivially true."



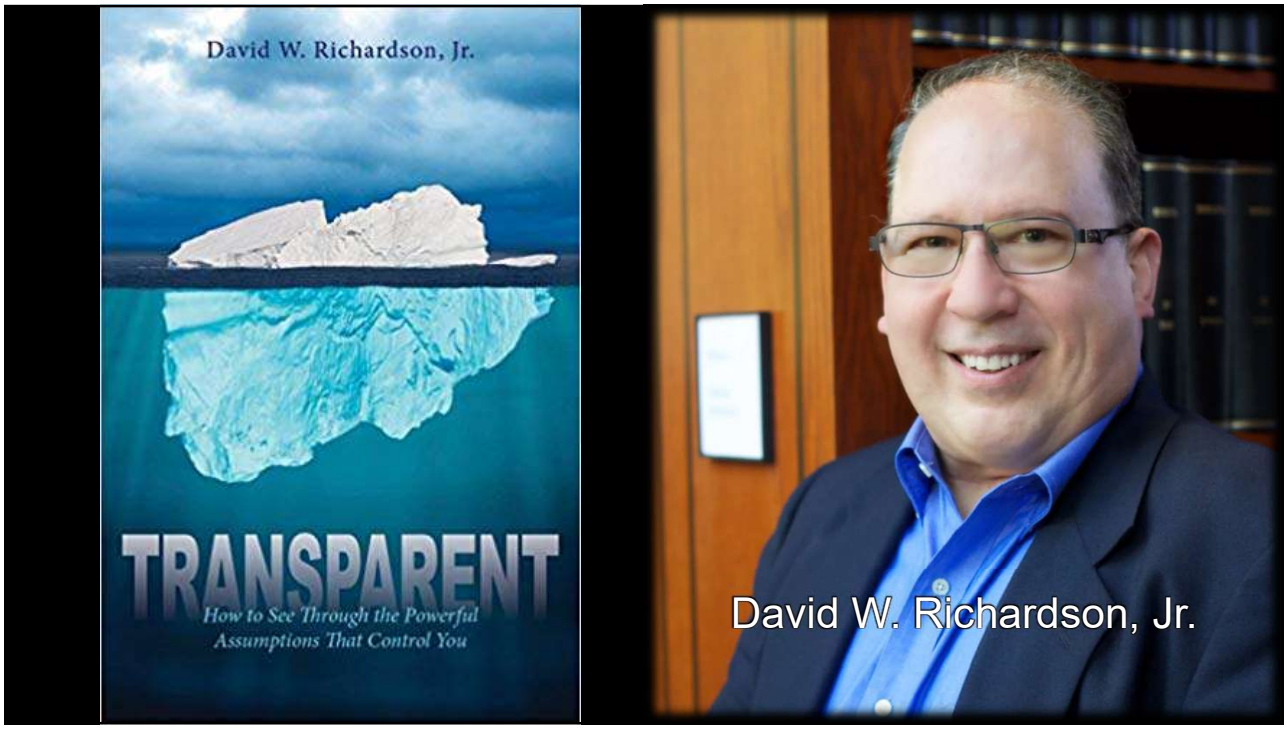
The second option says God wills X because X is good.

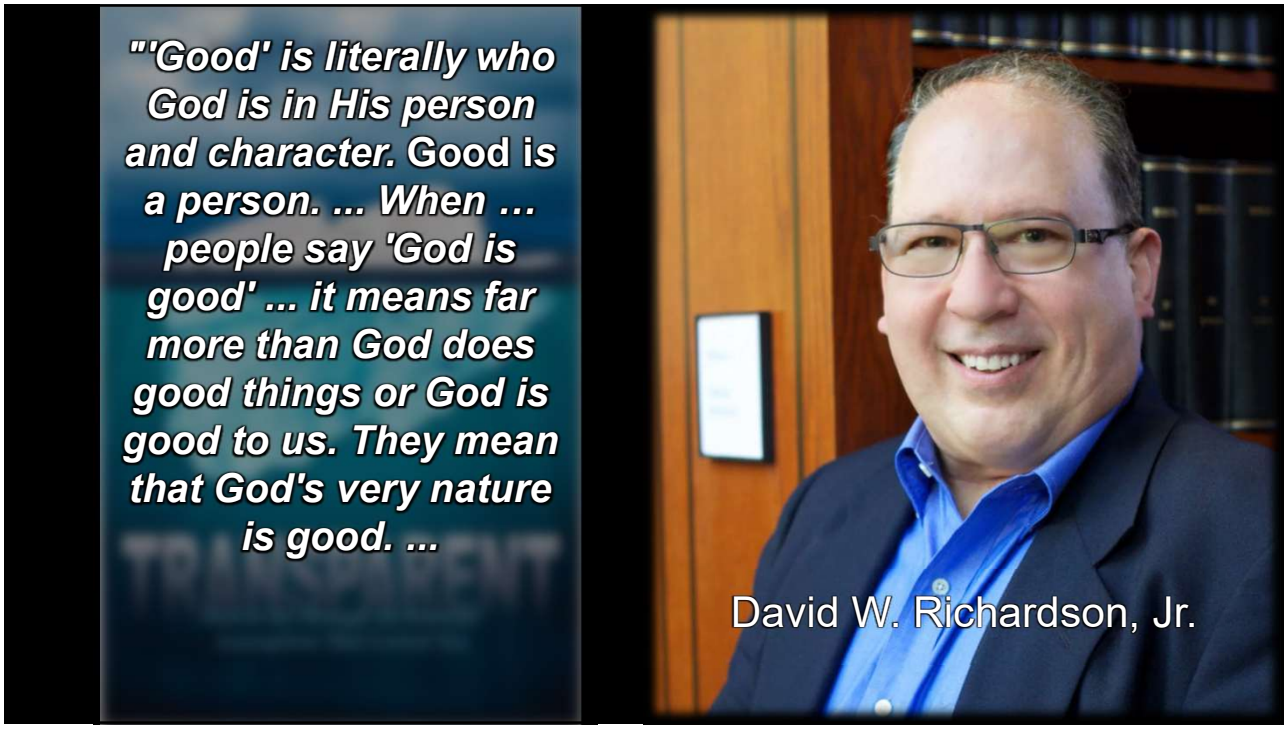
Suggested Problems with the Second Horn

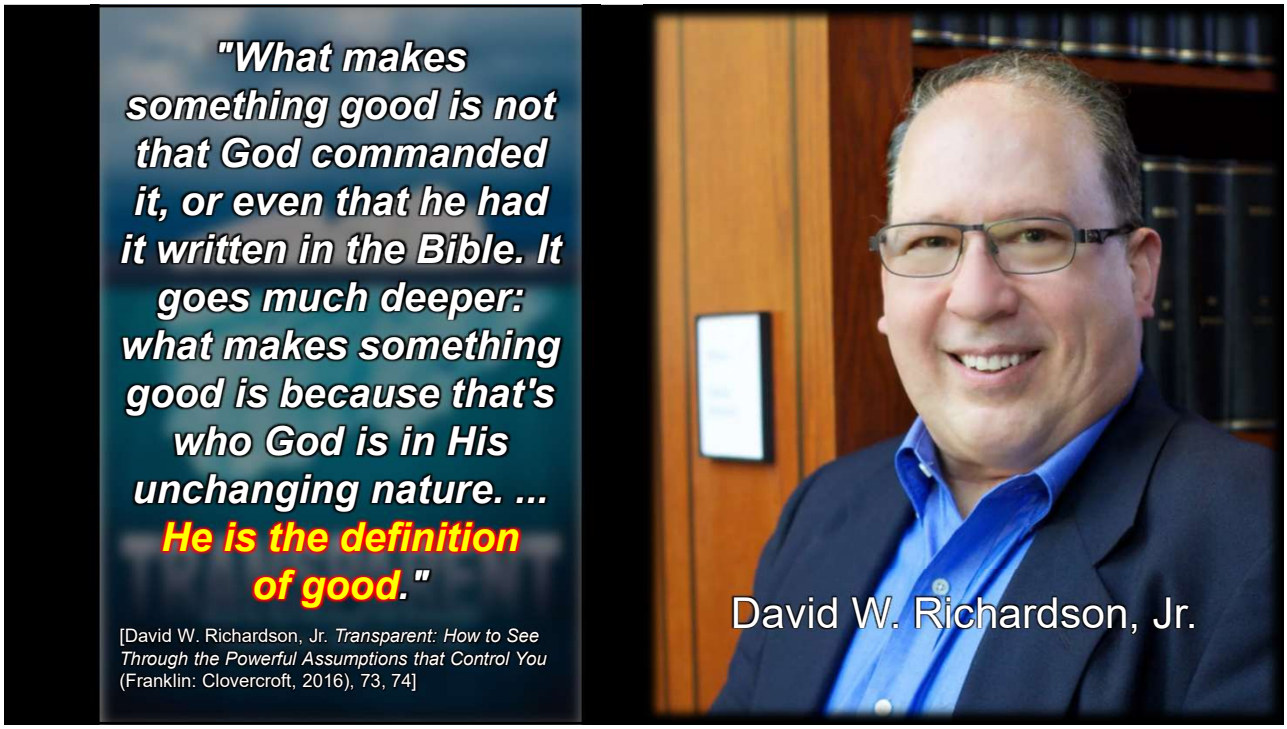
This seems to imply a standard of good that is outside of and above God.

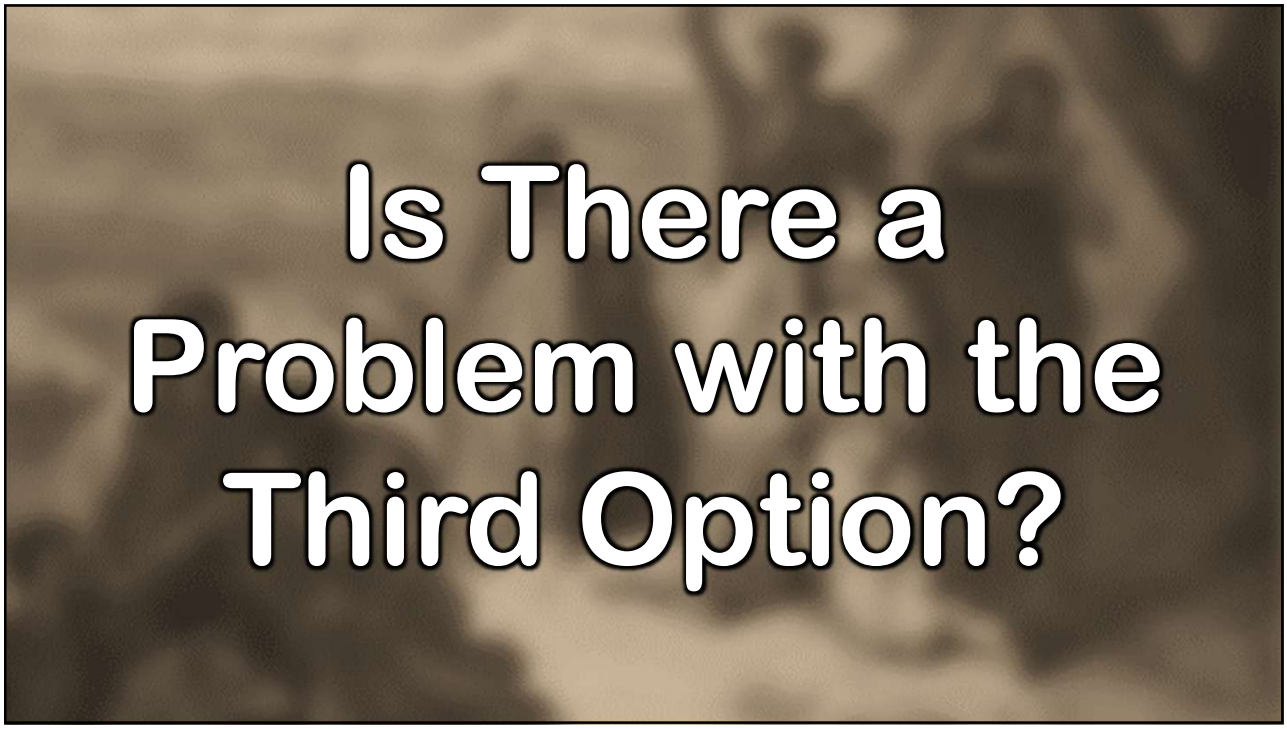


Good is ultimately grounded in the nature of God.

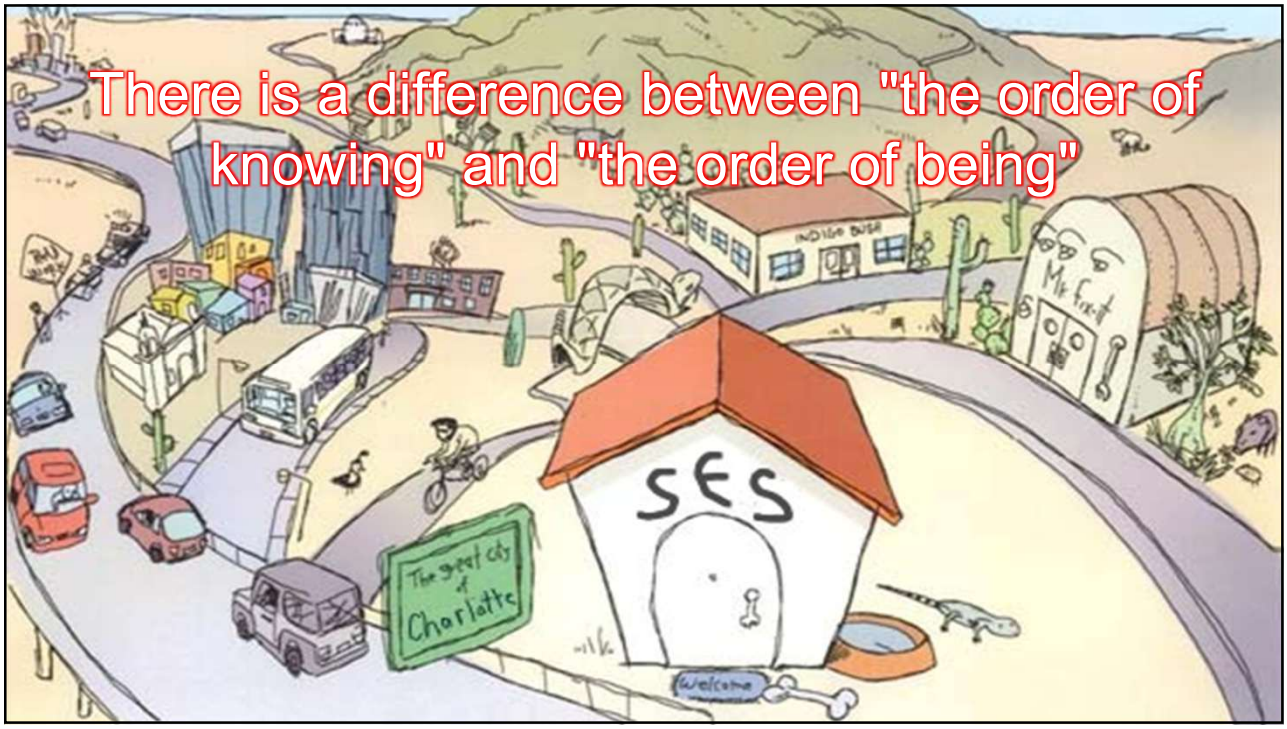

David W. Richardson, Jr.
TRANSPARENT
How to See Through the Powerful Assumptions That Control You
David W. Richardson, Jr.

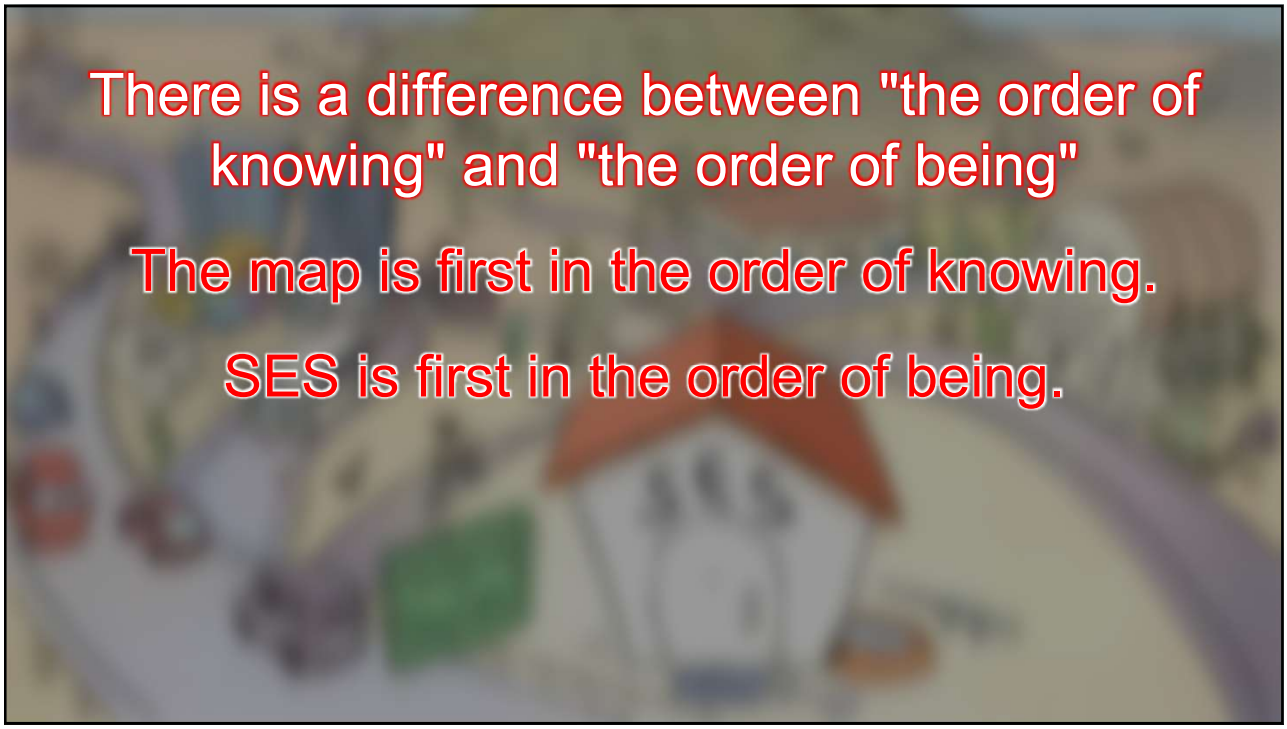

"'Good' is literally who God is in His person and character. Good is a person. ... When ... people say 'God is good' ... it means far more than God does good things or God is good to us. They mean that God's very nature is good. ...
David W. Richardson, Jr.

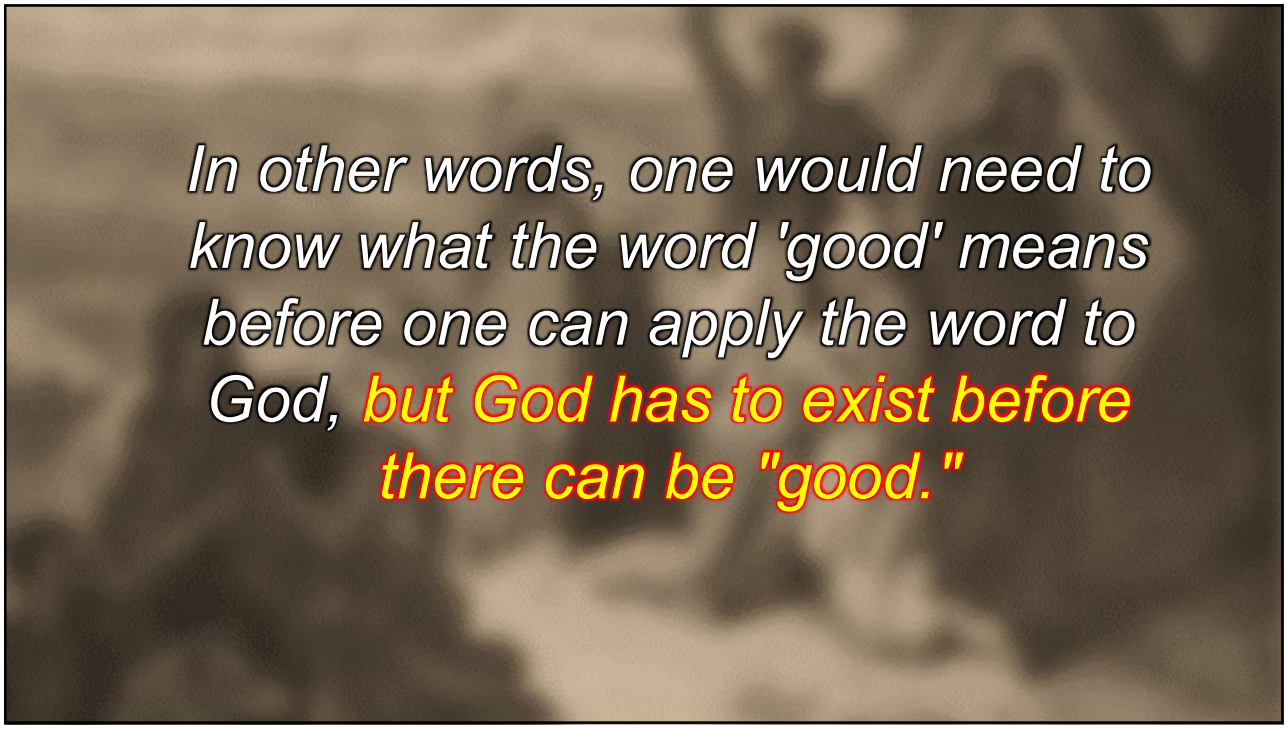

"What makes something good is not that God commanded it, or even that he had it written in the Bible. It goes much deeper: what makes something good is because that's who God is in His unchanging nature. ... He is the definition of good."
[David W. Richardson, Jr. Transparent: How to See Through the Powerful Assumptions that Control You (Franklin: Clovercroft, 2016), 73, 74]
David W. Richardson, Jr.

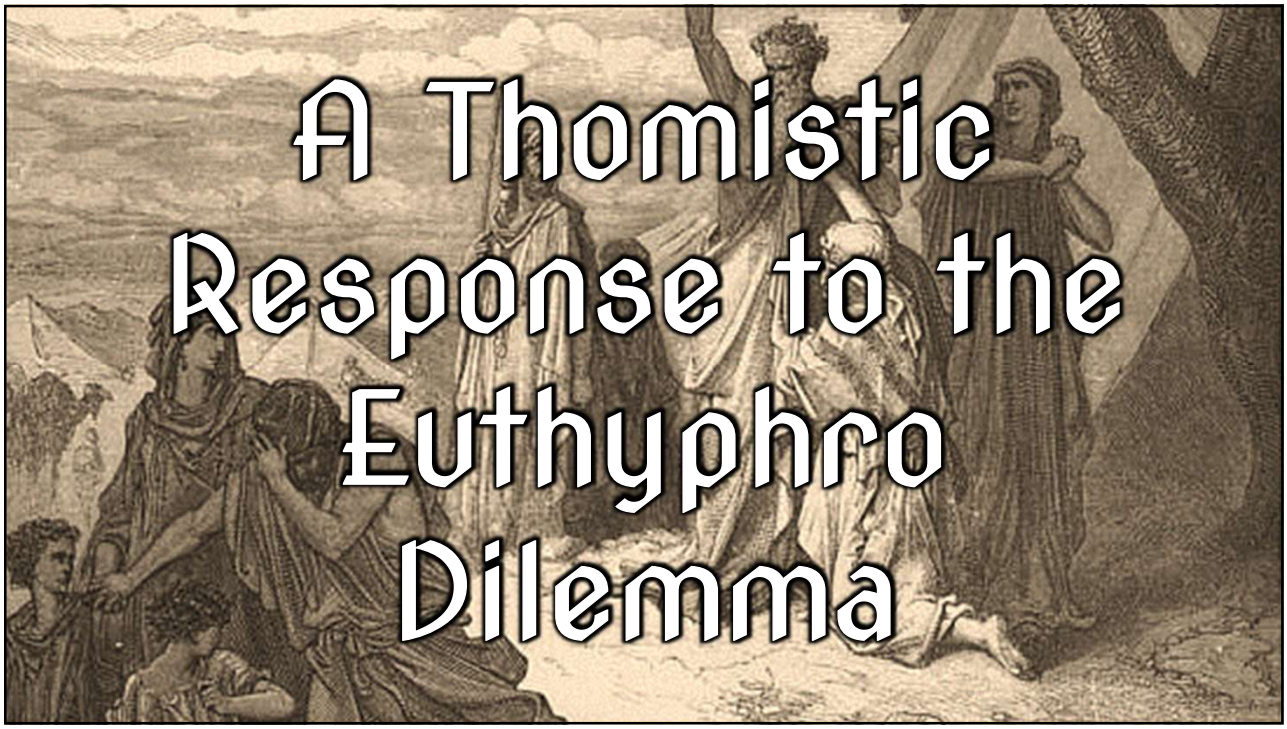

Is There a Problem with the Third Option?

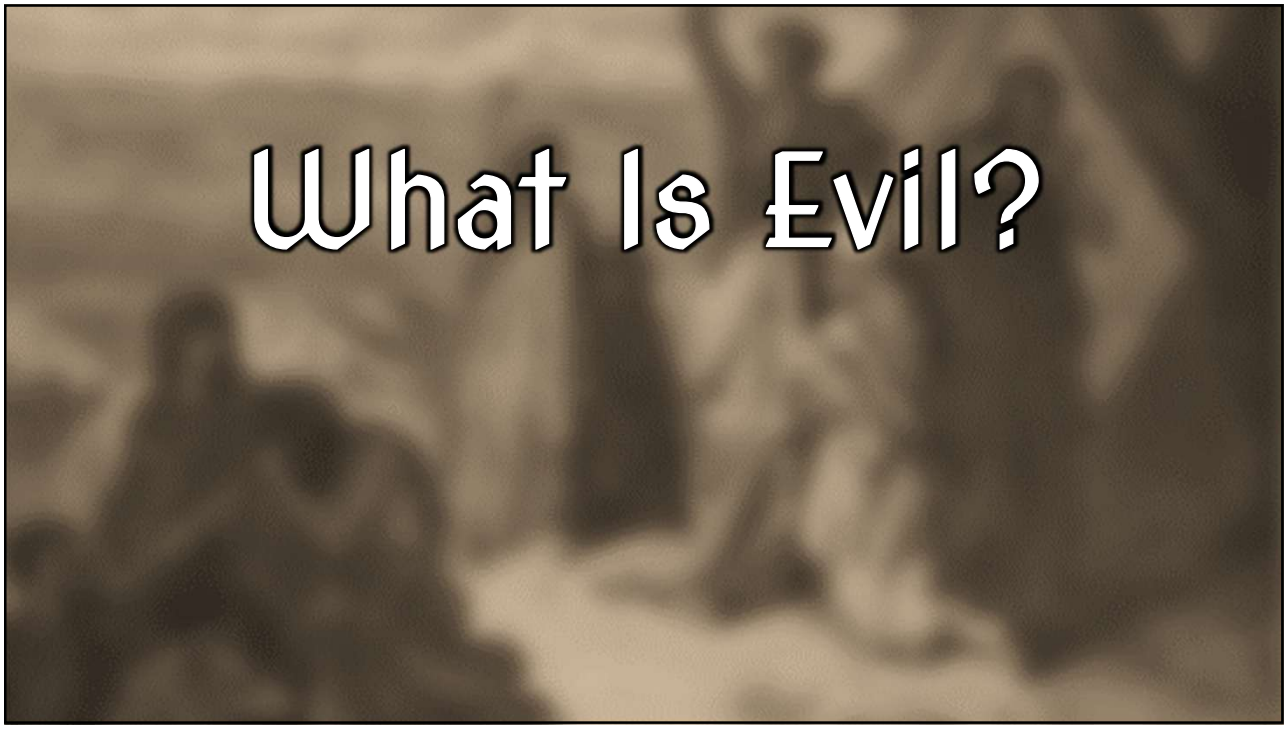
However, the problem of being trivially true and empty of moral content which we saw regarding the First Horn seems to remain.




There is a difference between "the order of knowing" and "the order of being"
The map is first in the order of knowing.
SES is first in the order of being.


In other words, one would need to know what the word 'good' means before one can apply the word to God, but God has to exist before there can be "good."


A Thomistic
Response to the
Euthyphro
Dilemma


What Is Evil?

This distinction in contemporary philosophy differs from the understanding of evil in the Classical / Medieval / Scholastic / Thomistic tradition.

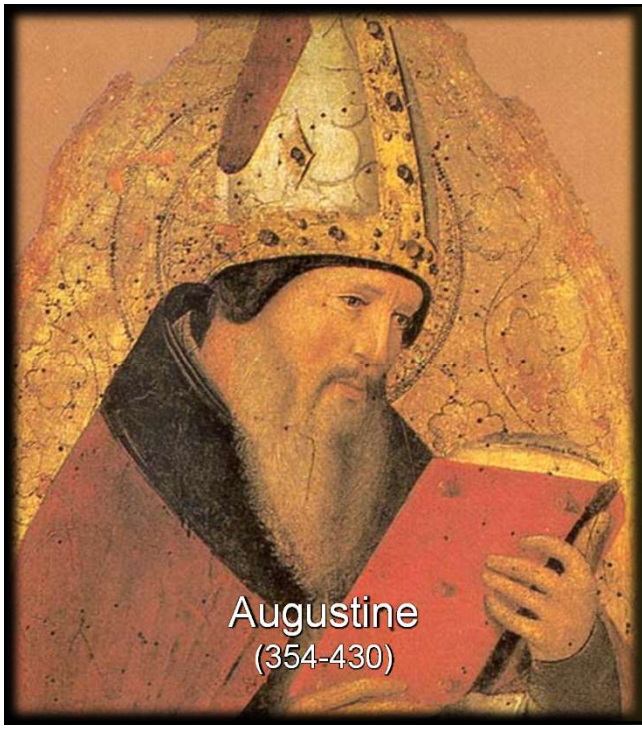
If God created everything except Himself, and, if evil is something, then it would seem the God created evil.

If God did not create evil, then it would seem either:

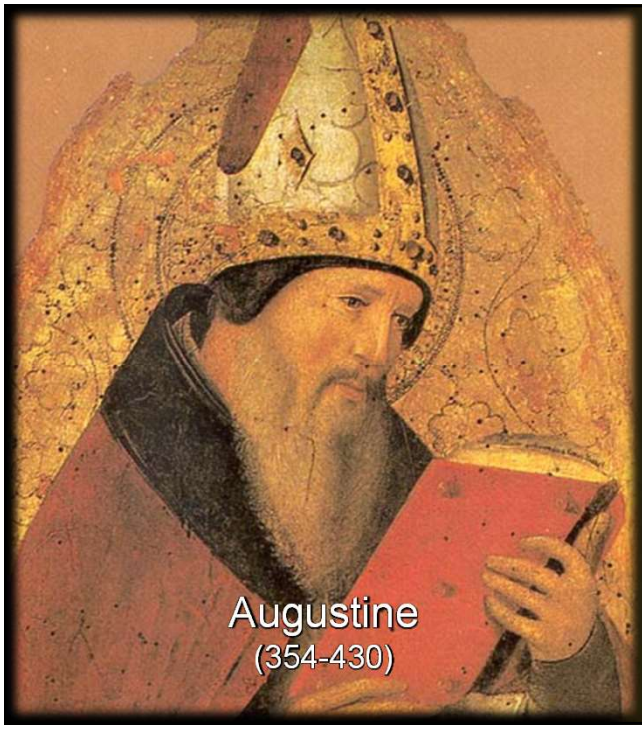
evil is unreal

or

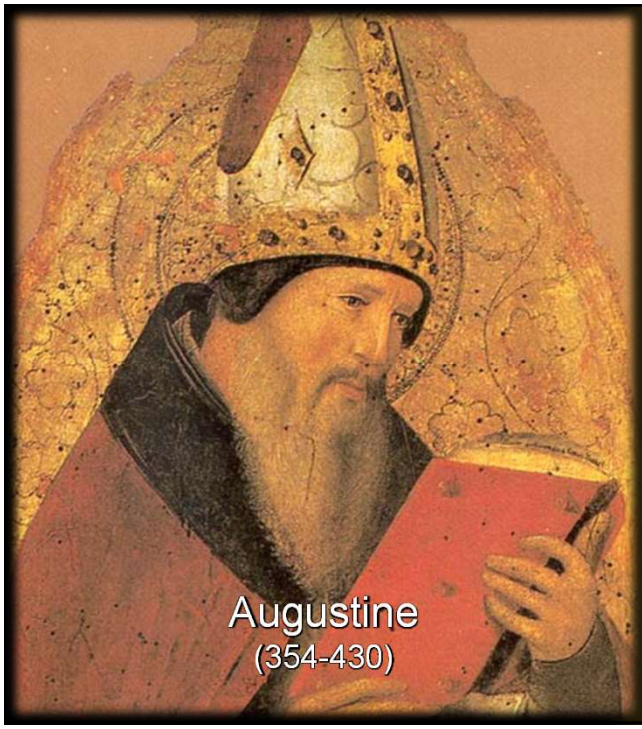
evil is not a thing.



Augustine on Evil as Privation

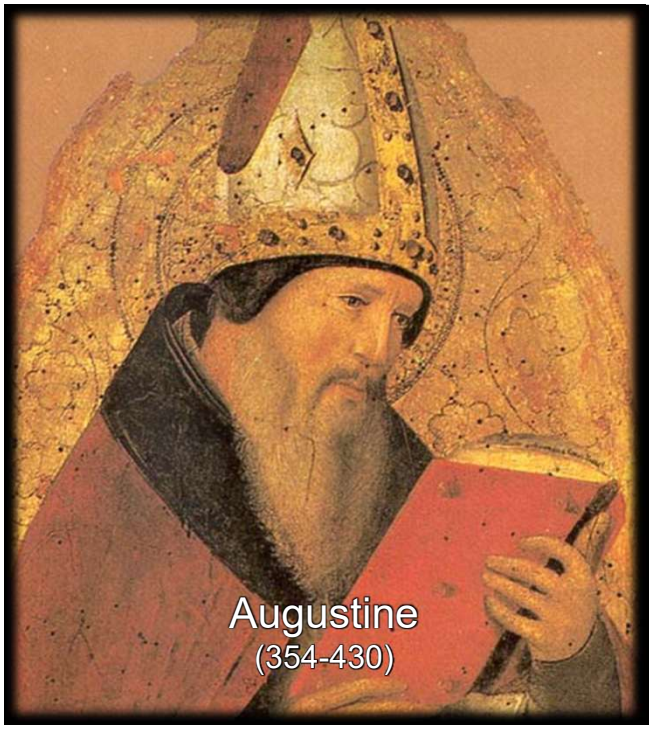


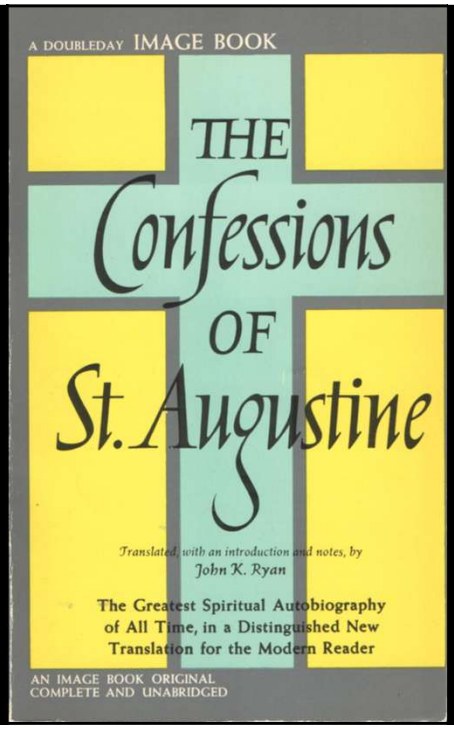
There is a difference between:
being nothing (unreal)
and
not being a thing.

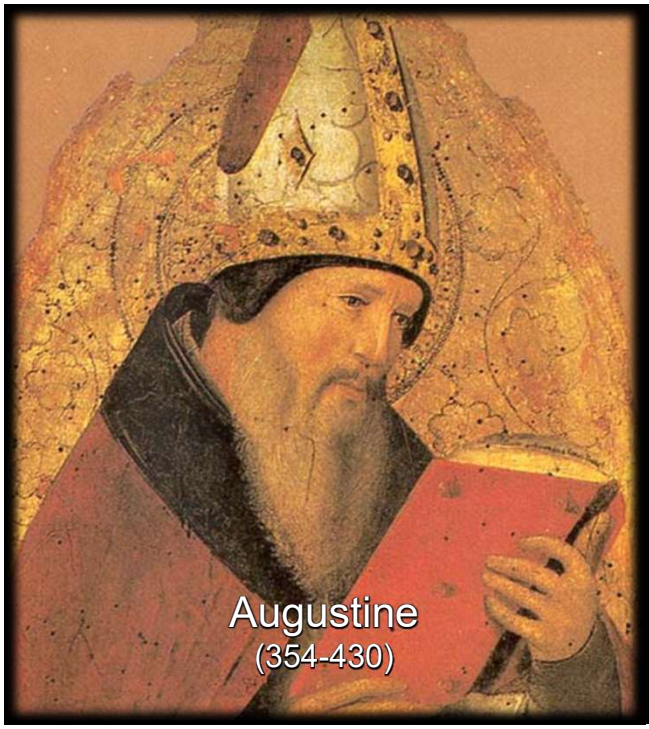


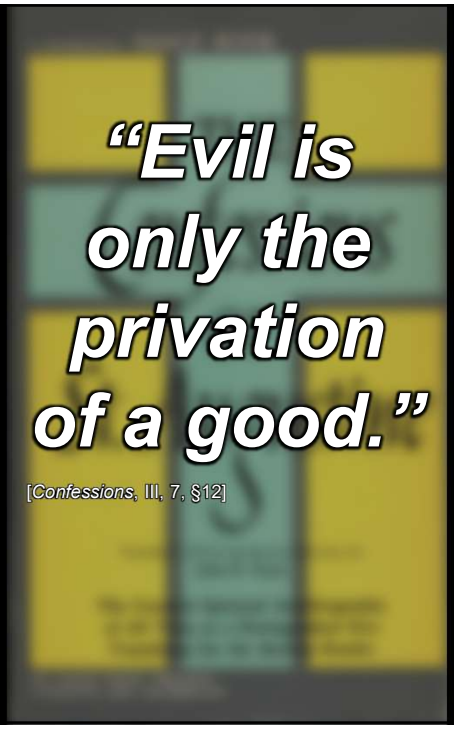
Augustine argued that evil is real but is not a thing.

Rather, it is a privation or a lack in things.


Augustine
(354-430)

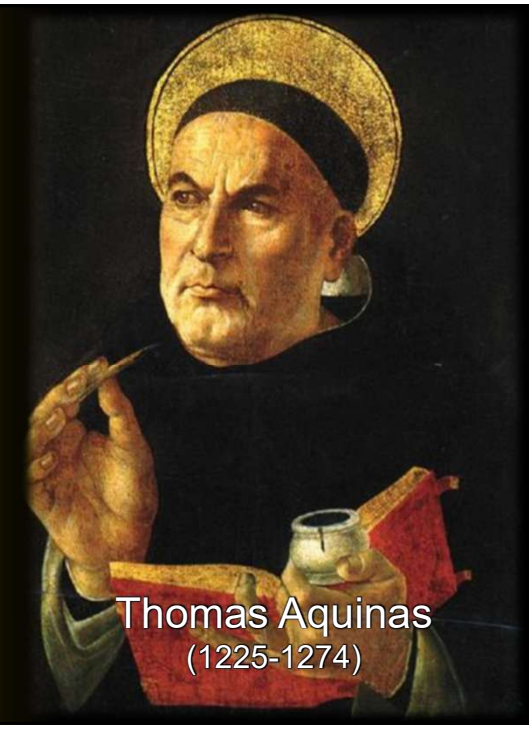

A DOUBLEDAY IMAGE BOOK
THE
Confessions
OF
St. Augustine
Translated, with an introduction and notes, by
John K. Ryan
The Greatest Spiritual Autobiography
of All Time, in a Distinguished New
Translation for the Modern Reader
AN IMAGE BOOK ORIGINAL
COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED


Augustine
(354-430)


“Evil is only the privation of a good.”
[Confessions, III, 7, §12]

"Now evil is in a substance because something which it was originally to have, and which it ought to have, is lacking in it."

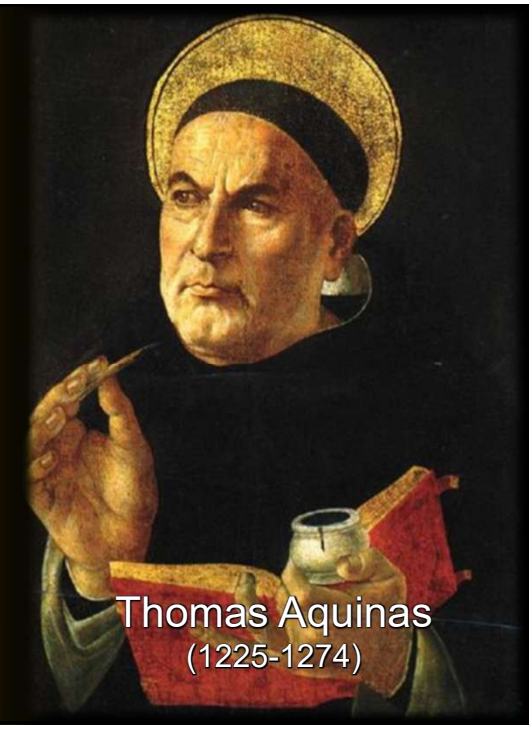
[*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 6, §1]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Evil is simply a privation of something which a subject is entitled by its origin to possess and which it ought to have."

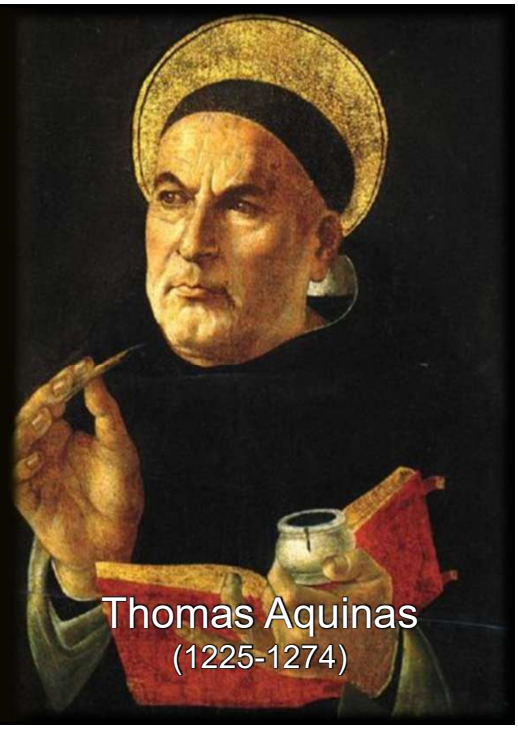
[*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 7, §2]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Evil is the absence of the good, which is natural and due to a thing."

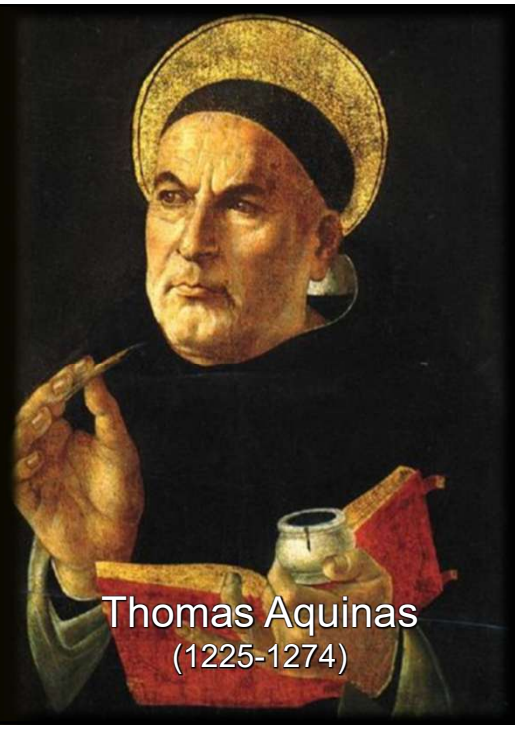
[*Summa Theologiae*, I, Q49, art. 1]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Evil cannot exist by itself, since it has no essence... Therefore, evil must be in a subject."

[*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 11, §2]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

Note that there is a difference between a **privation** and a **negation**.

A **negation** is the mere absence or removal of something.

A **privation** is the absence or removal of something that "ought" to be there.

Blindness is the privation of sight.

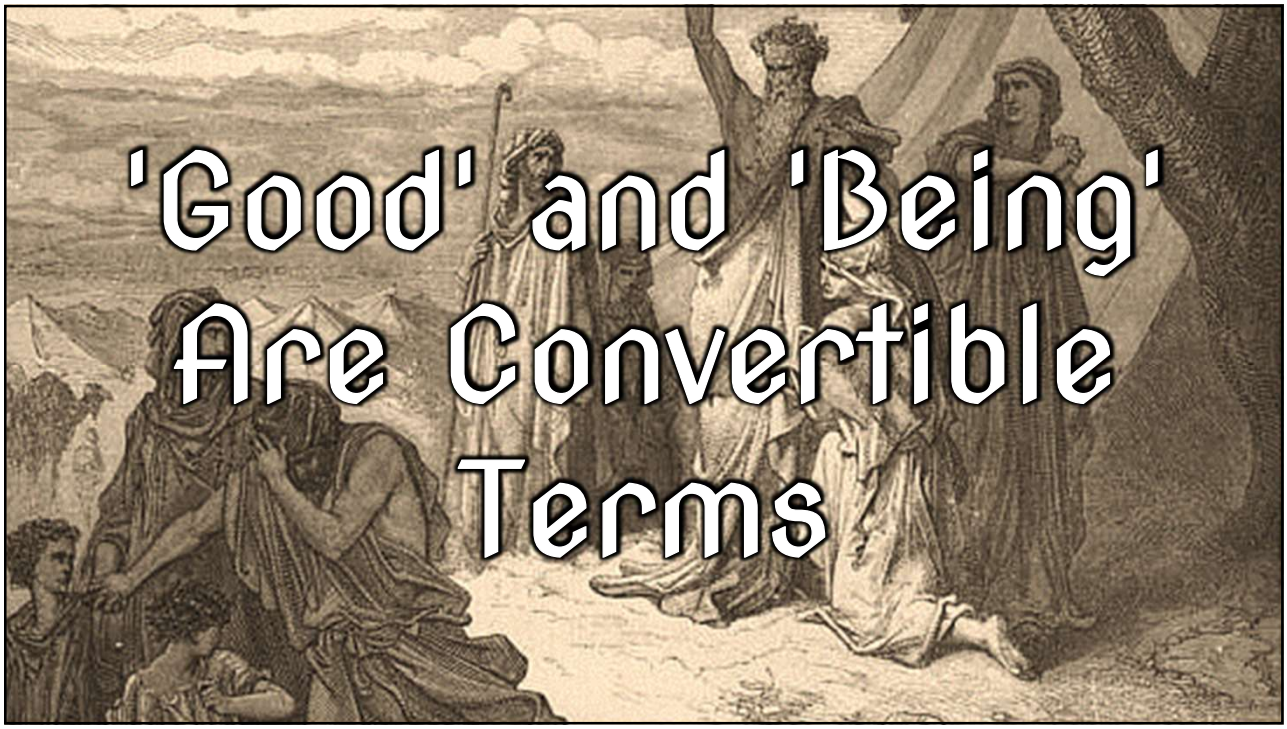
But blindness is not a thing in itself.

A rock cannot see, but it is not blind because it "ought" not be able to see.

Blindness is the displacement of sight.

But blindness is not a thing in itself.

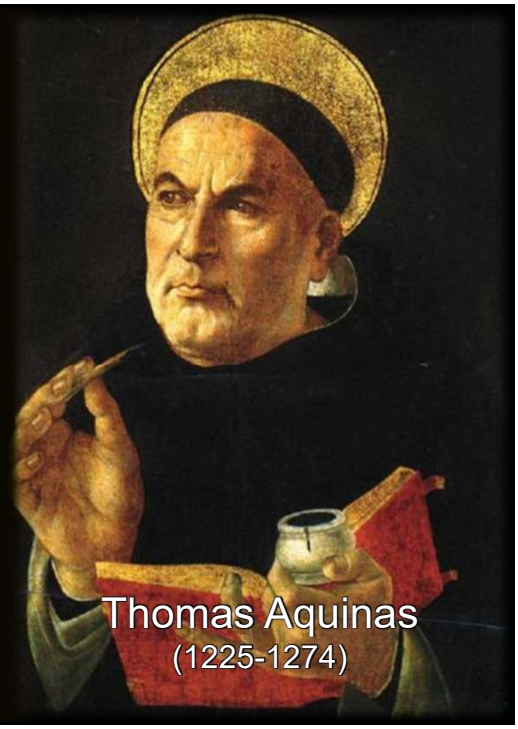
A rock cannot see, but it is not blind because it "ought" not be able to see.



1. 'Good' is first identified with 'desirable' (appetible).
2. 'Desirable' is identified with 'perfect'.

"Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection."

(*ST* I, Q5, art. 1)

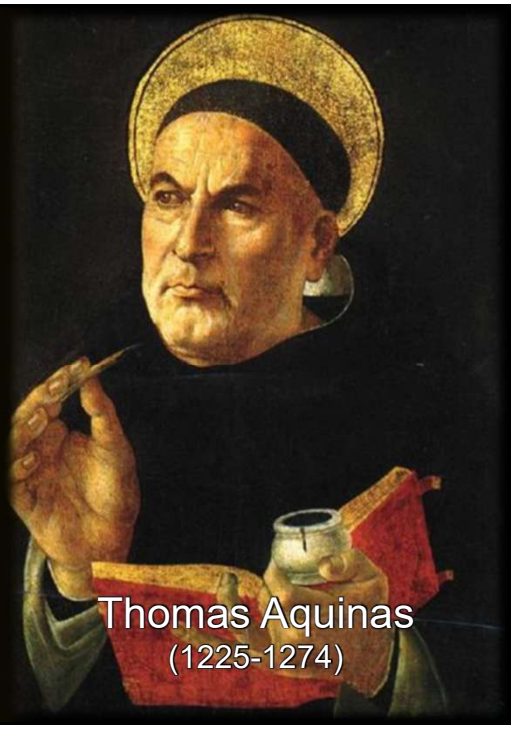


Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

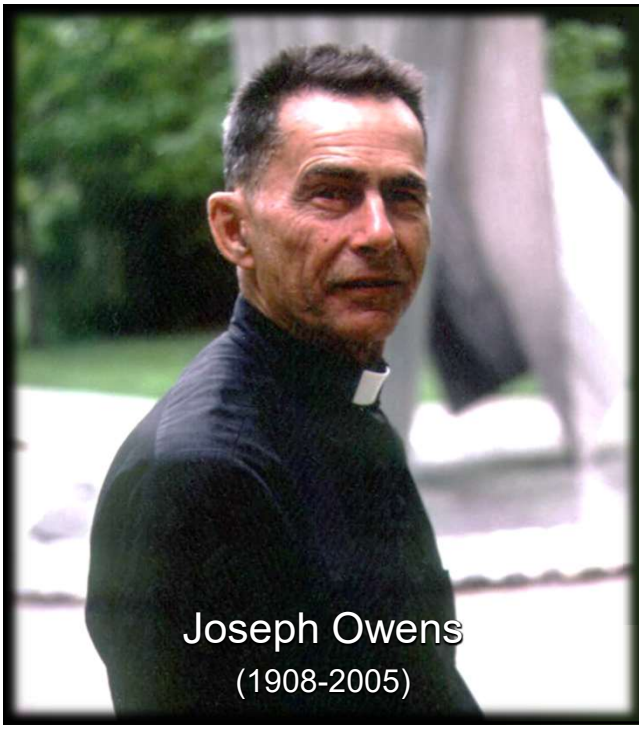
1. 'Good' is first identified with 'desirable' (appetible).
2. 'Desirable' is identified with 'perfect'.
3. 'Perfect' is identified with 'act' or 'actuality'.

"Everything is perfect so far as it is actual."

(*ST* I, Q5, art. 1)

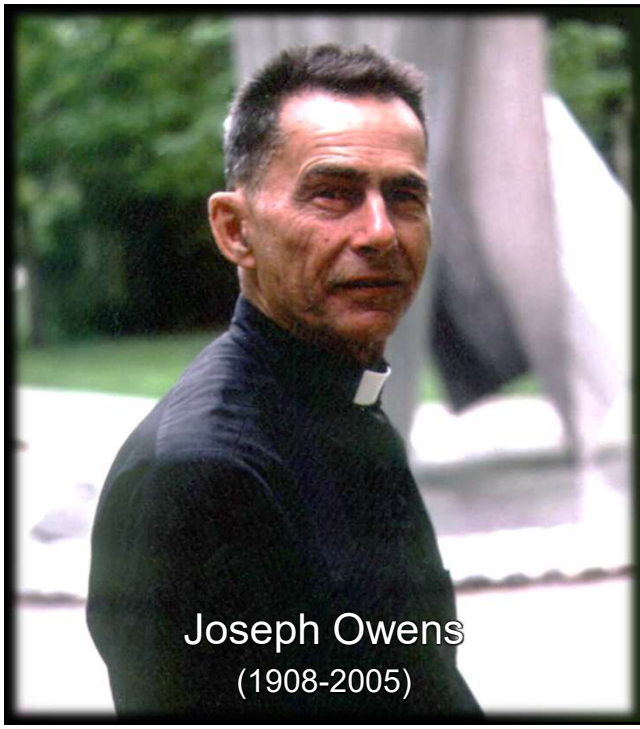


Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)



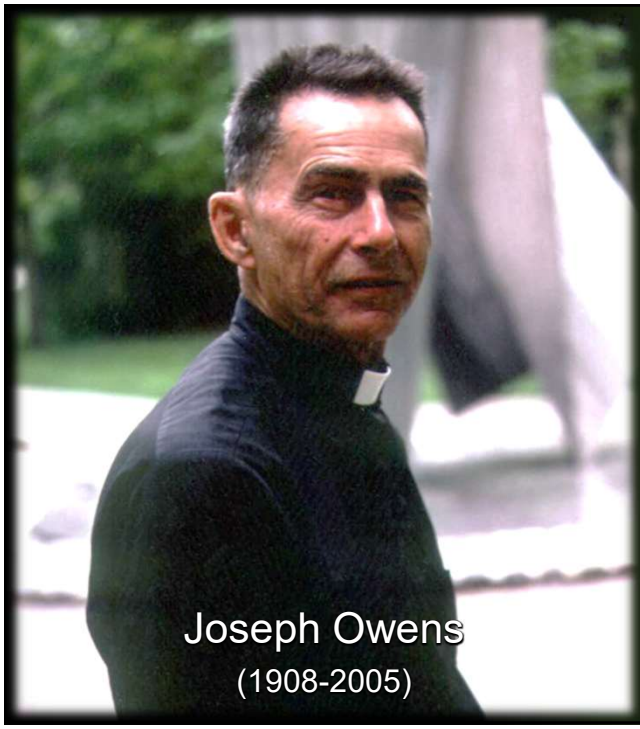
Joseph Owens
(1908-2005)

"An alternate word for actuality in this respect is "perfection" (entelecheia). It was used by Aristotle along with actuality to designate the formal elements in the things.



Joseph Owens
(1908-2005)

"These perfected the material element in the sense of filling its potentiality and completing the thing.



Joseph Owens
(1908-2005)

"Since existence is required to complete the thing and all the formal elements and activities, it may be aptly called the perfection of all perfections."

[*An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968), 52-53]

perfection

(entelecheia, ἐντελέχεια)

en, ἐν = in

+

telos, τέλος = end, goal

+

echein, ἔχειν = to have

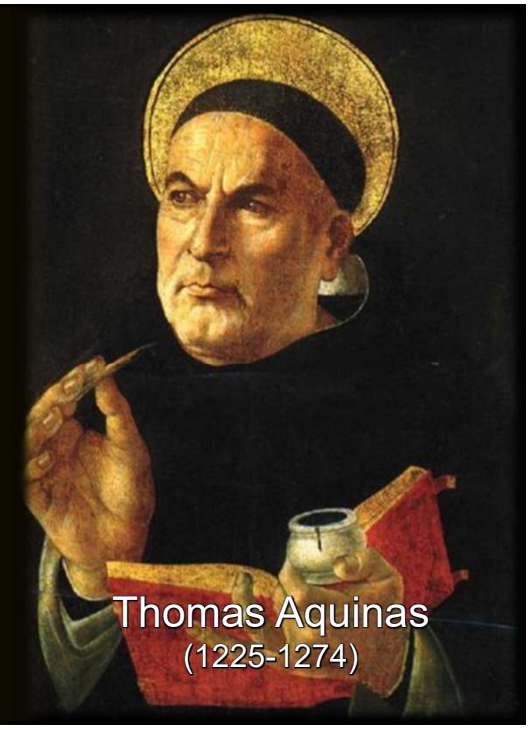
perfection

(entelecheia, ἐντελέχεια)

to have the end or goal in

1. 'Good' is first identified with 'desirable' (appetible).
2. 'Desirable' is identified with 'perfect'.
3. 'Perfect' is identified with 'act' or 'actuality'.
4. 'Actuality' is identified with 'being'.

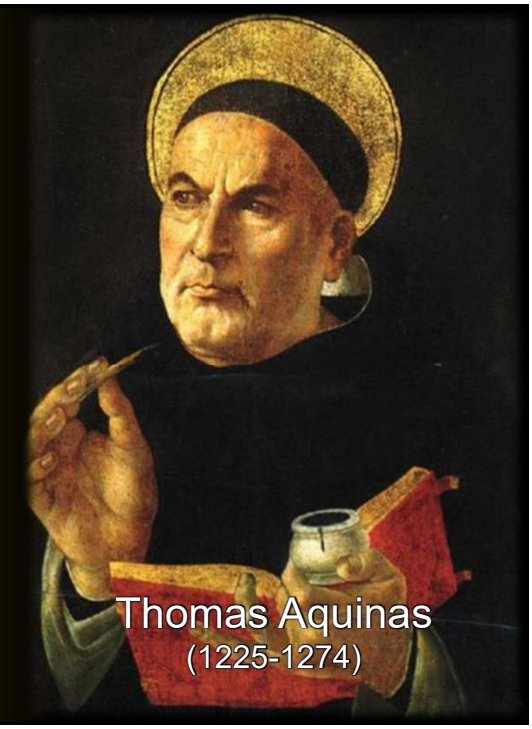
"Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea; which is clear from the following argument. The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher says [Ethic. i]: 'Goodness is what all desire.'



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Now is it clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual, as is clear from the foregoing [Q. 3, A. 4; Q. 4, A. 1]. Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same reality."

[*ST* I, Q5, art. 1]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

A full exploration of how it is that 'being' and 'good' are convertible (which is to say that 'being' and 'good' are really the same) requires a examination of the Medieval doctrine of the Transcendentals.

New Scholasticism 59 (1985): 449-470

The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas

by Jan A. Aertsen

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.

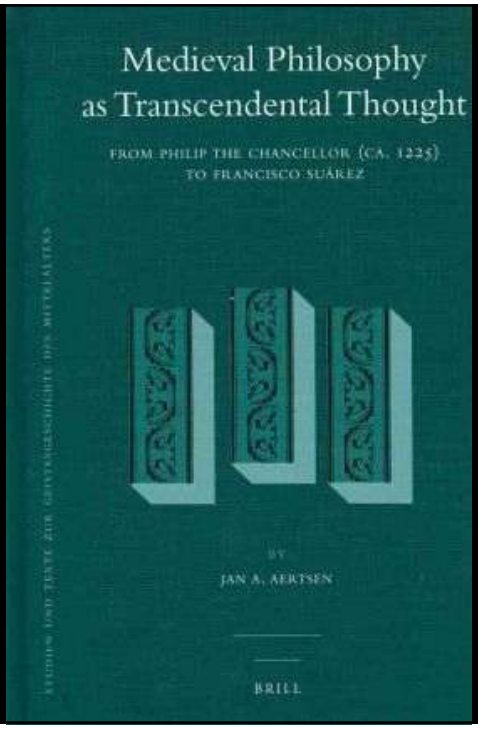
[2] Thomas Aquinas, *De Ver.* I, 2 obj. 2.

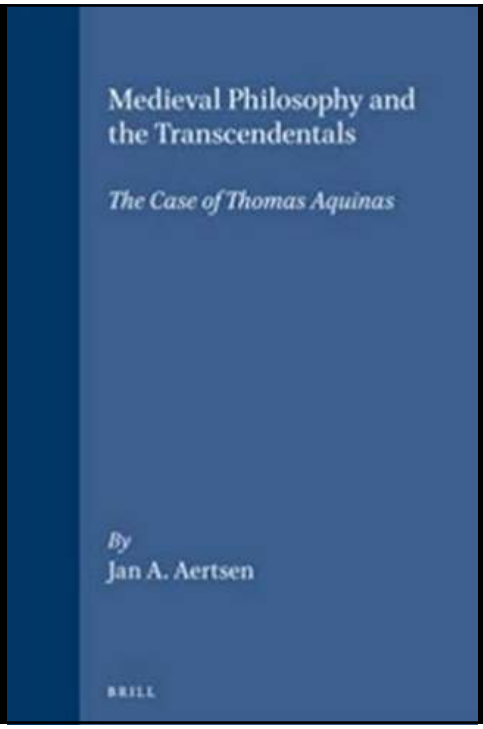
[3] *De Pot.* IX, 7 ad 5: Bonum quod est in genere qualitatis, non est bonum quod convertitur cum ente, quod nullam rem supra ens addit.

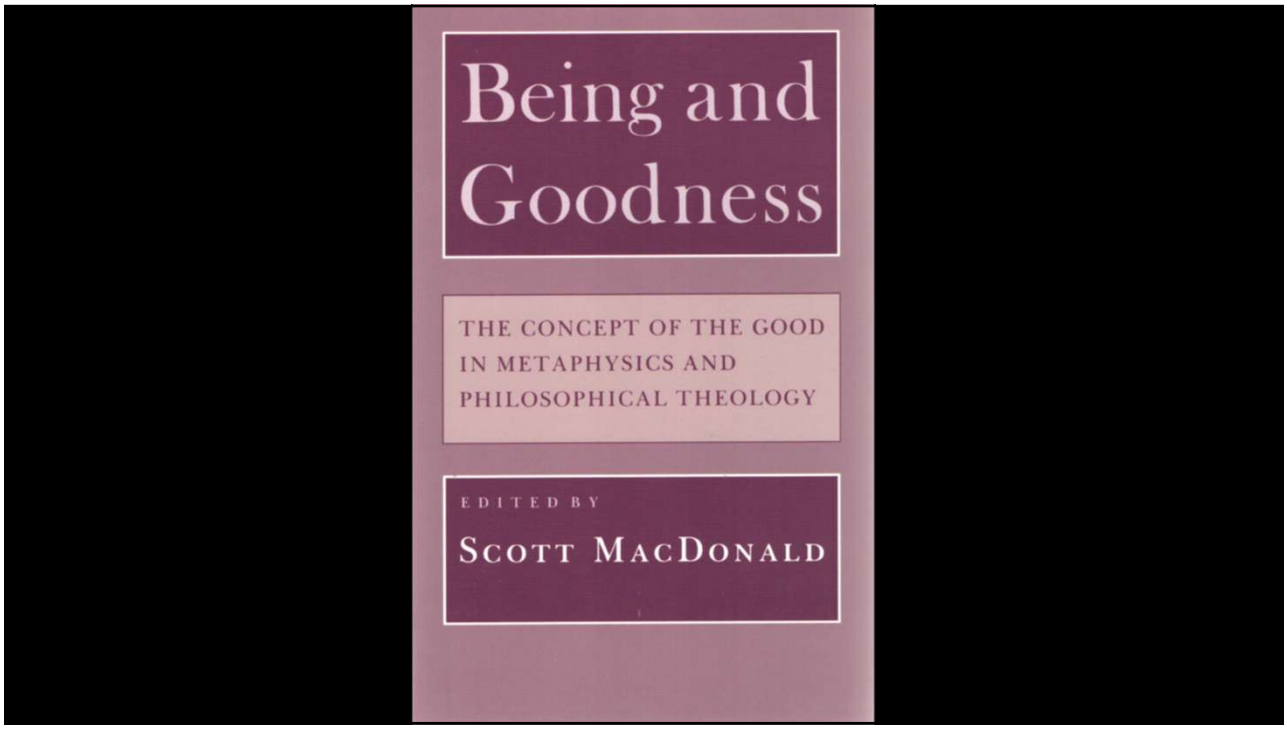
[4] *De Ver.* I, 1: modus generaliter consequens omne ens.

[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.

Jan Aertsen
1938-2016





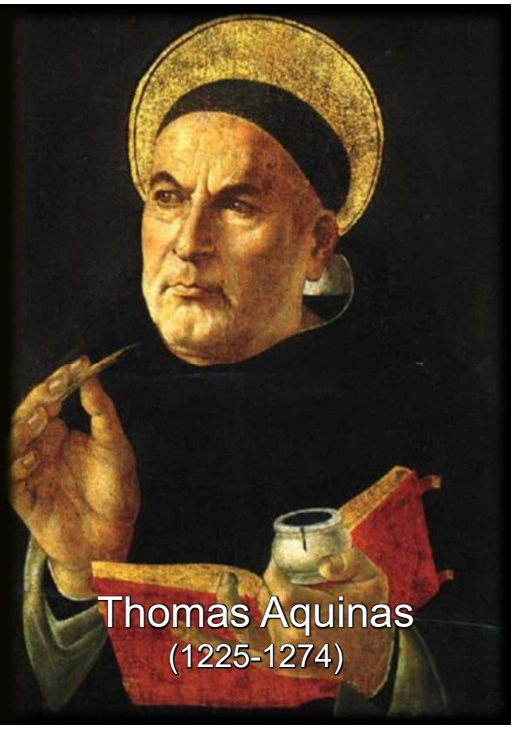

Being and Goodness
THE CONCEPT OF THE GOOD IN METAPHYSICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY
EDITED BY
SCOTT MACDONALD

God Is Good

1. 'Good' is first identified with 'desirable' (appetible).
2. 'Desirable' is identified with 'perfect'.
3. 'Perfect' is identified with 'act' or 'actuality'.
4. 'Actuality' is identified with 'being'.
5. God is goodness itself in as much as God is being itself.

"To God alone does it belong to be His own subsistent being."

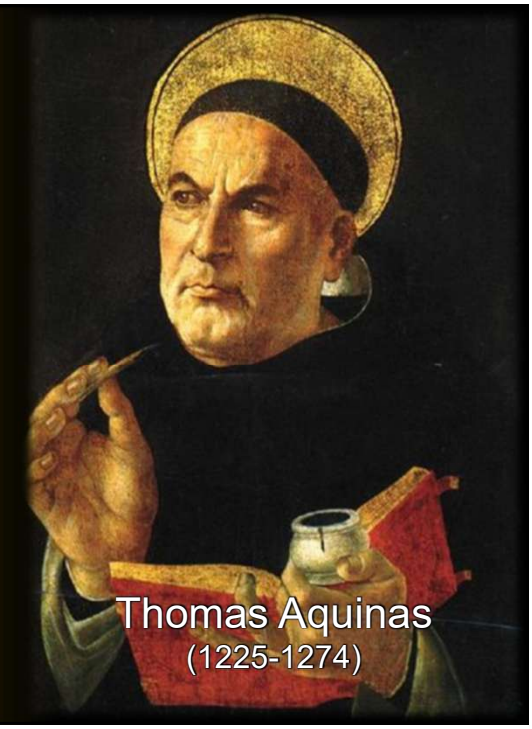
[*ST* 1, Q 12, art. iv]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"God is absolute form, or rather absolute being"

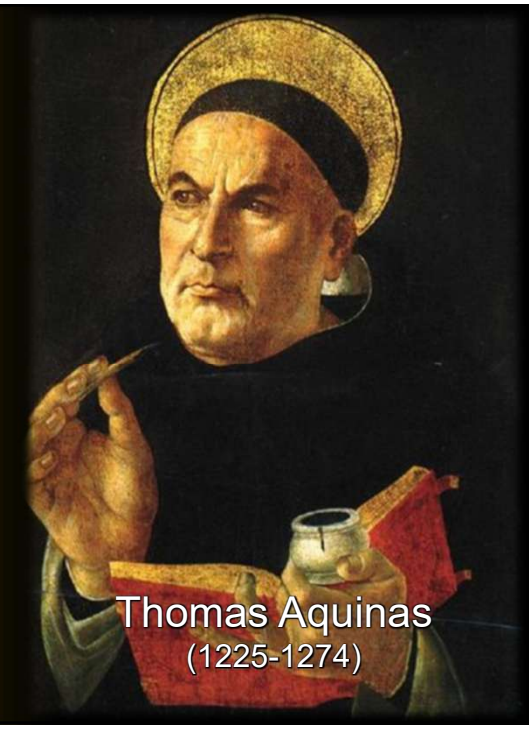
[*ST*, I, Q3, art. 7.]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"God is supremely being ... He is being itself, subsistent, absolutely undetermined."

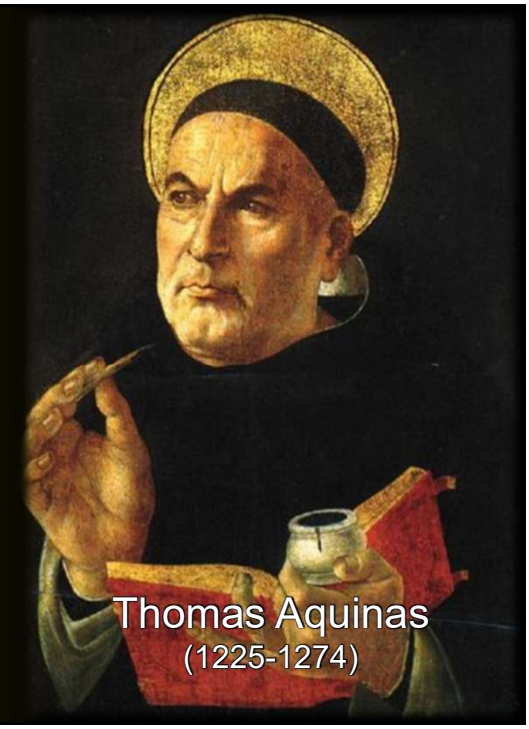
[*ST* 1, Q 11, art. iv]



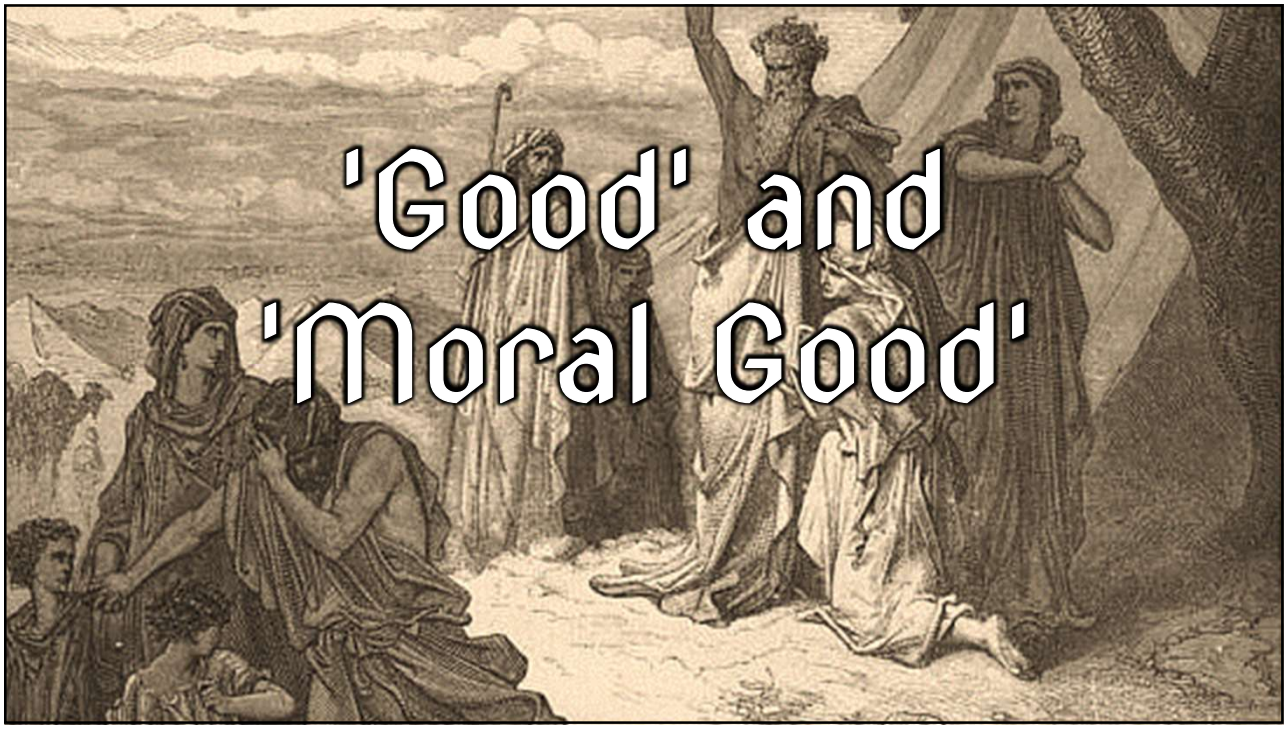
Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Good belongs pre-eminently to God."

(*ST* I, Q5, art. 1)



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

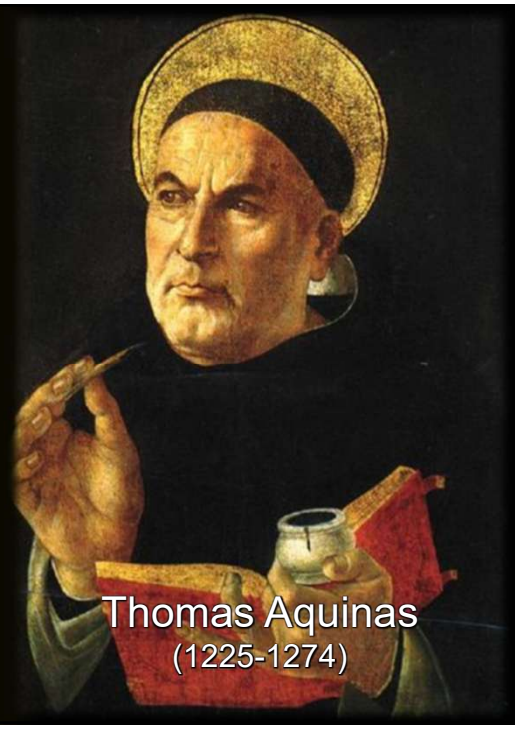


Human beings are unique among God's creatures on earth in as much as we have **rationality** and **free will**.

These enable us to choose, not merely among particular goods, but to pursue the good as such.

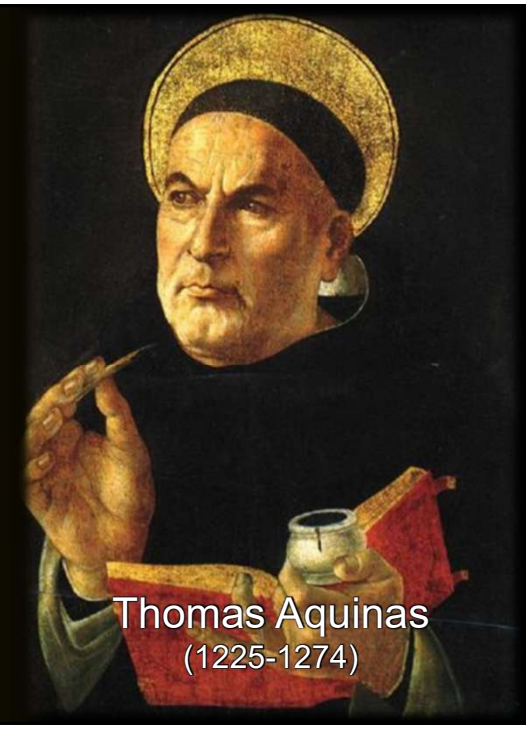
But these will also allow us to choose against our own natures and against our proper telos (end) which is our good.

"Evil may be considered either in a substance or in an action . . .



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

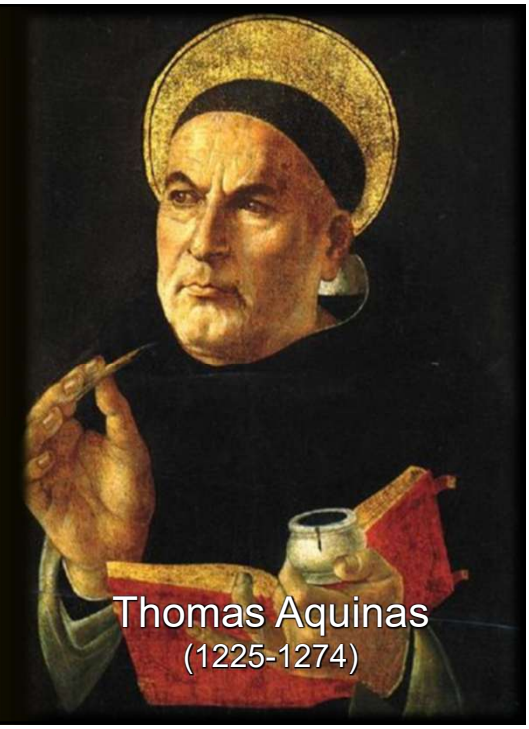
"Moral fault is found primarily and principally in the act of the will only . . . so . . . an act is moral because it is voluntary. . . .



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"The root and source of moral wrongdoing is to be sought in the act of the will."

[*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 10, §13]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

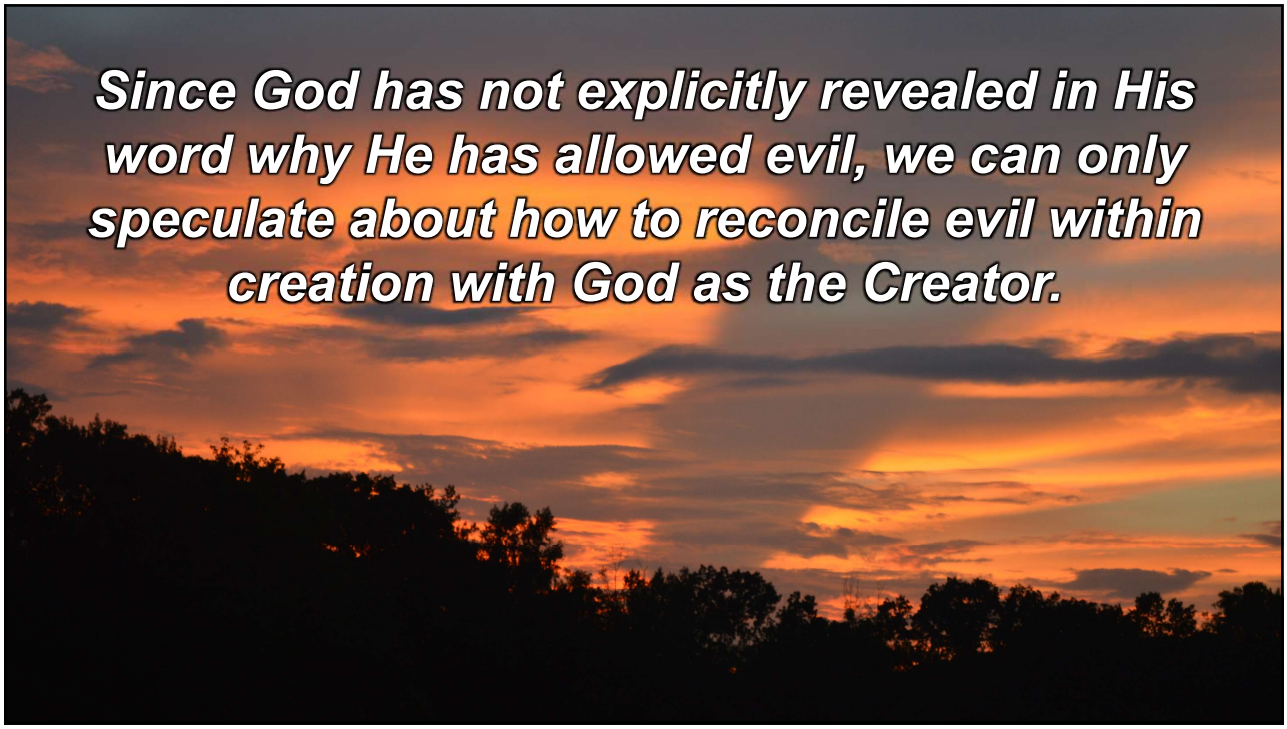
Just as 'true' is the human intellect's grasp of being (i.e., the real), 'moral good' is the human will's grasp of being (i.e., the real).

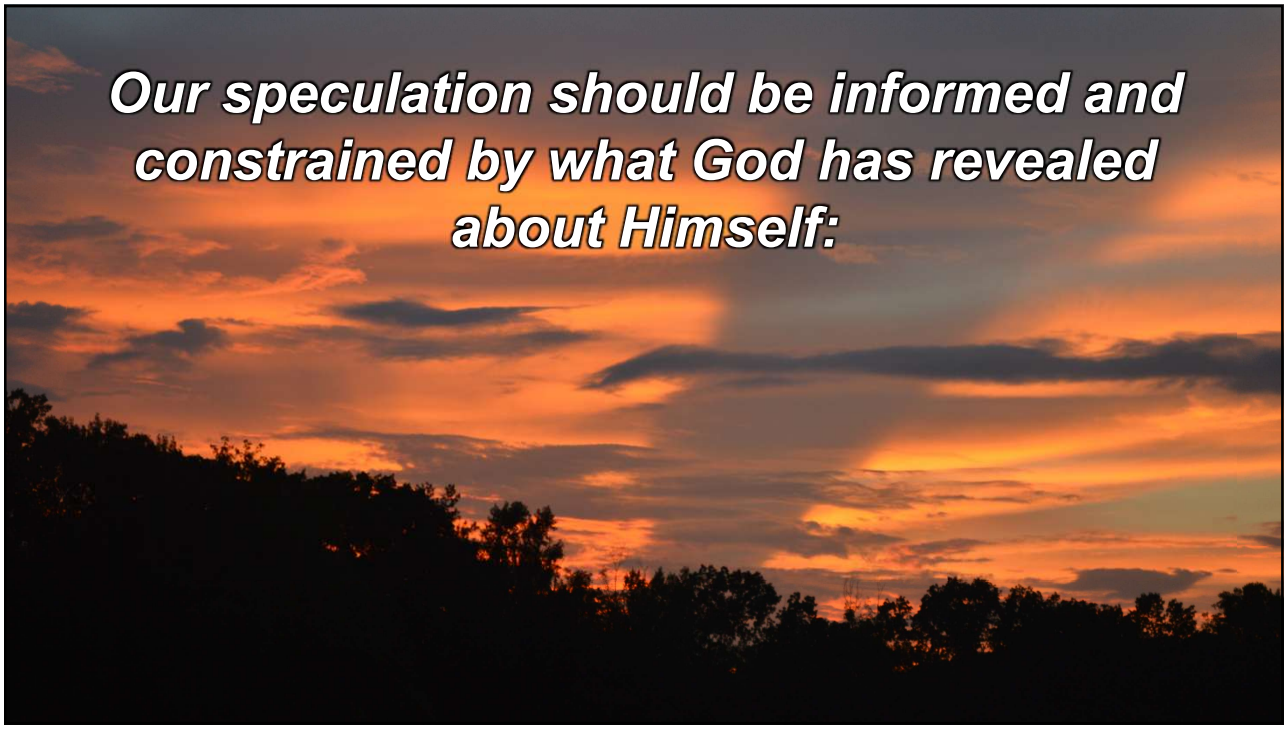
In classical theism, note that these uses of 'true' and 'moral good' are with respect to human beings.

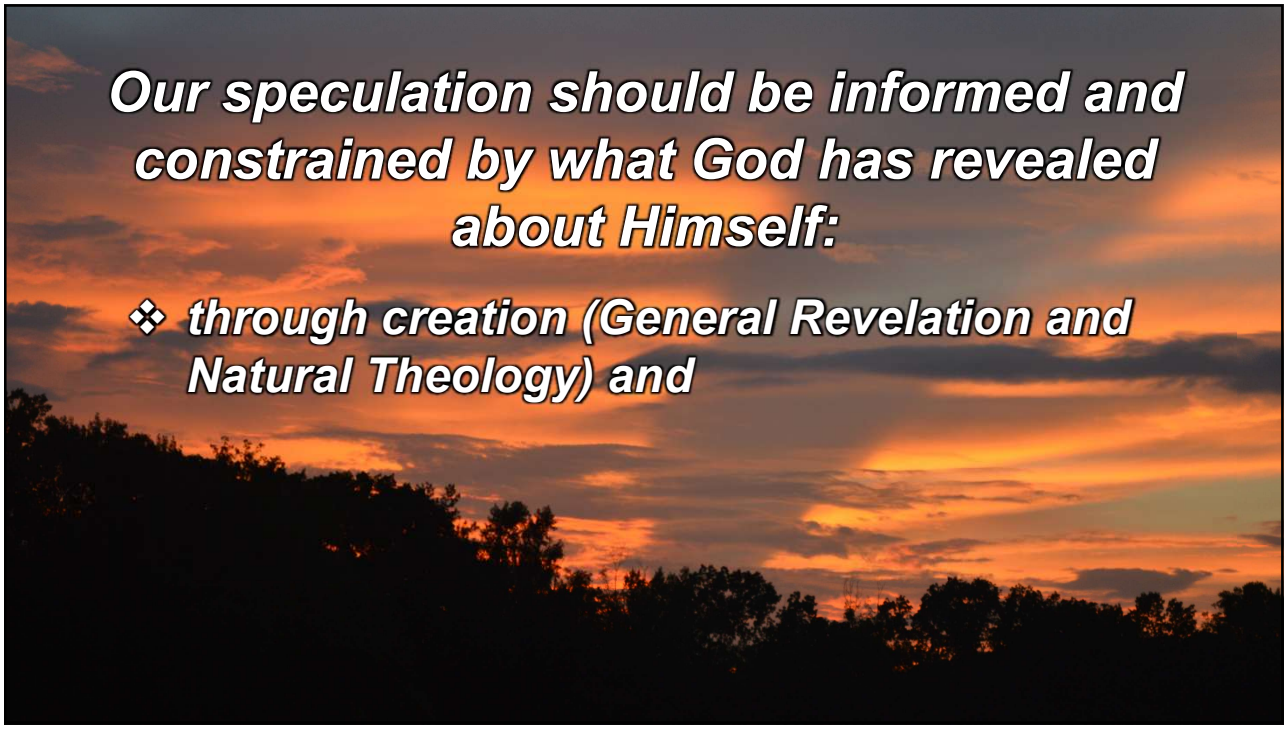
God's knowledge is not constituted by His "intellect's" "grasp" of any reality outside of Himself.

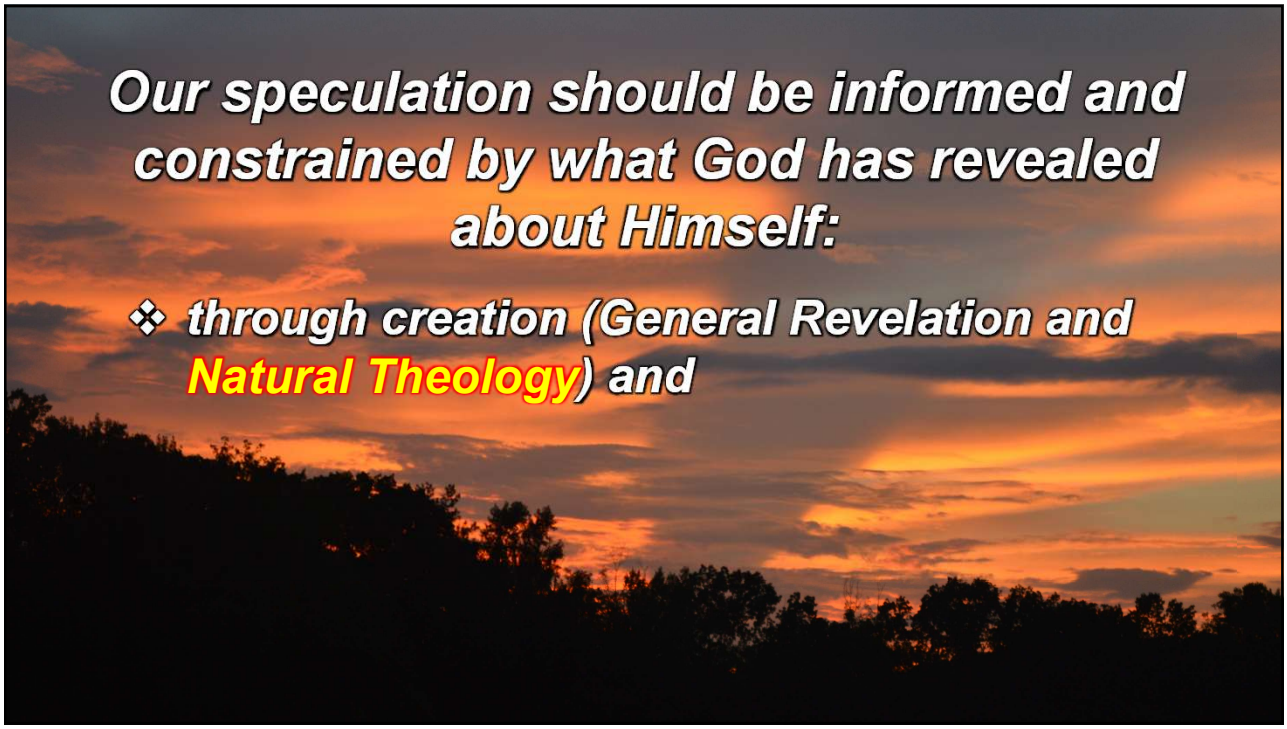
Nor is God's goodness constituted by His "will's" "grasp" of any reality of Himself.

Implications for the Problem of Evil




Our speculation should be informed and constrained by what God has revealed about Himself:


Our speculation should be informed and constrained by what God has revealed about Himself:
❖ through creation (General Revelation and Natural Theology) and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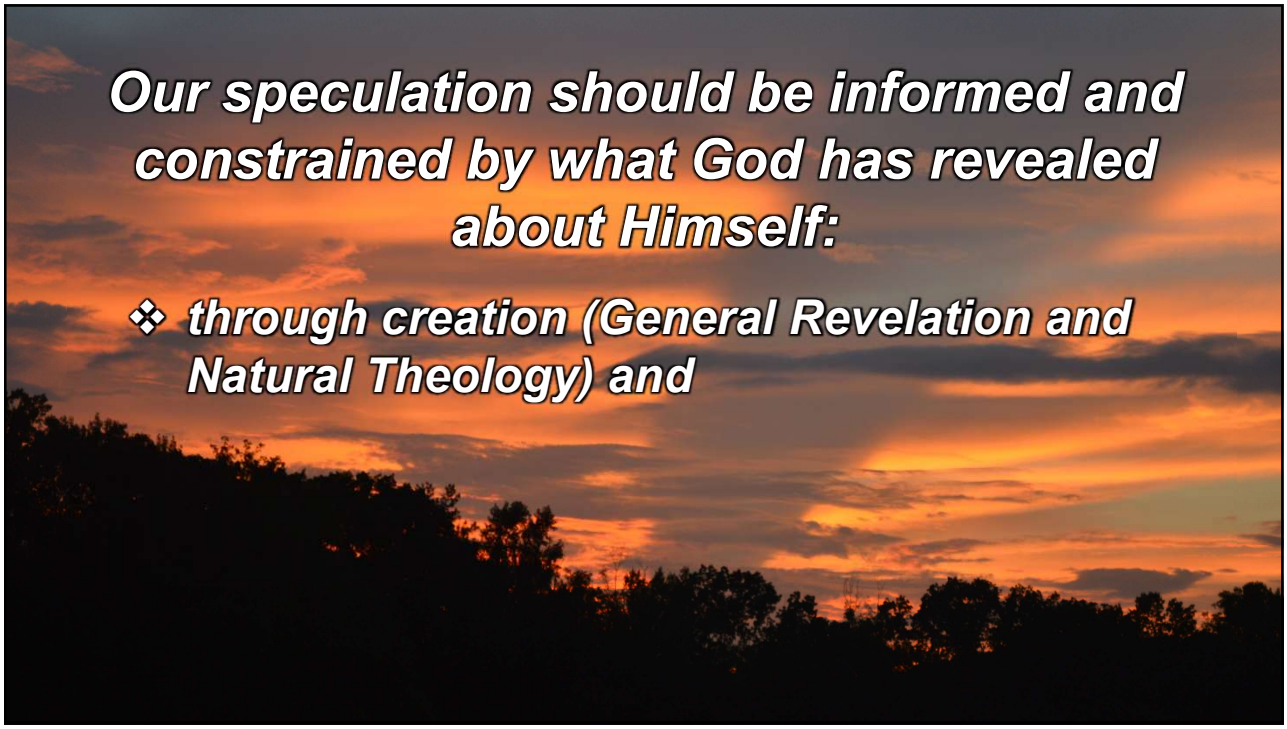
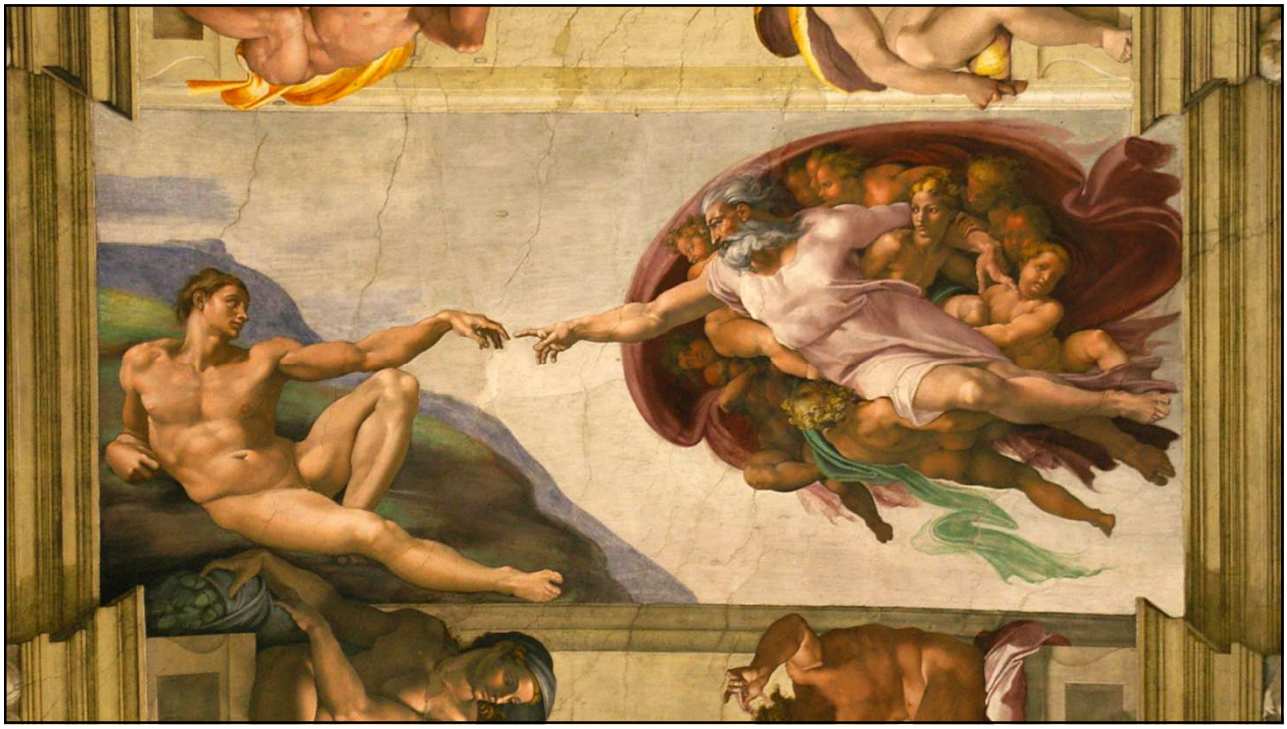
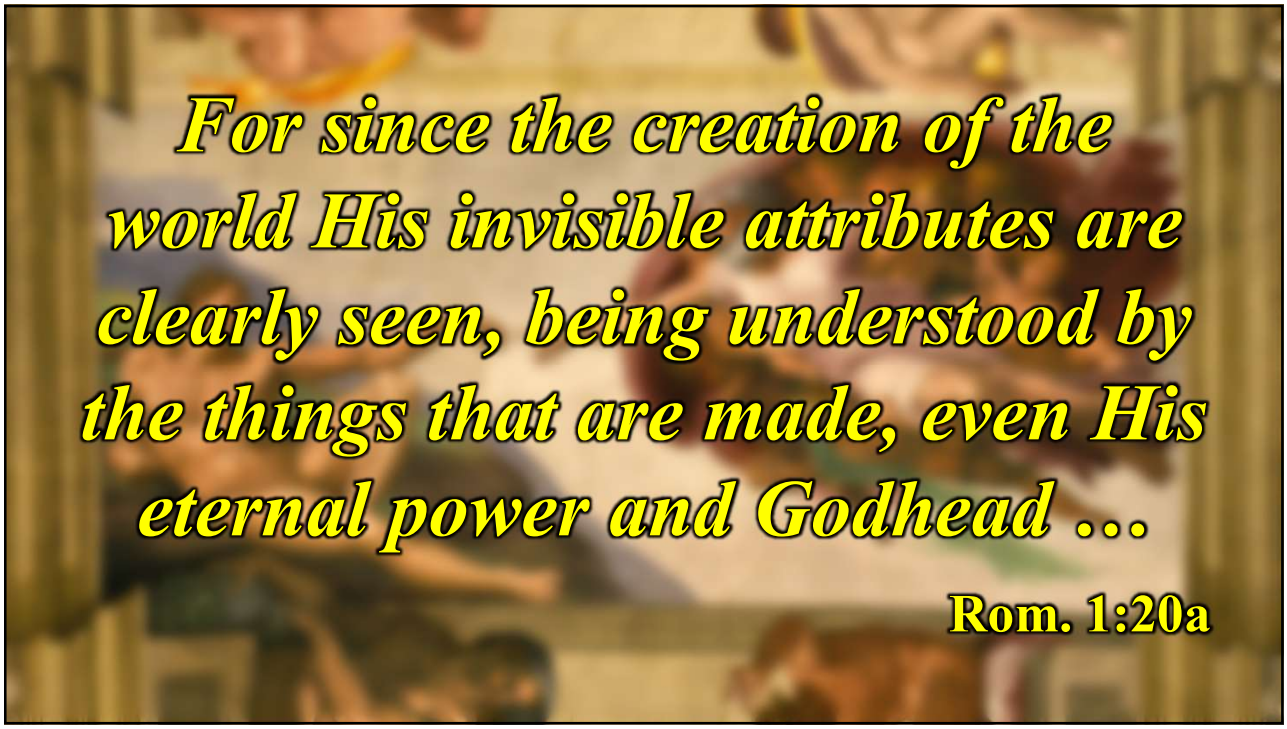
❖ through creation (General Revelation and Natural Theology) and

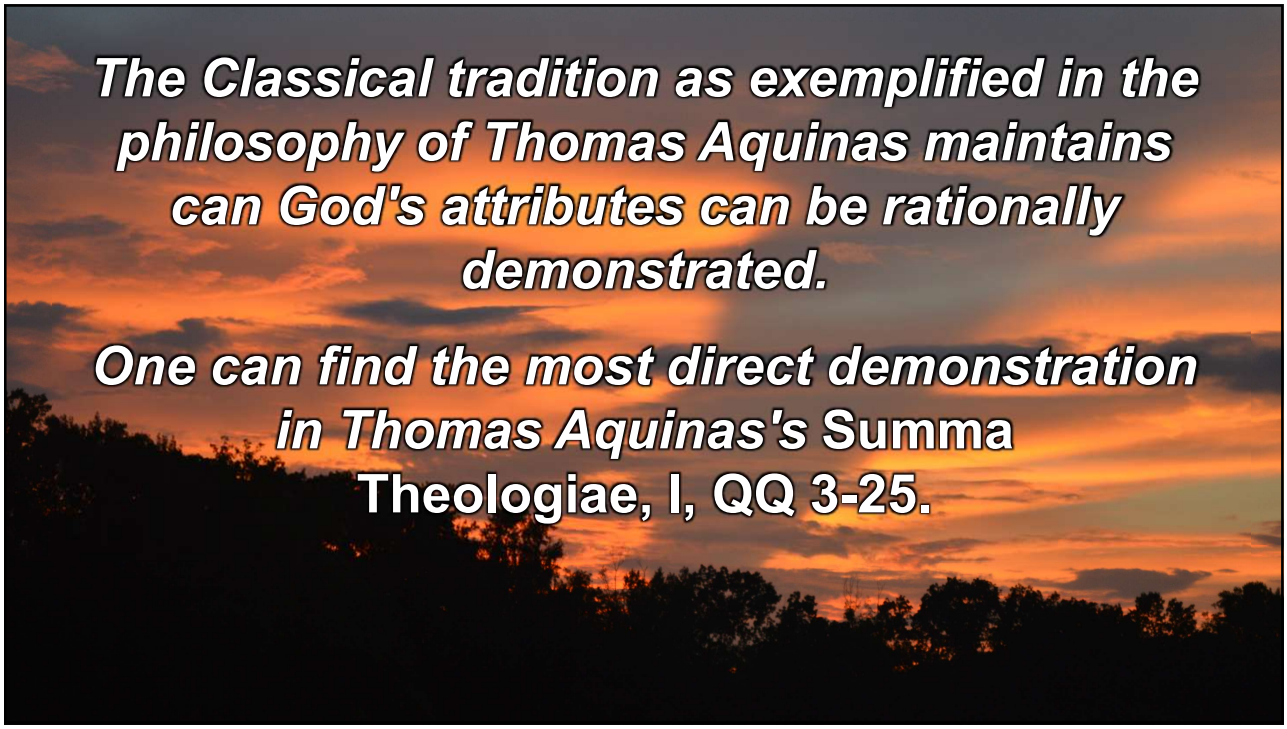

Our speculation should be informed and constrained by what God has revealed about Himself:
❖ through creation (General Revelation and Natural Theology) and

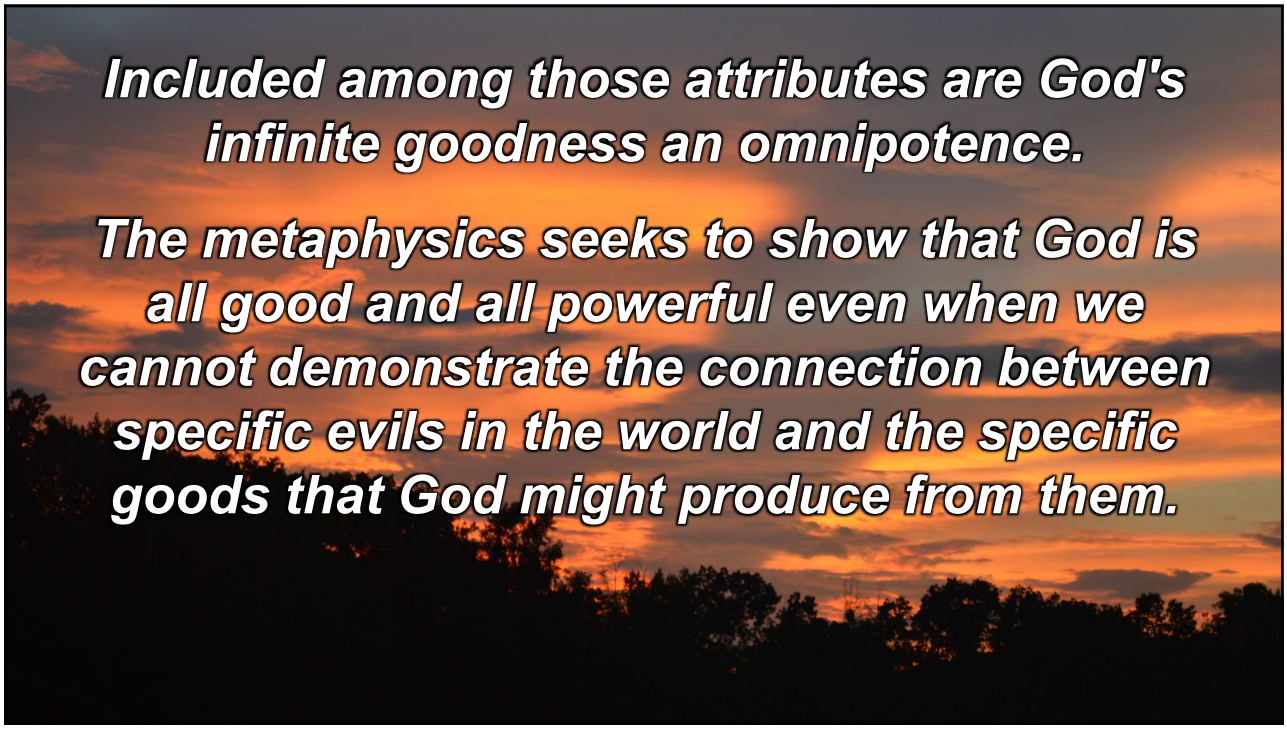
Our speculation should be informed and constrained by what God has revealed about Himself:

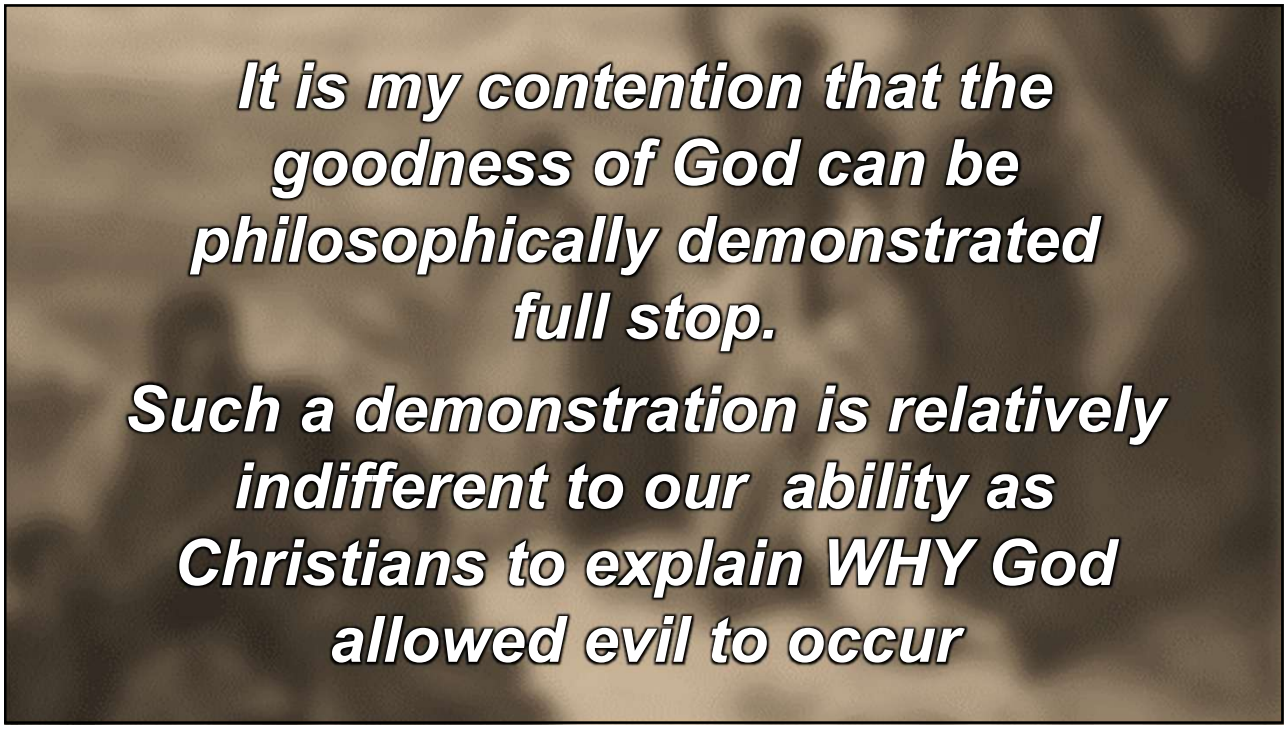
- ***through creation (General Revelation and Natural Theology) and***
- ***through Scripture (Special Revelation and Systematic Theology).***



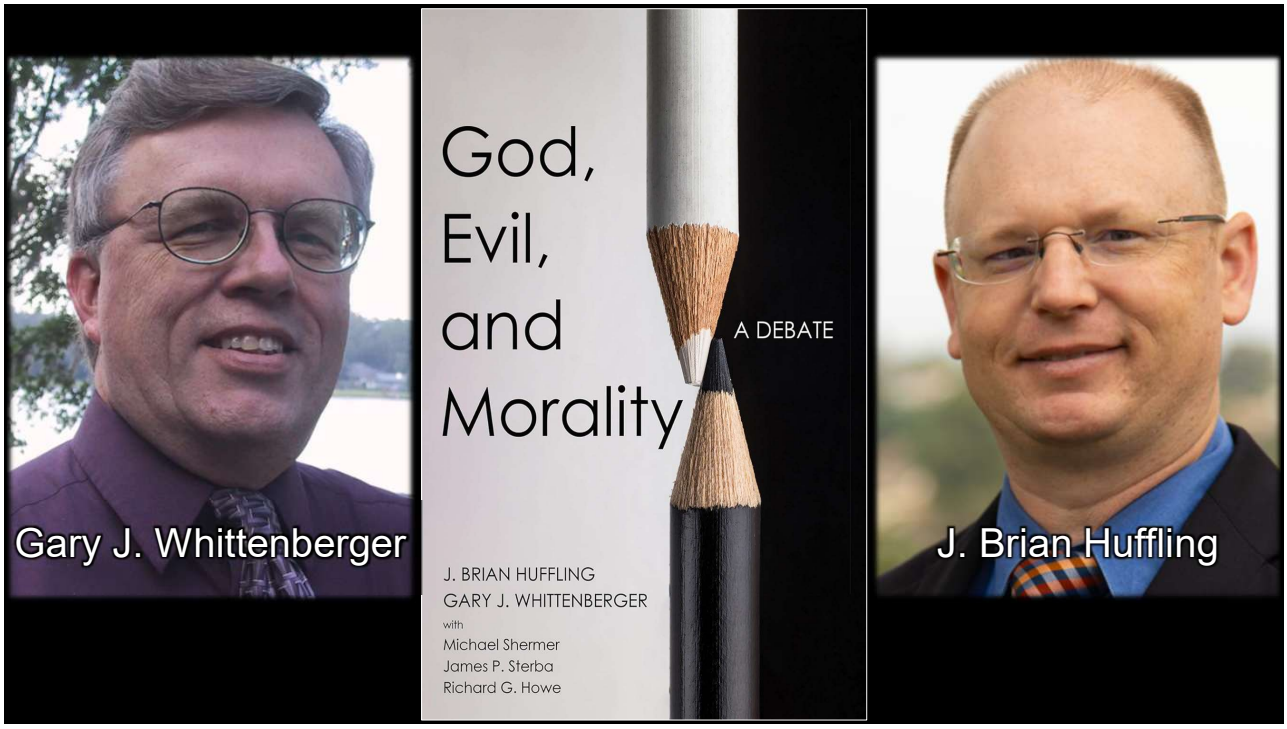

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead …
Rom. 1:20a

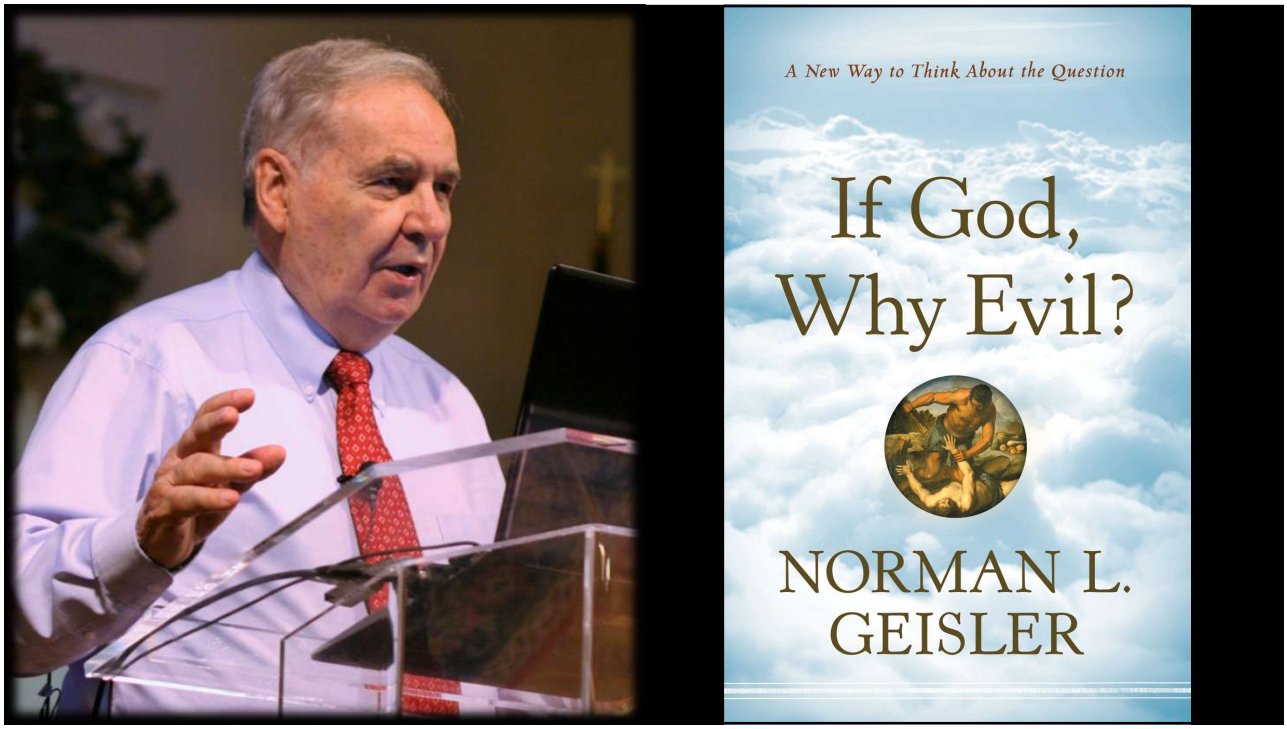

The Classical tradition as exemplified in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas maintains can God's attributes can be rationally demonstrated.
One can find the most direct demonstration in Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae, I, QQ 3-25.

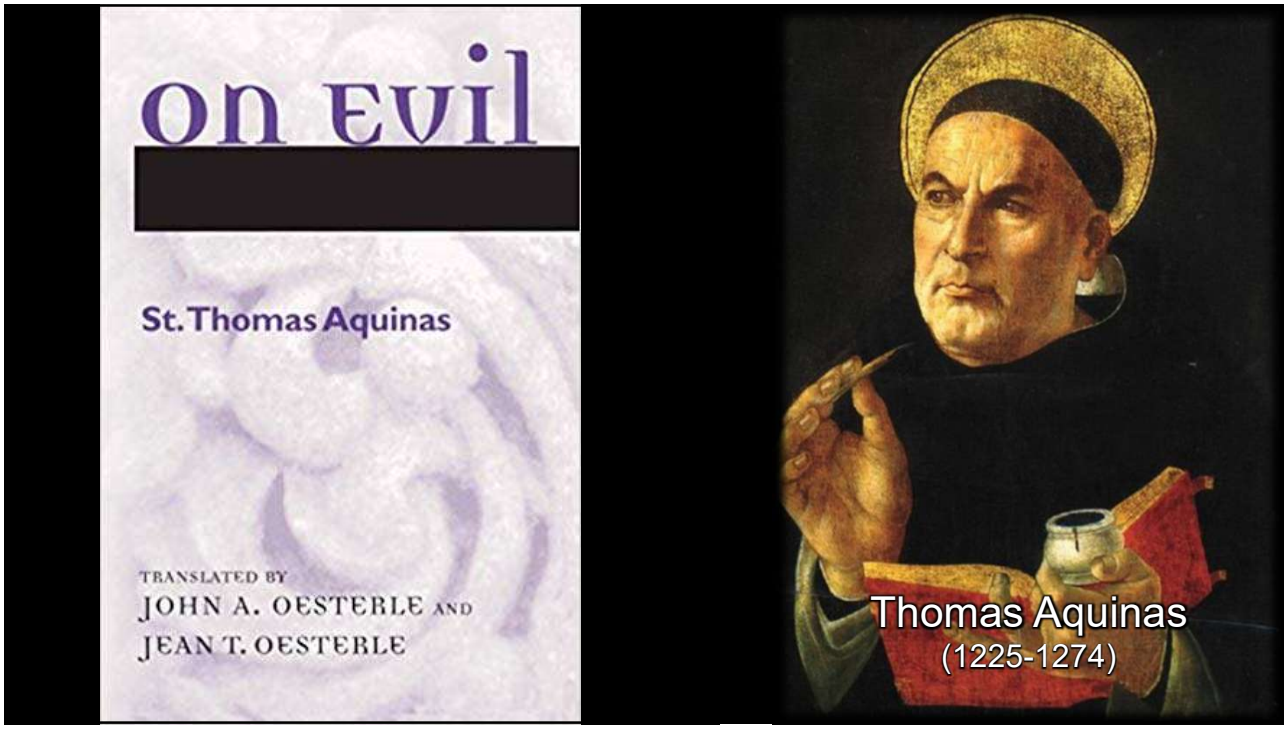

Included among those attributes are God's infinite goodness an omnipotence.
The metaphysics seeks to show that God is all good and all powerful even when we cannot demonstrate the connection between specific evils in the world and the specific goods that God might produce from them.

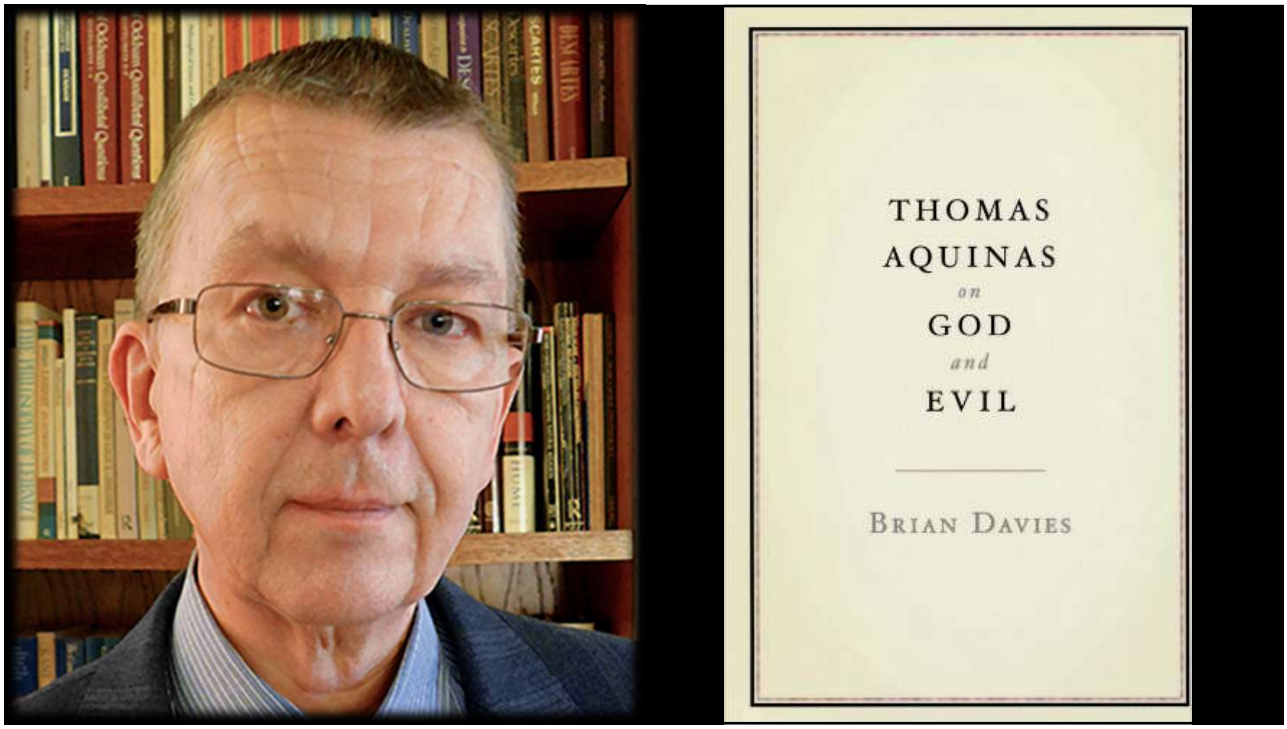

It is my contention that the goodness of God can be philosophically demonstrated full stop.
Such a demonstration is relatively indifferent to our ability as Christians to explain WHY God allowed evil to occur

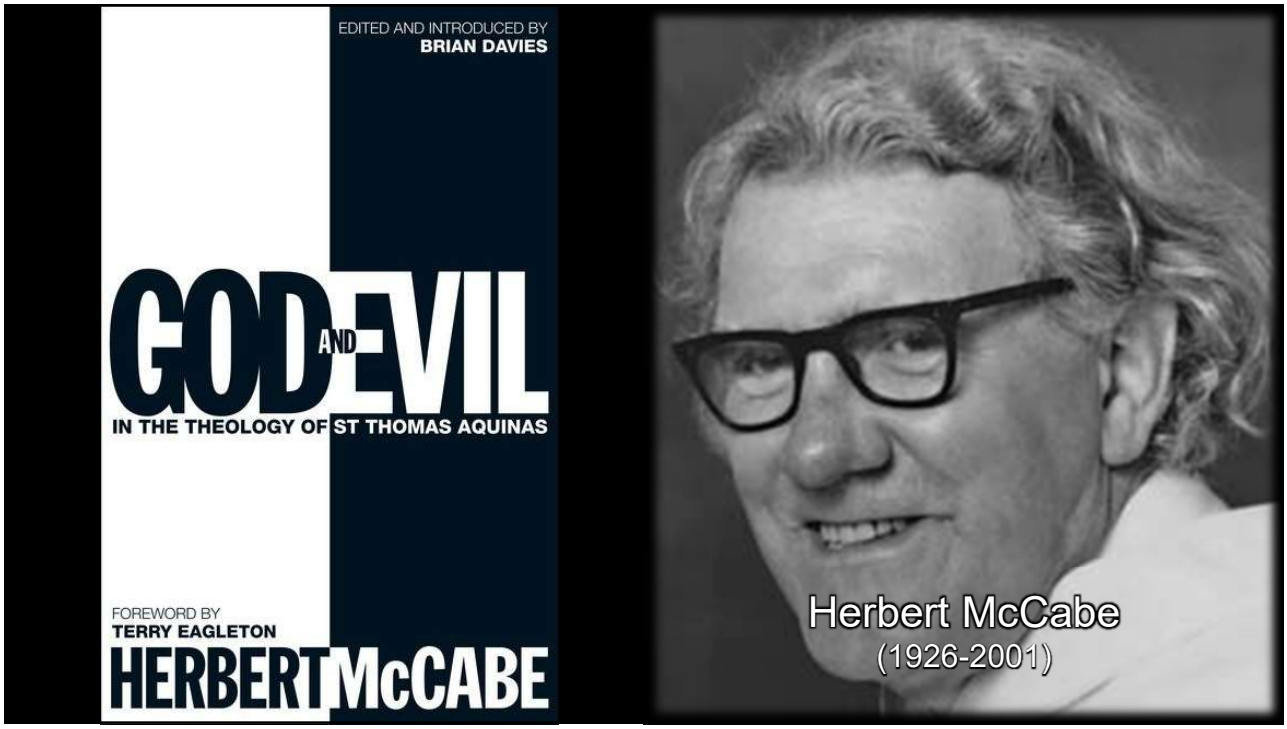
Resources

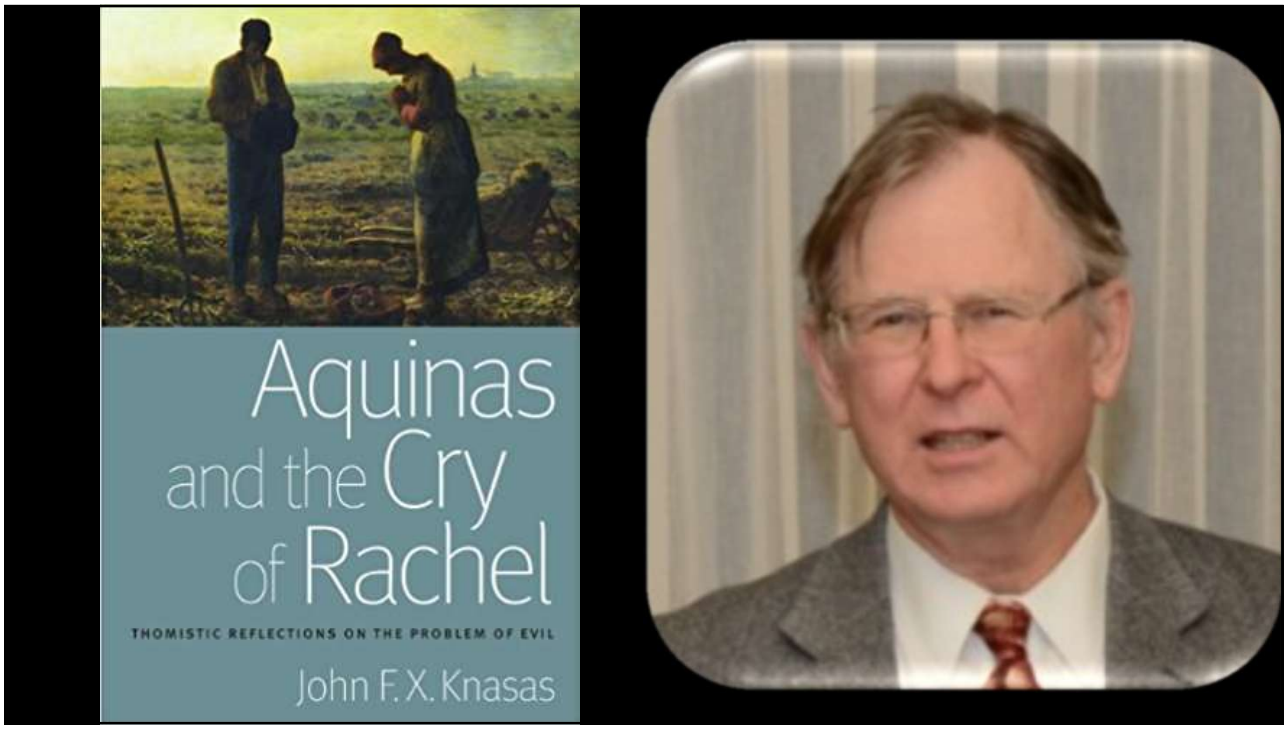

Gary J. Whittenberger
God, Evil, and Morality
A DEBATE
J. BRIAN HUFFLING
GARY J. WHITTENBERGER
with
Michael Shermer
James P. Sterba
Richard G. Howe
J. Brian Huffling




On Evil
St. Thomas Aquinas
TRANSLATED BY
JOHN A. OESTERLE AND
JEAN T. OESTERLE
Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)


THOMAS
AQUINAS
on
GOD
and
EVIL
BRIAN DAVIES


EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY
BRIAN DAVIES
GOD AND EVIL
IN THE THEOLOGY OF ST THOMAS AQUINAS
FOREWORD BY
TERRY EAGLETON
HERBERT McCABE
Herbert McCabe
(1926-2001)


Aquinas
and the Cry
of Rachel
THOMISTIC REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL
John F. X. Knasas