

**Some of the footnotes are still in progress. A final version will be uploaded when they are done.**

**The Metaphysics of God's Goodness and the Euthyphro Dilemma**

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In this paper, I explore a common challenge posed by unbelievers to the Christian understanding of how goodness relates to God. Socrates's interaction with Euthyphro, in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, gave rise to what we know now as "the Euthyphro Dilemma."<sup>1</sup> Any response to the challenge requires unpacking the elements of the challenge to see if and how a Christian position can be rationally sustained.

In the interest of full disclosure and a level of epistemological humility, I will be aiming my argument toward how I understand a Classical Realist response (in the tradition of Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas) to the dilemma.<sup>2</sup> More narrowly, my argument will follow the thinking of the existential Thomism of Etienne Gilson, Joseph Owens, Jan Aertsen, Norman Geisler, et al. I readily acknowledge that such a Thomistic approach puts me in a minority among Protestant philosophers. However, perhaps to the consternation of some of my fellow apologists / philosophers, that minority is growing.

### **What Is the Euthyphro Dilemma?**

#### **Dilemmas: True and False**

Before examining the apologetic challenge posed by The Euthyphro Dilemma and perhaps at the risk of offending your intelligence, I should like first to define certain related terms. A dilemma is a choice between two options where either both options are desirable but only one can be chosen; or where both options are less-than-desirable and one must be chosen. Choosing between chocolate cake and apple pie is a dilemma when one's diet or health cannot

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<sup>1</sup> For an English translation of Plato's works, see Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds. *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Other labels one might hear in reference to this tradition (with emphasis on that zenith) would be medieval, scholastic, moderate realism, philosophical realism, or Thomism.

afford both. Suffering a toothache or having a root canal is a dilemma since both are undesirable but one must be endured.

A true dilemma has only two possible options. In logic, this is known as the excluded middle. Either X is true or non-X is true. The Lord Jesus said “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit.”<sup>3</sup> A false dilemma is when a dilemma is presented (sometimes deliberately) as if it is a true dilemma when there are actually more than two options. In doing so one is committing the fallacy of false dilemma. The choice is a challenge when it is presented as only two options, implying there are no others. We see that the Lord Jesus was confronted with a false dilemma fallacy.

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus averted their challenge by pointing out a third option, a response, as we shall see, that is integral to the apologetic response to the Euthyphro Dilemma.

### Unpacking the Euthyphro Dilemma

In Plato’s dialogue, Socrates meets his prosecutor acquaintance, Euthyphro, as Euthyphro heads to court to prosecute his own father for murder. Taken aback that Euthyphro would prosecute his own father, Socrates queries Euthyphro as to why he would do such a thing. In response, Euthyphro claims that to do so is holy and to refrain from doing so is unholy.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 12:33. All English quotations of the Bible are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982) unless otherwise indicated. Jesus forced his detractors to face His credentials of, among other things, casting out demons after they sought to explain away His actions by accusing Him of doing so by Beelzebub. Ἡ ποιήσατε τὸ δένδρον καλόν, καὶ τὸν καρπὸν αὐτοῦ καλόν, ἢ ποιήσατε τὸ δένδρον σαπρὸν, καὶ τὸν καρπὸν αὐτοῦ σαπρὸν· ἐκ γὰρ τοῦ καρποῦ τὸ δένδρον γινώσκεται.

<sup>4</sup> John 9:1-3. καὶ παράγων εἶδεν ἄνθρωπον τυφλὸν ἐκ γενετῆς. καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ λέγοντες· ραββί, τίς ἥμαρτεν, οὗτος ἢ οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, ἵνα τυφλὸς γεννηθῇ; ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· οὔτε οὗτος ἥμαρτεν οὔτε οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἵνα φανερωθῇ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ.

Characteristically, Socrates presses for definitions. “Then tell me. How do you define the holy and the unholy?”<sup>5</sup> Euthyphro proceeds to give examples of things holy and things unholy.

Socrates is unsatisfied. “What I asked 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.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Socrates is not asking merely for examples of holy or unholy.

Rather, Socrates is seeking the essence of holiness itself as he presses Euthyphro for more explanation. The salient question from Socrates then arises. “Is what is holy, holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?”<sup>7</sup>

This is the essence of the Euthyphro Dilemma that eventually was employed to challenge Christians about how we regard goodness (or ‘the good’, or morality) and its relationship to God’s will. Atheist Philosopher Bertrand Russell put it this way:

If you are quite sure there is a difference between right and wrong, ... is that difference due to God’s fiat [i.e., a formal declaration that is fundamentally arbitrary] or is it not? If it is due to God’s fiat, then for God himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say ... that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God’s fiat .... If you are going to say that, you will then have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God.<sup>8</sup>

The Euthyphro Dilemma now commonly takes the form “Is something good because God commands it; or does God command it because it is good?” For some Christian apologists, what

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<sup>5</sup> Plato *Euthyphro* 5d, trans. Lane Cooper in Hamilton and Cairns, eds. *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, p. 173. All English quotations and page references of Plato’s *Euthyphro* are from Lane Cooper’s translation unless otherwise indicated. Socrates uses two terms and their negations for ‘holiness’ and ‘unholiness’; ὅσιον / ἀνόσιον (hosion / anosion) and εὐσεβές / ἀσεβές (eusebes / asebes).

<sup>6</sup> *Euthyphro* 6d, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> *Euthyphro* 10a, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 12.

makes this a dilemma, at least *prima facie*, is that either option seemingly poses problems in how the Christian should understand the relationship of goodness and God's will. The undesired options are often referred to as the "horns" of the dilemma.

### ***First Horn of the Dilemma***

The first option or horn says that X is good because God wills/commands it; and X is evil because God forbids it. This option is often labeled the Divine Command Theory. With this understanding, note that Divine Command Theory is not merely saying that God's commands are the means by which we *know* what is good and evil (i.e., it is not merely a matter of moral epistemology). Rather, this option says that God's commands or prohibitions *make* an action to be good or evil.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly the most explicit version of this view was that of René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes maintained:

It is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or actions or omission prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. ... There can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on [God]. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It should be pointed out that some use the expression 'Divine Command Theory' as referring, not primarily to what makes some action good, but what makes the action a duty or obligation. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig maintain that "the theist should not be understood as offering a definition of *good* or *right* in theistic terms (e.g., 'willed by God'). The theist does offer a **definition of morality** in the sense that moral values and duties are to be explicated in terms of God's nature and will rather than of self-interest, social contract, common happiness, or what have you. But the aim of theists is not to analyze the meaning of moral terms; rather they aim to provide an ontological grounding for objective moral values and duties." Afterwards, they explore more directly divine command theory. [J. P. Moreland, and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 536-537, emphasis in original].

<sup>10</sup> René Descartes, *Objections and Replies*; "Author's Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections" §6, §8, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 291, 293-294. One should note that Descartes held this view not only about morality (goodness) but also mathematics (specifically geometry), as Descartes goes on to argue in §6. For a survey of interpretations of Thomas Aquinas's understanding of mathematics in contradistinction to Descartes', see Armand Maurer, "Thomists and Thomas Aquinas on the Foundation of Mathematics" *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (September 1993): 43-61.

## Problems with the First Horn

Saying that God commanding X is what makes X good seemingly leads to the undesirable conclusion that if God willed rape, racism, murder, etc., then those would be good. Many Christians, however, sense these actions are intrinsically wrong, thus hinting that the wrongness is intrinsic to the action and perhaps, in some sense, antecedent to, or independent of, God's commands.

A second problem with the first horn is that 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." But this claim is empty in as much as, however one unpacks the expression 'God's will' it certainly could never fail to be true that what God wills is God's will. But could we say that same about the sentence "God's will is good"? It would seem that no matter how we unpacked the notion of 'good' it certainly could never fail to be true that God's will is good if what 'good' means is 'what God wills'. Since there are a number of ways in which 'good' has been defined to which many Christians would take exception, this would preclude the suggestion that no matter which definition of 'good' one opts for, that definition of the term 'good' would apply to God's will.

In this vein, some philosophers regard the statement "God's will is what God wills" a "trivially true" statement. They reason that since any X is X no matter what X is, then the truth of the statement 'X is X' is indifferent to any way in which the world is. It is what Kant called an analytic statement.<sup>11</sup> Logicians have labeled this the law of identity.

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<sup>11</sup> "In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought (I take into consideration affirmative judgments only, the subsequent application to negative judgments being easily made), this relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate B belongs to the subject A, as something which is (covertly) contained in this concept A; or B lies outside the concept A, although it does indeed stand in connection with it. In the one case I entitle the judgment analytic, in the other synthetic." [Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction, § IV, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 47].

As an aside, I must point out that as a classical philosopher in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, I would take umbrage with the claim that the law of identity is the same as Kant's analytic statement. Time and purpose will not allow me to explore this here, though it may be possible as I work through the rest of the paper for my reader (or hearer) to begin to see why I take this stance.<sup>12</sup> Let it suffice to say here that, for many Christians, it is hard to resist the notion that there is more to God's will than what the statement "God's will is what God wills" seems to capture.

### ***Second Horn of the Dilemma***

The second horn says that God wills X because X is good. Here, the goodness of X has to do with X itself, not merely because God wills it. In fact, it is the reverse—X is willed by God because it is good. This option seeks to establish something objective about the goodness of actions and things that cannot change due to someone's will—God's or anyone else's.

#### **Problems with the Second Horn**

Christians rejecting the first horn will initially be attracted to the second, since it seems to preserve the objectivity of goodness. But many regard it, too, as going too far. They argue that

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<sup>12</sup> Kant's analytic / synthetic distinction fails (without further argument) to recognize that there are at least five ways that a predicate can be in a subject. Henry Veatch observes, "Superficially, of course, the question as to whether propositions may be divided into analytic and synthetic would appear to be no more than a logical question; and more specifically still, it would seem to be merely logical question as to the possible kinds of predicable relationships that can hold between the subjects and predicates of propositions. Thus, as is well known, on the traditional Aristotelian doctrine of the predicables there are five possible ways in which predicate terms can be related to their subjects: a predicate may be either the genus of its subject, its differentia, its definition (or species), its property, or its accident. [Henry Veatch, "St. Thomas and the Question, 'How Are Synthetic Judgments A Priori Possible?'" *Modern Schoolman* 42 (March 1965): 239-263 (240)] For an exploration and defense of this classical understanding that the law of identity is not coextensive with Kant's analytic statements, especially with Kant's insistence—as indeed with the insistence of seemingly everyone since Kant—that analytic statements say nothing about reality beyond the relationship of parts of the statement itself see (in addition to the above cited Veatch article) other salient treatments by Veatch, including: "The Truths of Metaphysics," *Review of Metaphysics* 17, no. 67 (March 1964): 372-395 and "Symposium—Logical Truth" *The Journal of Philosophy* LIII, no. 22 (Oct. 25, 1956): 671-679. For fuller treatments by Veatch of the philosophy of logic, see his *Two Logics: The Conflict Between Classical and Neo-Analytic Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969; and *Intentional Logic: A Logic Based on Philosophical Realism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952. Republished, New Haven: Archon Books, 1970.

this option implies that there is a standard of goodness that lies external to, or independent of, God. The challenge then, is how to maintain the objectivity of goodness without being committed to the notion that God Himself is subordinate to that objectivity. The degree to which one opts for goodness's objectivity is the degree to which one seems to be committed to the notion that such objectivity is independent of God. The result, therefore, is an option that is just as distasteful (albeit for different reasons) as the first option. If God is Supreme Being, then it seems wrong to say that goodness is outside or above or independent of Him.

### ***The Euthyphro: A False Dilemma?***

Upon reflection of the dilemma's challenge and the untenable two options, many Christian apologists have chosen to "split the horns of the dilemma," essentially rejecting the challenge as a false dilemma. Splitting the horns offers a third option. Sometimes this alternative argues that *good* should be defined in terms of God's nature. Apologist David W. Richardson puts it this way.

"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. ... 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.*<sup>13</sup>

Scott B. Rae gives a more philosophical rendering. "At its heart, Christian ethics is a blend of both virtues and principles. Morality is ultimately grounded in the character of God—that is, the ultimate source for morality is not God's commands but God's character. ... God

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<sup>13</sup> David W. Richardson, *Transparent: How to See Through the Powerful Assumptions that Control You* (Franklin: Clovercroft, 2016), 73, 74, emphasis added.

issues the commands that he does because he is the kind of God that he is.”<sup>14</sup> Christians have commonly responded to the dilemma in some version of these examples.

### The Problem with the Third Option

While I believe that the two lines of thinking are on target, there seems to me to be a lurking problem viz., that being trivially true and empty of moral content seems to remain (which we saw regarding the First Horn). In defining goodness in terms of God’s nature or character, the question remains as to why one should think that the term *good* applies to God’s nature. For our purposes, one would have to know what the word *good* means before one can apply the word to God while at the same time showing that God has to exist before there can be *good*.

To be sure, this point needs to be unpacked and defended. For now, one needs only notice that if we seek to define the word *good* by reference to God’s nature or character, we still have not avoided making the same mistake of triviality. If *good* means “according to God’s nature,” then in saying that God’s nature is good amounts to saying nothing more than God’s nature is according to God’s nature. This, of course, is true but seems to lack in defining the good as the first horn failed explicitly and as the second horn eventually. It does not go far enough in answering the dilemma. It comes down to this. Unless there is some way to know what *good* means, we can never be in a position to know whether the term does or does not apply to God or to anything else.

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<sup>14</sup> Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 24. William Lane Craig make a similar point. “Since our moral duties are grounded in the divine commands, they are not independent of God. Neither are God’s commands arbitrary, for they are the necessary expressions of his just and loving nature. God is essentially compassionate, fair, kind, impartial, and so forth and his commandments are reflections of his own character. God’s character is definitive of moral goodness; it serves as the paradigm of moral good. Thus, the morally good/bad is determined by reference to God’s nature; the morally right/wrong is determined by reference to his will.” [William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 182].

## Good, Evil, and Being

Perhaps a more classical understanding of what *good* means can move the response to the Euthyphro Dilemma response towards a full resolution. By *classical* I generally mean the philosophical thinking that tracks the tradition from Plato (428-348 BC) and, more so, Aristotle (384-322 BC) up to its zenith in Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).<sup>15</sup> A helpful place to start, ironically, is with an understanding of the term *evil*. In contemporary philosophy, evil is often related to pain/suffering/death while good is taken as evil's contrast. In his discussion of the problem of evil, atheist philosopher Theodore Drange defines evil this way: "To formulate the argument from evil in the strongest possible way, it seems to me that it would suffice to take *evil* to refer just to suffering and premature death."<sup>16</sup>

This contemporary philosophy definition differs from how the classical tradition understands evil. While not denying altogether this contemporary definition, the

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<sup>15</sup> Other uses of the term 'classical' can be noted. **Classical Apologetics** is an apologetic system or methodology distinguished from other apologetic systems such as Presuppositionalism, Evidentialism, and Reformed Epistemology. It is characterized by an emphasis on natural theology and the primacy of theism in establishing the truth of the Christian faith. It is not uncommon to find apologists who self-identify as classical apologists who do not hold to classical philosophy as exemplified by Plato and Aristotle. **Classical Realism** as I use the expression, refers to the view that there is an external world outside the mind of the knower. It maintains that this external reality is the starting point of human knowledge. Classical Realism stands in contrast to Critical Realism which insists that the question of whether there is an external world outside the mind of the knower must itself be subject to the critique of philosophy. **Classical Empiricism**, the empiricism of Aristotle and Aquinas, is to be contrasted with modern and contemporary empiricism. (I am indebted to Ed. L. Miller and his work *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 226-229 for introducing me to this distinction.) Classical empiricism regards all knowledge as beginning in sensory experience, but completed in the intellect. As such, classical empiricism can give rise to knowledge of non-physical truths such as logic, metaphysics, ethics, and theology while modern empiricism (and some contemporary empiricism) expressly cannot. Though no one owns the exclusive right to the expression **Classical Theism**, most often in the contemporary debate over the attributes of God—especially the debate over the doctrine of Divine simplicity (DDS)—classical theists affirm the range of the attributes of God predominantly held throughout church history. Some detractors of the doctrine of Divine simplicity self-identify as neo-classical theists. See, for example, Ryan Mullins, "The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity" (<https://theopolisinstitute.com/conversations/the-doctrine-of-divine-simplicity/>, accessed 07/19/26).

<sup>16</sup> Theodore Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), 27. Philosopher Andrea M. Weisberger says, "Both natural evil, the suffering that occurs as a result of physical phenomena, and moral evil, the suffering resulting from human actions, comprise the Problem of Evil." [Andrea M. Weisberger, "The Argument from Evil," in Michael Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166].

Classical/Thomistic tradition will largely understand evil in terms of the metaphysics. Unpacking this classical understanding of evil will help us define *good* and see how this approach answers the Euthyphro Dilemma.

### Augustine on Evil

The definition of evil given by Augustine of Hippo (354-440 AD) has greatly influenced subsequent Christian thinking, particularly Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274). Employing his metaphysics (much of which he borrowed from Aristotle), Aquinas gives a fuller treatment of good and evil.<sup>17</sup> It is precisely because Aquinas employs Aristotle's metaphysics (together with his own augmentation to Aristotle with a certain notion of existence as distinct from essence) that Aquinas's thinking becomes the fuller treatment of good and evil that it does. Aquinas's thinking here governs what I take to be a fuller response to the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Augustine's understanding of evil is particularly relevant in the classical response to the Euthyphro Dilemma. Consider the question "Is evil real?" or "Is evil a thing?" In contrast to certain pantheistic religions and New Age thinking, Christians and many non-Christians affirm the reality of evil.<sup>18</sup> But there is a difference between saying X is real and saying that X is a

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<sup>17</sup> Some argue that Augustine's definition of evil was anticipated by Aristotle. "That the contrary of a good is an evil is shown by induction: the contrary of health is disease, of courage, cowardice, and so on. But the contrary of an evil is sometimes a good, sometimes an evil. For defect, which is an evil, has excess for its contrary, this also being evil, and the mean, which is a good, is equally the contrary of the one and of the other." [*Categories* XI, 13<sup>b</sup>36-14<sup>a</sup>5] See also, *Metaphysics* IX, 9, 1051<sup>a</sup>1-22.

<sup>18</sup> Upanishadic Hinduism regards evil as an illusion arising from one's ignorance of the fact that Atman (the individual soul) is Brahman (god). [*Chandogya Upanishad* 8.3.2, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/chandogya-upanishad-english/d/doc239433.html>] The New Age denial of the reality of evil can be seen in Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the New Religious Movement known as Christian Science. She says, "Evil has no reality. It is neither person, place, nor thing, but is simply a belief, and illusion of material sense. ... Expose and denounce the claims of evil and disease in all their forms, but realize no reality in them." [Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: The Christian Science Publishing Society, 1918), pp. 71, 447.] In addition, *A Course in Miracles*, the pseudo-Christian work written by Helen Schucman at the behest of "The Voice," says "Here is the real basis for your escape from fear. The escape is brought about by your acceptance of the Atonement, which enables you to realize that your errors never really occurred." [Helen Schucman, *A Course in Miracles* (Tiburon: Foundation for Inner Peace, 1985), p. 15].

thing/substance. X can be real even though X is not a thing/substance. Augustine argued that evil is real, but it is not a thing. Rather, evil is a privation or a lack *in* a thing. In his *Confessions* he says, “Evil is only the privation of a good.”<sup>19</sup> Some might argue that this does not help since we are employing the term *good*: the very thing we are trying to define. Let us develop this notion by incorporating the thinking of Aquinas.

### Aquinas on Evil

Aquinas concurs with Augustine on evil being a privation. Looking closer at the term ‘evil’ he observes

Just as the color white is spoken of in two ways, so also is evil. For in one way when white is said, it can refer to that which is the subject of whiteness; in another way to the whiteness itself, namely, the accident or quality itself. And likewise, when evil is said, it can refer to that which is the subject of evil, and this is something; in another way, it can refer to the evil itself, and this is not something but is the privation of some particular good.<sup>20</sup>

He builds upon Augustine’s definition in observing, “Evil cannot exist by itself, since it has no essence... Therefore, evil must be in a subject.”<sup>21</sup> He expands the thought. “Now evil is in a substance because something which it was originally to have, and which it ought to have, is lacking in it.”<sup>22</sup> He later adds, “Evil is simply a privation of something which a subject is entitled by its origin to possess and which it ought to have.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, III, 7, §12, in *The Confession of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 85. (*malum non esse nisi privationem boni*)

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil (De Malo)* I, 1, s.c., trans. Jean Oesterle, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 11, §2, in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. Three: Providence, Pt. II trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 6, §1, p.44. Note that Aquinas points out that, while evil itself is not a substance, it *in* a substance.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 7, §2, 48.

To say that evil is a lack or privation is perhaps easily understood when we contrast a privation with 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. Take blindness in a human. Blindness is the privation of sight. But blindness is not a thing in itself.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the reality of blindness is precisely because the human lacks a power or attribute that it “ought” to have. It is by virtue of being a human, i.e., it is precisely because of having a human nature, that it “ought” to see. The lack of seeing in a human is a privation. Since a rock is not the kind of thing that “ought” to see, then the lack of seeing in the rock is not a privation but merely a negation or absence. We would not call a rock blind.

One should note that the ‘ought’ necessarily a moral notion. For a human to be blind is not a moral evil. It is, however, in the classical and contemporary philosophical terminology, an evil inasmuch as it is a lack in a thing. Certainly, in contemporary non-philosophical talk, we often reserve the term *evil* for *moral evil*. The distinction between *good* and *moral good* or *evil* and *moral evil* remains to be seen.

An examination of the classical understanding of the nature of the good and how it relates to being (i.e., existence) exceeds our space and time constraints here. Volumes have been written on the subject, dating from the ancient Greeks (Plato and Aristotle) to the high Middle Ages

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<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps easy to see why this subtlety can be missed in those instances where, when the talk about whether X is real or not, the idea comes to mind that X would be a substance. But in the context of Aristotle’s Ten Categories, substance is only one way among several in which something can be real. In addition to being a substance, like, for example, being a dog, there are at least nine further “ways” or “modes” that the substance can be, to wit: quantity (25 pounds); quality (brown); relation (twice as big as a cat); place (in the back yard); time (now); position (sitting); state (leashed); action (barking); and passion (being rained upon). Each one of the last nine categories are as real as the first category “substance.” But the mode of that reality or being or existence is, of course, different. None of the other nine categories is a thing in the common use of the term *thing*. They each would require the existence of a substance to exist “in” rather than existing on their own. This would be one of several important ways that Aristotle differs with Plato. See Aristotle’s *Categories* chaps. 4 and 5 (1<sup>b</sup>25-4<sup>b</sup>20) as well as *Topics*, Bk. I, chap. 9 (103<sup>b</sup>20-104<sup>a</sup>2). Regarding this discussion of evil, note that it cannot be any one of the categories.

(Aquinas).<sup>25</sup> Additionally, despite the antiquity of some of the principles governing the topic and the depth the Thomistic analysis of them, there is not a consensus among philosophers, even Christian philosophers, regarding the nature of the good and its relationship to being and ultimately to God. What I can hope to accomplish in my summary here is to provide a pegboard on which the reader (or hearer) can hang the details of further exploration and analysis.

### Aquinas on the Convertibility of Being and Good<sup>26</sup>

To fully answer the Euthyphro Dilemma, two things need to be demonstrated. First the argument will seek to demonstrate that *being* (or *existence*) and *good* are convertible terms, in other words, to exist and to be good are the same. What kind of distinction there is between the two will be explained in due course. At this point, unless we identify good with existence, we will never fully account for the reality of goodness itself. As an aside, the convertibility of *being* and *good* will also have important philosophical implications for the fact/value dichotomy as well as the oft-cited “is-ought fallacy” and the closely related “naturalistic fallacy.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Plato’s *Republic* Bks. VI and VII, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. I, and Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* I, QQ. 5 and 6 and his *An Exposition of the ‘On the Hebdomads’ of Boethius*.

<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Jan A. Aertsen for his article “The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas” *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 449-470 for my understanding here.

<sup>27</sup> I deny, as my argument will show, that such thinking is always a fallacy. The expression *naturalistic fallacy* was first used by the philosopher G. E. Moore. “The very commission of the naturalistic fallacy involves that those who commit it should not recognize clearly the meaning of the proposition ‘This is good’—that they should not be able to distinguish this from other propositions which seem to resemble it; and where this is so, it is, of course, impossible that its logical relations should be clearly perceived.” [G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 61]. David Hume has perhaps the earliest description of what came to be known as the is/ought fallacy.

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that

Second, the argument will then seek to show that God as Supreme Being—Aquinas’s phrase is “subsisting existence itself” (*ipsum esse subsistens*)—is infinitely good. Interestingly, Aquinas’s argument that God is subsisting existence itself is the substance of his cosmological argument for God’s existence. In this thinking, to demonstrate God’s existence is sufficient to demonstrate all of God’s superlative attributes, including goodness. We will address the second point later.

No one could coherently insist that there is some level of reality more basic or fundamental than existence into which an argument is obligated to resolve. Thus, it follows that demonstrating that good and existence are the same is ultimately to answer the Euthyphro Dilemma. Nothing is more fundamental than to be real. So, while other arguments resolve into less-than-fundamental categories (like *moral* - e.g., God is a morally perfect being; or God is the ultimate standard of goodness) which are not themselves convertible with being, the argument here will ground the answers as fully as possible.<sup>28</sup>

In Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 5, article 1, he asks “whether Goodness Differs Really from Being?” His argument can be summarized as follows.

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

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this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.”[David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. III, §1 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 469-470].

<sup>28</sup> Though I cannot unpack the details here, this answer to the Euthyphro Dilemma will also answer the Problem of Evil by showing that the goodness of God is philosophically demonstrable irrespective of the evils that are found in creation and irrespective of how unsuccessful the given theodicies and other responses are regarded to be. For an exploration of that demonstration (and other issues), see Richard G. Howe, “Saving Natural Theology from Jeffrey Johnson” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 17 (Spring 2023): 55-91. An augmented version of this article is available for download at [http://richardghowe.com/index\\_html\\_files/SavingNaturalTheologyfromJeffreyJohnson.pdf](http://richardghowe.com/index_html_files/SavingNaturalTheologyfromJeffreyJohnson.pdf). See especially the section “Aquinas’s Doctrine of Esse,” pp. 26-36.

3. 'Perfect' is identified with 'act' (or actuality).
4. 'Actuality' is identified with 'being'.<sup>29</sup>

My overall point is demonstrated when we show that God is being (existence) itself, or, as the theologian would say it, God is Supreme Being. Let us address these premises one at a time.

***'Good' is first identified with 'desirable'.***

Aristotle observed: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has been rightly declared to be that at which all things aim."<sup>30</sup>

Aquinas echoes and expands upon Aristotle's thinking by saying: "Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea .... The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable."<sup>31</sup> But have we not encountered a problem? Is it not the case that we sometimes desire things that are not good? Are Aristotle and Aquinas stating something false? The problem is only apparent and not real. They are not saying that something is good in an unqualified sense because it is desirable. We desire many things that we know are, in some way, not good as a diabetic may desire an unhealthy dessert.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q5, art. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (Westminster: Christian Classics. 1981), p. 23. All English translations of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* are from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1, 1094<sup>a</sup>1-2 trans. W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 935. Lest the Christian be suspicious that our argument for God's goodness begins with a pagan philosopher, I know no Christian who would reject the Pythagorean Theorem by which we can calculate the length of any side of a right triangle knowing the length of the other two sides. Yet the theorem was also formulated by a pagan philosopher. Regardless of him being a pagan, Pythagoras was able to know certain mathematical truths because they are truths about reality. It did not matter whether Pythagoras understood that the reality which conveyed those truths was created by the God of the Bible. By virtue of the faculties with which God created him, Pythagoras was able to know certain geometrical truths. By parallel, I maintain that there are other truths about God's creation that one can know irrespective of whether or not one is in a saving relationship with God, including certain truths about goodness and morality. I believe Aristotle was on to something with his line of reasoning, though, as will become clear enough through the argument, he did not have the complete picture.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q5, art. 1, p. 23.

So, what is going on? Having defined evil, we must now give some content to good. We use the term *good* to describe countless things – a good pizza; a good knife; a good person. There is something common in things that we can describe as good. We hinted at that commonality when we defined *evil*. Philosopher Herbert McCabe puts it this way. "A perfect X is an X that has all its properties; an imperfect X lacks one or more of its properties."<sup>32</sup> For our purposes, McCabe is using the term *perfect* as a synonym for *good*. The salient point to understand is that what makes a good or perfect X is when X has all of the characteristics it ought to have by virtue of being an X.

A good knife has all the characteristics that a knife ought to have by virtue of being a knife. But suppose a customer refused to buy a knife because it was a bad knife – it had a pitted, dull blade and worn handle. The seller argued, "Who are you to say that a good knife ought to have a sharp and clean blade and unworn handle? Are you trying to shove your knife morality down my throat? What about all those dull knives in the world; are you saying they are all bad?" Clearly such talk would not make any sense. Having a sharp and clean blade and an unworn handle is what it means to be a good or perfect knife.

Another salient point is that, in the classical tradition, natural objects have the attributes they ought to have precisely because of their natures. A thing's nature is that metaphysical aspect of a thing that makes it the kind of thing that it is. Up until now, I have been using examples of artificial things like knives to provide an initial understanding of the term *good*. However, the

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<sup>32</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2010), 40. The term *property* is the one most commonly found in the contemporary philosophical literature when discussing the attributes or characteristics of a thing. Aristotle's Greek word is *sumbebēkos* (συμβεβηκός). Its Latin equivalent is *accidens* from where we get the English word *accident*. English translations of the Ancient Greek and Medieval philosophy use *accident* to translate *sumbebēkos* and *accidens*. For obvious reasons, it can be misleading to the English reader when the Greek or Medieval philosopher labels a thing's properties or attributes as *accidents* given that the word in English has come to mean "an unfortunate mishap."

philosophical point to be made about goodness and its relationship to a thing's nature, applies strictly speaking, only to natural objects like plants, animals, and humans. Technically, in the classical tradition, artifacts like knives do not have metaphysical natures or essences. Philosopher David S. Oderberg defines essence as "an objective metaphysical principle determining [a thing's] definition and classification. Such principles are not mere creatures of language or convention; they belong to the very constitution of reality."<sup>33</sup> The nature of a thing answers the question "What is it?" when asking about a thing that is not merely an artifact.

To finalize this line of thinking, one last metaphysical point needs to be made. The trajectory that natural objects follow is called *teleology*. The teleology of the tadpole is to become a full-grown frog. The term comes from the Greek word for "end" or "goal." The Latin word is "finis" from where we get the English word 'finish' as in a finish line as the end or goal of the race. Focusing on living things, a thing's nature not only makes the thing what it is, but it also sets that thing on a trajectory of development towards its completion or perfection. It is precisely because a tadpole has the nature that it does that it will always become a full-grown frog (unless interfered with by injury, malnourishment, disease, or destruction). The whatness of X remains the same throughout all the changes X undergoes during its development.<sup>34</sup>

***'Desirable' is identified with 'perfect' (perfectum).***

It may be easy to see that a tadpole's teleology constitutes its completion or perfection, but how does this relate to desire? Two points are relevant here. First, broadly-speaking, the

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<sup>33</sup> David Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), x.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle uses the term *morphē* (μορφή), translated *form* and *hulē* (ὕλη), translated *matter* to refer to the two metaphysical aspects of sensible (i.e., knowable by the senses) objects. Together they account for the essence of the sensible (i.e., knowable by the senses) thing. Form is the class or category to which the thing belongs and matter is the material individuation of the thing. Thus, *dog* would be its "whatness" and its matter would make it this particular physical dog. Aquinas's Latin would be *forma* (from which the English *form* derives) and *materia* (from which the English word *matter* derives).

teleology of X can be described as a desire inasmuch as it inevitably tends toward that completion, even though the tadpole lacks a state of mind that causes that tending. It is precisely because a tadpole does not have the ability to direct itself toward its completion that Aquinas argues that only God can account for directing the teleology of things. This is the fifth of Aquinas's *Five Ways*, i.e. his five arguments demonstrating the existence of God.

Second, when considering this point in light of humans as opposed to other animals, the distinction between *good* and *moral good* emerges. Because humans have reason and will, our teleology is more than the mere completion of our physical bodies. A human is able to "master his actions" inasmuch as his actions "proceed from a deliberative will." Aquinas explains:

Of actions done by man those alone are properly called human, which are proper to man as man. Now man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions. Wherefore those actions alone are properly called human, of which man is master. Now man is master of his actions through his reason and will; whence, too, the free-will is defined as the faculty and will of reason. Therefore, those actions are properly called human which proceed from a deliberate will.<sup>35</sup>

It is entirely because humans can deliberate among competing "goods" that our actions are moral. The full-grown frog is the good/perfection of the frog. But it has no moral status. But the good/perfection of the human is moral since the actions of the human that bring about the perfection are deliberately chosen. Certainly, the human no more chooses to grow physically than the tadpole does with the exception of course as to whether the human does or does not choose to eat healthily. But, without giving any argument here, humans possess more to their essence than merely the life in the body like all other animals. Humans have a soul. This soul possesses the faculty of rationality by virtue of the intellect. This gives human a free will and, thus the capacity (unique among animals) to choose a course of action that either perfects or does violence to the nature; and can choose toward or against advancing along this trajectory towards one's proper

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q1, art. 1, p. 583.

end, understanding that this end involves the soul. Historically, when a human achieves (as much as possible) that end, the human is said to be virtuous. This point is key. It is precisely because humans have this capacity of deliberation that we are moral creatures. Freedom of the will is a necessary condition for morality as such.

Perhaps one can see that X is always chosen because it is taken (rightly or wrongly) to be that which completes/perfects us. This is what Aristotle means when he said, “Every action ... is thought to aim at some good.” It is labeled *good* because it is taken to be achieving some completion/good. Aquinas says, "Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection."<sup>36</sup> As the intellect always aims at that which it (rightly or wrongly) takes to be true, the will always aims at that which it takes to be good.<sup>37</sup>

***'Perfect' is identified with 'act' (or actuality).***

With this and the next premise, space constraints compel us to say it this way. Aristotle and Aquinas use the term *potency* to refer to certain capacities in a thing. It is what makes it possible for X to remain the same kind of X while undergoing changes as it moves toward its teleology. Aristotle and Aquinas use *act* or *actuality* as the terms referring to the state when those capacities are realized.<sup>38</sup> To actualize a potency is to move the potency from the merely possible to the real. It is important to remember that what X's potencies are has everything to do

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q5, art. 1, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> To unpack that point a bit, the human intellect is always directed to what it takes to be true. It would not make sense to say that one intellectually embraces a notion that he takes to be false. To be sure, one might actually accept something to be true that is in fact false. The point here is that, by its very nature, the intellect always aims at what it takes to be true. By parallel, the human will always aims at what it takes to be good. To be sure here as well, one might actually will something that is not in fact good. But in the same way as the intellect, the will by its very nature always aims at what it takes to be good. This can help clear up how the notion of the good as desirable can be a moral evil even when that moral evil is sometimes desirable.

<sup>38</sup> For these definitions, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, D (V), 12, 1019<sup>a</sup>15 and Thomas Aquinas, *On the Principles of Nature*.

with its nature. While in the tadpole stage, the potencies it possesses set it on its course to be and only be a full-grown frog. It would be impossible for the tadpole to become, for example, a tree. Only the seed with its potencies can become the full-grown tree. The full-grown frog stage is the perfection of the tadpole just as the full-grown tree is the perfection of the seed.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it follows that actualizing the potencies of the tadpole and seed make them perfect. As Aquinas says, “Everything is perfect so far as it is actual.”<sup>40</sup>

***'Actuality' is identified with 'being'.***

In every case, existence (or being) makes the difference between the potencies in a thing and the actuality of the thing. The potencies are actualized by taking on being. This highlights that perfection just is existence. The being of the completed tadpole arises by means of its potency coming into full existence. Aquinas concludes, “Now is it clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, *good* and *being* are convertible terms.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Owens points out an interesting aspect of the term ‘perfection’ in Greek. “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. These perfected the material element in the sense of filling its potentiality and completing the thing. 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.” [Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968), 52-53]. The word entelecheia (ἐντελέχεια) is composed of three Greek words; en (ἐν) meaning “in” telos (τέλος) meaning “end” or “goal” and echein (ἔχειν) meaning “to have.” Thus, ‘actuality’ is “to have the end or goal in” which is to say, the actualization of the potencies.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q5, art. 1, p. 23. Elsewhere Aquinas expands the thinking. “Being is divided by act and potency. Now, act as such is good, for something is perfect to the extent that it is in act. Potency, too, is a good thing, for potency tends toward act, as appears in every instance of change. ... So, everything that exists, whether the mode of its existence, is a good thing to the extent that it is a being.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 7, §8. Trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 49-50.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q5, art. 1, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Some have objected that existence is the broadest and most abstract of categories, making it have the least of specifying content. George Klubertanz summarizes: “Genus is always abstract; and the wider and more universal the genus, the more abstract and potential it is. For example, *material substance* is a predicate that can be applied to every thing in our material universe: it is also a very abstract concept and is in potency to all the specific determinations—living, sensitive, rational.” He goes on to point out however: “But *being* as it is understood in its

Let us revisit a potential misunderstanding. Aquinas's point is not that everything is good full stop. The objectivity of goodness can be seen by remembering several points. First, recall the diabetic/dessert illustration. In some sense, the dessert is good to the diabetic inasmuch as it is the object of desire. The diabetic views the dessert as fulfilling/completing him. In another sense, the dessert is not good for the diabetic since it detracts from the perfection (in this case the health) of the diabetic. Here, the objective goodness has to do with the nature of the thing under consideration. When a lion eats a springbok, it is good for the lion as it contributes to the teleology of the lion as its food. But it is not good for the springbok as it leads to its destruction. Note that in neither case (lion nor springbok) is the *good* here a moral good.

Second, in addition to the animal aspect of a human (viz., a body with sentience, which is the same as any other higher animal), the human possesses rationality that gives the human free will to deliberate among competing goods some of which are objectively good and some are not. Aquinas puts it this way, "Those acts are properly called human which are voluntary because the will is the rational appetite, which is proper to man."<sup>43</sup> Such acts are what make human actions moral. They are morally good inasmuch as such actions are the means by which humans actualize their teleology with special emphasis on a virtuous character. While a lion never acts contrary to what it is to be a lion, human free will allows the human to act in accordance with or contrary to what it is to be a human. Acting contrary to what it is to be a human does not render him non-human. Rather, to act in accordance with what it is to be a human is to act morally

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first and proper metaphysical sense is named from that which is most actual and concrete, namely, the act of existing. Being is *not* the "widest in extension and the least in comprehension," because the logical rule of the inverse variation of extension and comprehension holds only for universals. Being is at once the widest in extension—for *is* can be said of all things—and the fullest in (implicit) comprehension—for any real act or perfection *is*. [George Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 185, 1866].

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q6, prog., p. 615.

good; and to act contrary to what it is to be a human is to act morally evil. If one goes on to ask “why should one choose the good?” Aquinas will liken the question to asking “why should one believe the true.” In parallel to the law of non-contradiction (which is the first principle of the speculative intellect), Aquinas asserts the first principle of the practical intellect to wit *Bonum est faciendum et prosequendum et malum vitandum*: “The good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided.”<sup>44</sup>

More needs to be said regarding what it means to act in accordance with and contrary to human nature. One would need to explore a philosophy of human nature and natural law ethics. Space constraints do not allow that here. For now, let us summarize what we have said with a look at how the goodness of God fully answers the Euthyphro Dilemma.

### **The Goodness of God**

This final section explains what is meant by saying God is good. Steven R. Lewis points out “God’s goodness is not generally intended as a description of or adjudication on God’s accomplishments or achievements, but rather it is seen as a metaphysically necessary aspect of his divine nature. The question remains, however, as to how and on what basis God can be said to be ‘good’ and how God’s goodness informs our understanding of him.”<sup>45</sup> God is existence (being) itself. The substance for Aquinas’s argument for the existence of God shows exactly this.<sup>46</sup> Aquinas points out that there is a distinction between the basic metaphysics of essence (what something is) and existence (that something is). One can know what something is without

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Aquinas, ST I-II, Q94, art. 2

<sup>45</sup> Steven R. Lewis, *Natural Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2026), 51.

<sup>46</sup> See Aquinas’s relatively short monograph *On Being and Essence*.

knowing whether it exists.<sup>47</sup> Whatever is true of X is true of it either because of the principles of its essence/nature or not. For example, humans have risibility because of human nature. In contrast, the location of a human (e.g., Pretoria) is not due to its nature. A thing can still be a human without being located in Pretoria. But while location is not due to the principles of the essence, location can be caused by the human himself. A human can make himself be in one city or another. With this, consider the fact that the human exists. Either the human exists because it is his nature to exist or it is caused to exist by something else. (It should be noted here without argument that what is in view is not the “coming-into-existence” of the human but rather the “continued existing” of the human.) It cannot be the cause of its own existence, otherwise it would have to exist before it exists, which is impossible. Therefore, the human exists because he is caused to exist by something else. For reasons outside the scope of this chapter, Aquinas’s argument concludes that the reason anything exists is because there is something whose very essence is existence itself—*ipsum esse subsistens* (subsisting existence itself). There can only be one being whose essence is to exist. Last, he shows that such a being must have all the perfections of existence itself.<sup>48</sup>

### **Answering the Euthyphro Dilemma**

One of God’s perfections must be goodness itself since good is convertible with being (i.e., existence) and God is existence itself. Thus, it follows from the metaphysics that God is good. This alone avoids all the shortcomings of other attempted responses to the dilemma. God’s will/commands, when taking *will* or *commands* to be something other than God’s essence itself

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, ch. 4, §6.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, QQ 2-26. For a treatment of Aquinas’s “Five Ways” (*Summa Theologiae* I, Q2, art. 3) showing how they are imbued with this reasoning in his *On Being and Essence*, see Joseph Owens, “Aquinas and the Five Ways. *Monist* 58 (Jan. 1974): 16-35.

cannot sufficiently answer the challenge. This is not only because of the reasons given earlier, but also because it is predicated on the assumption that God is not existence itself. This allows the challenger to press the problem of God willing something that is not good.

Regarding the option that says that good is objective and, thus, must be outside of God Himself and must be that to which God is subject—this, too, fails because it is predicated upon the mistaken notion that goodness and God are distinct.

Finally, regarding the common option that God's commands are good because they are grounded in God's nature/character—this line of thinking is on the right track. What is missing is the proper connection between goodness and God's nature. It is my considered judgment that the only viable position must be that God is existence itself and thus, is goodness itself.

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