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Aquinas on divine impeccability, omnipotence, and free will

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Abstract: This article analyses Aquinas's conception of divine impeccability, and replies to some contemporary objections to this view. The first three sections show that for Aquinas the proposition that expresses God's impeccability is necessary *de re*, since God's moral goodness is grounded in His ontological goodness. The fourth section presents the connection between God's will and God's power and explains the sense of Aquinas's claim that God cannot sin because He cannot will to sin. The last three sections address the objections based on the apparent incompatibility between omnipotence and impeccability, and between impeccability, free will, and praiseworthiness.

Introduction

Classical Theism has traditionally considered divine impeccability, i.e. God's inability to sin, as an essential divine attribute. Even if impeccability has received less attention than other attributes – such as foreknowledge, eternity, and simplicity – it has been frequently discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion and philosophical theology over the last fifty years. In this context, many scholars have raised objections to the traditional concept of impeccability, claiming its apparent incompatibility with divine omnipotence, significant free will, and praiseworthiness. Aquinas's account of impeccability has been present in these discussions as the paradigm of the traditional view on the subject. Nevertheless, his position has been misrepresented many times, leading to some criticisms that do not affect his real position.

In this article I will present and analyse Aquinas's conception of divine impeccability, and reply to some contemporary objections to his view. In the next three sections I will explain that for Aquinas the proposition that expresses God's impeccability is necessary *de re*, since God's moral goodness is grounded in His

ontological goodness. Then, I will present the connection between God's will and God's power and explain the sense of Aquinas's claim that God cannot sin because He cannot will to sin. Finally, I shall address the objections based on the apparent incompatibility between omnipotence and impeccability, and between impeccability, free will, and praiseworthiness.

God's ontological perfection and moral goodness

Divine impeccability has been traditionally considered an aspect of God's perfect ontological goodness. Contrary to this notion, many contemporary accounts of divine impeccability tend to separate God's ontological goodness – the goodness He has insofar as He is a being – from God's moral goodness – the goodness He has by having a good will and acting in a good fashion. Reichenbach (1980) and Brown (1991) state that Aquinas's claim that God is good by nature does not imply that He is good in His actions, so ontological goodness does not guarantee moral goodness. Wierenga states that Aquinas's claim that 'God is good' *qua* desirable and first cause of all desirable perfection is an ontological or aesthetical claim that must be distinguished from the same claim taken as a moral judgement, which would be the relevant sense for a discussion about impeccability (Wierenga (1989), 202).

Contrary to these positions, God's moral goodness is for Aquinas directly linked to His ontological perfection or, more properly speaking, both in Him are one and the same thing. However, in order to understand this claim, it is important to provide some relevant background. As it is well known, for Aquinas goodness is a property of being as such (*Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] Ia, 5, 1).[1] Every being is good insofar as it is desirable, since the desirability of a thing depends upon its perfection, and the act of being is the first and most radical perfection of every thing (*ST* Ia, 5, 1; also *De veritate* [hereafter *DV*] 21, 1). Now, since God is the primary cause of the perfection of every being, He is self-subsisting being itself and pure act or perfection, pre-containing all the perfections of every created being (*ST* Ia, 4, 2). He does not just possess goodness, but He is the supreme and absolute Good, not contained by any particular genus or order of created goodness (*ST* Ia, 6, 1 and 2). Moreover, given God's simplicity, for Aquinas, God is essentially good; He is Goodness itself, in whose goodness every other thing participates.

In this sense, God's goodness is metaphysically incompatible with any kind of evil. As it is well known, following Augustine, Aquinas defines evil as a privation or defect of a due good (*ST* Ia, 48, 1), as he says: '. . .evil according as it is evil is not numbered among the things that are, but is a privation of some particular good, inhering in a particular good' (*De malo* [hereafter *DM*], 1, 1).[2] Now, any privation requires a subject to exist; therefore, privations can only exist in those individuals that are not identical with the properties they possess. Only an individual that is not identical with the properties it possesses is able to acquire or lose any

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perfection. Now, for Aquinas, the distinction between an individual substance and its properties is a formal effect of the composition between actuality (being) and potentiality (essence), which can be found in all created beings (*Summa Contra Gentiles* [hereafter *SCG*] II, ch. 52). Hence, according to Aquinas, there can only be genuine privation or lack of perfection in those beings in which some metaphysical composition can be found, i.e. in the creatures. God, however, is metaphysically simple, given that He is pure actuality of being (*ST* Ia, 3, 4), therefore, no evil can be found in Him:

> since evil, as we have said above, is nothing else but the privation of a due perfection, and privation exists only in a being in potentiality, because we say a thing is deprived which is designed by nature to have something and does not have it, it follows that evil exists in good inasmuch as being in potentiality is called good. Now the good which is perfection is free from i.e. is without evil; consequently in such a good evil cannot exist. But the good which is a composite of subject and perfection is seriously damaged by evil, inasmuch as the perfection is removed and the subject remains, for instance blindness deprives of vision and leaves the eye without sight, and exists in the substance of the eye or even in the animal itself as in a subject. Hence if there is a good which is pure act having no admixture of potency, such as God is, in such a good evil in no way can exist. (*DM* 1, 2)[3]

The preceding argumentation, isolated from its metaphysical framework, could be interpreted as referring exclusively to God's ontological perfection and not to moral perfection. One may feel inclined to think that, since God is ontologically perfect, he is the most desirable being, and therefore He is perfectly good only in this sense. Hence, one could say, no ontological imperfection or privation can be found in Him with regards to His nature, but that doesn't prevent God from 'acting' in an evil fashion, in spite of His ontological goodness. God's metaphysical perfection would not guarantee his moral perfection.

Such an interpretation would miss the main point of Aquinas's metaphysics of divine simplicity. For Aquinas, the composition of substance and accidents, which can be found in every creature, is a consequence of its composition of being and essence (*SCG* II, ch. 52). Since no creature is essentially its own being, no creature has, by virtue of its own nature, all the perfection that it is capable of (and that it aims to achieve), and which belongs to the scope of the accidental being. For this reason, every creature is oriented towards an ultimate end distinct from itself, and so has to attain that end through its actions, which are accidental properties, distinct from its substantial being. This is why in every rational creature the ontological goodness and the moral goodness are two distinct features.

God, on the other hand, is an absolutely simple being, with no composition of being and essence, or of substance and accidents (*ST* Ia, 3, 4 and 3, 6). Thus, He is not distinct from any of His attributes; He has, by His own nature, infinite goodness and perfection. Therefore, He doesn't need to achieve an end distinct from Himself through His actions. Moreover, His actions are not something distinct from His substantial being. Hence, God has in one simple act all the perfection that

creatures can only have unfolded through different and successive instances (*ST* Ia, 4, 2):

> I answer that God alone is good essentially. For everything is called good according to its perfection. Now perfection of a thing is threefold: first, according to the constitution of its own being; secondly, in respect of any accidents being added as necessary for its perfect operation; thirdly, perfection consists in the attaining to something else as the end. Thus, for instance, the first perfection of fire consists in its existence, which it has through its own substantial form; its secondary perfection consists in heat, lightness and dryness, and the like; its third perfection is to rest in its own place. This triple perfection belongs to no creature by its own essence; it belongs to God only, in Whom alone essence is existence; in Whom there are no accidents; since whatever belongs to others accidentally belongs to Him essentially; as, to be powerful, wise and the like, as appears from what is stated above; and He is not directed to anything else as to an end, but is Himself the last end of all things. Hence it is manifest that God alone has every kind of perfection by His own essence; therefore He Himself alone is good essentially. (*ST* Ia, 6, 3)[4]

By virtue of His metaphysical perfection God has, by His own nature, all the goodness that creatures can only acquire through their actions – or, eventually, via virtues infused by God. Now, the perfection that rational creatures achieve through their free actions is what is properly called 'moral goodness'. Only in rational creatures does metaphysical and moral goodness unfold as two distinct perfections. Hence, for Aquinas, God's essential goodness includes the perfection of all kinds of goodness, even moral goodness. Since God's ontological perfection includes moral perfection, and His ontological perfection is absolute, then He also has perfect moral goodness, including moral virtues:

> For just as His being is universally perfect, in some way containing within itself the perfection of all beings, so must His goodness in some way comprise the various kinds of goodness of all things. Now virtue is a kind of goodness of the virtuous person, since in respect thereof he is said to be good, and his work good. It follows therefore that the divine goodness contains in its own way all virtues. (*SCG* I, ch. 92)[5]

God's goodness and necessary impeccability

This conclusion clearly sets Aquinas's position apart from a certain number of contemporary accounts of divine impeccability. Many contemporary scholars (see Pike (1969), Reichenbach (1980), and Brümmer (1984)) hold what Carter has called the 'divine office position' (Carter (1982)). According to this position, the term 'God' is a descriptive expression, a 'title' with an identifiable meaning, which contains necessarily the attributes 'perfectly good' and 'omnipotent', so that the proposition 'God cannot sin', would be necessary *de dicto*. To affirm of some individual, for instance, 'Yahweh', that He is 'God' is to affirm that that individual holds that title, i.e. that he occupies the 'divine office'. Now, 'Yahweh' holds the title 'God' contingently, so that if He were to sin, He would no longer hold the office.

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Things are quite different for Aquinas's classical position. Absolute and perfect ontological goodness can only be possessed by the only one individual who actually and essentially possesses it. Now, if God is morally perfect by virtue of His ontological perfection, which can only be possessed by the individual that He is (since He is the only possible instance of pure act (*ST* Ia, 11, 3)), it follows that He is essentially and necessarily morally good. Therefore, He is also necessarily impeccable, i.e. it is metaphysically impossible for Him to sin, or to do evil: 'Divine will has by its own nature not being able to sin' (*Scriptum super Sententiis* [hereafter *SS*] II, d. 23, 1, 1).[6] Now, in order to properly understand this thesis, it is necessary to clarify Aquinas's concept of 'sin'.

In a broad sense, sin can be regarded as a species of evil, namely, the privation, defect, or disorder affecting a natural or a voluntary action: 'Sin, whether it be spoken of in natural or artificial or voluntary matters, is nothing but a defect or disorder in the agent's proper action when something is done otherwise than as it should be. . .' (*DV* 24, 7).[7] Strictly speaking, 'sin' is a specific kind of evil that affects the actions of the will, consisting in their disorder or deviation from their proper end, which is also called 'evil of fault' (*malum culpae*) (*DM* 1, 4).

If sin or evil of fault is a defect or disorder of the actions of the will, it can only be found in a naturally fallible will. As is well known, Aquinas conceives the nature of the will as a rational tendency (*appetitus rationalis*) towards the perceived good (*ST* Ia, 82, 1). Every will tends towards good by its own nature, so evil is never directly intended as such by any will, but only *per accidens*, insofar as it is linked to some good: 'The will naturally tends to good as its object. That it sometimes tends to evil happens only because the evil is presented to it under the aspect of a good' (*DV* 24, 8).[8] For Aquinas, when a free creature sins, the creature chooses an apparent good, willingly not considering the rule of law that it should act in accordance with (*DM* 1, 3). This means that there can only be sin in a will whose goodness or rectitude is not intrinsic, but depends on the accordance of its own action with a rule distinct from itself (which makes it possible to deviate from the rule) (*DM* 1, 3). If a finite will has to adapt its action to a rule distinct from itself, it is because, even if it is naturally ordained towards good in general, it does not have the absolute and perfect Goodness as its natural object. Indeed, for Aquinas, only God's will, which is identical with His being, can have perfect and absolute Goodness as its natural object, whereas any finite will cannot (*ST* Ia, 6, 3). Hence, given that the finite created will always has to choose between particular goods and without immediately seeing their connection to the absolute Goodness, it can always reject any of them voluntarily. This is why, for Aquinas, every creature with free will, insofar as it is created from nothing – i.e. insofar as it is the free will of a composed being – is naturally fallible, while God, who is not a composed being, wills always naturally and indefectibly the good:

> A rational nature, accordingly, which is directed to good, taken absolutely, through many different actions, cannot have actions naturally incapable of going astray from good unless it have in it naturally and invariably the formality of the universal and perfect good. That can be had, however, only in the divine nature. For God alone is pure act, admitting no admixture of any potentiality,[9] and thus is pure and absolute goodness. But any creature is a particular good, since it has in its very nature the admixture of potentiality, which belongs to it because it is made out of nothing. And hence it is that among rational natures only God has a free choice naturally impeccable and confirmed in good, whereas it is impossible for this natural impeccability to be in a creature because of its being made out of nothing, . . . (*DV* 24, 7)

In this argument Aquinas explicitly links God's ontological goodness or perfection and simplicity with His natural inability to sin. Given that God is the individual He is, i.e. the only instance of pure actuality, His free will is naturally 'confirmed', i.e. fixed, in good. The natural object of His will is His perfect Goodness, from which He cannot back out. The divine nature is uncreated, and is identical to its own act of being and its own goodness; there cannot be any deficiency in it (*SS* II, d. 23, 1, 1), and hence 'to have a goodness incapable of failure is the characteristic of God's nature' (*DV* 24, 7). Natural and necessary impeccability is an exclusive property of God's nature and, as such, it cannot be naturally communicated to any creature, although it can be bestowed to rational creatures through grace and in glory (*DV* 24, 9).[10]

From the preceding argument it follows that for Aquinas the proposition 'God cannot sin' expresses a metaphysical necessity, and not just a *de facto* impossibility. The proposition 'God cannot sin' is thus necessary *de re*, and not only *de dicto*. In other words, impeccability is not an essential property just of the 'divine office', but rather an essential property of the individual who, being pure actuality, necessarily holds the office. If, *per impossibile*, God would sin, He would completely undo His own nature and existence, and not just lose His job, but also destroy his own act of being.

Impeccability, will, and power

The thesis that God's inability to sin derives from a metaphysical necessity goes against another recurrent account of divine impeccability according to which it is just a feature of God's moral character. Pike (1969, 215–216), Reichenbach (1980, 61), Brümmer (1984, 213–214), and, more recently, Manis (2011), have stated that the proposition 'God cannot sin' means that God has a strong disposition towards good that provides the material assurance that He will in fact not sin, or even that He would not sin in any possible world.[11] Hence, even if God has the power to sin,[12] He could not bring Himself to do it, in virtue of His moral character.

For Aquinas, this position is excluded not only by the general arguments expressed above, but also more specifically by the relation he establishes between God's will and God's power. Nevertheless, this issue has not always been understood correctly, particularly with regard to a very well-known argument

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presented by Aquinas. In several places, he tries to make sense of a statement by Aristotle according to which 'God can do evil things' (*potest Deus prava agere*) (*Topic.* iv, 3). Explaining one of the possible senses in which this statement can be interpreted, Aquinas says:

> this must be understood either on a condition, the antecedent of which is impossible – as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and consequent are impossible: as if one were to say: 'If man is a donkey, he has four feet'. (*ST* Ia, 25, 3, ad 2)[13]

Pike rejects Aquinas's interpretation of the Philosopher's claim saying that 'God can do evil things if He will' is not really a conditional statement (Pike (1969), 211).[14] He may be right concerning that precise grammatical formulation, in which case the conditional should be reformulated as follows: 'God could do evil things if He could will to do them'. It therefore seems to me fairly clear that Aquinas presents a counter-possible statement, whose only point is to establish that if God had the power to will evil things, He would have also the power to do them.

An alternative interpretation of this text must also be excluded. According to Morriston, Aquinas's quoted argument allows for a distinction to be made between God's 'basic power', i.e. the power of making choices, and God's 'conditional power', i.e. the power of actualizing states of affairs other than choices (Morriston (2001), 154). According to this distinction, God could have the 'conditional power' of actualizing some states of affairs (e.g., evil states of affairs) that He has not the 'basic power' of bringing Himself to choose. This distinction seems to be supported by some parallel texts in which Aquinas suggests that God's power has a broader extension than God's will: 'this statement is true: if God wills to sin, He can sin. It follows without condition, if one argues assuming the impossible: God wills to sin, so He can sin. Since everything He wants, He can, but not vice versa' (*Quaestiones de quodlibet* [hereafter *QQ*] V, 2, 2).[15]

This interpretation, however, is not correct. When Aquinas says that God can do everything He wills, but not vice versa, he means to say only that God does not actually want to create or actualize everything He could create or actualize. This does not imply that God's absolute power goes beyond what God is able to will. In fact, for Aquinas, the opposite is true. Given divine simplicity, will and power are one and the same thing in God. And, being a rational agent, God cannot act apart from His will, so everything that is impossible for Him to will is, absolutely speaking, impossible for Him to do: 'Since He is an agent by will, He cannot do those things which He cannot will' (*SCG* II, ch. 25). In other words, the fact that God cannot will something is not an extrinsic restriction of God's power, but just a sign of its real scope.

In the case of divine inability to sin, the identity between the scope of God's will and the scope of God's power established by Aquinas's argument is clear. As shown above, for Aquinas to sin is to perform an evil (i.e. a defective or disordered)

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act. Willing to sin implies having already a disordered will; hence, willing to sin is already a sin in itself. If willing to sin is impossible for God, then it is impossible for Him to sin, i.e. to perform a disordered act of will. Hence, for Aquinas the truth of the proposition 'God cannot will to sin' is not grounded on a contingent feature of God's moral character.

On the contrary, Aquinas provides several arguments to prove that that proposition is a necessary truth, and that God's will excludes by necessity the power to sin. All of these arguments are grounded either directly in God's nature, or in the nature of God's faculties as a perfect being. I will call the former 'ontological' arguments, and the latter 'operative' arguments.

The first of the 'ontological' arguments is based on God's simplicity, and presupposes the identity between God's nature and God's virtue, through which He produces all things: 'the virtue of a thing is that by which one produces a good work. Now every work of God is a work of virtue, since His virtue is His essence, as I have shown above. Therefore He cannot will evil' (*SCG* I, ch. 95).

The second 'ontological' argument is based on the unchangeable character of the divine nature, which is incapable of undergoing any mutation caused by God's will. God cannot will to sin because, as seen in the previous section, not being able to sin is a feature of God's nature, and His will does not have power over His own nature:

> God's will is a principle and a cause with regard to creatures, not with regard to those things which belong to divine nature: . . . The power of God belongs to God's nature itself: therefore, to be able to sin is not subdued to divine will; otherwise, God's will would be the principle of a divine mutation, which is impossible. (*QQ* V, 2, 2)

In their turn, 'operative' arguments are based on the perfection of three different faculties: intellect, will, and power. In the first place we find an argument based on the infallibility of God's intellect, which cannot err in discerning the real good from the apparent good, in which sin is based:

> The will never tends towards evil unless there be an error in the reason, at least as regards the particular object of choice. For since the object of the will is an apprehended good, the will cannot tend towards an evil unless, in some way, it is proposed to it as a good; and this cannot be without an error. Now there can be no error in the divine knowledge, as we have shown. Therefore God's will cannot tend to evil. (*SCG* I, ch. 95)

In the second place, there are 'operative' arguments based on the natural object of divine will. One of them is based on divine goodness as the primary, natural, and necessary object of God's will:

> God cannot do what he cannot will. And since no will can consent to the contrary of what it naturally desires – thus a man's will cannot desire unhappiness – it is clear that God's will cannot will what is contrary to his goodness, since he wills this naturally. Now sin is a lapse from divine goodness: wherefore God cannot will to sin. Therefore we must grant absolutely that God cannot sin. (*De potentia* [hereafter *DP*] 1, 6)[16]

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Another argument taken from the object of God's will is based on the assumption that divine goodness is the means through which God wills every secondary object of His will:

> Since good has the aspect of end, evil cannot be an object of the will except the latter turn away from its end. But the divine will cannot turn away from its end, because He cannot will anything except by willing Himself, as we have proved. Therefore He cannot will evil. (*SCG* I, ch. 95)

Finally, Aquinas also provides an argument for the impossibility of God's willing to sin based on God's absolute power, i.e. His omnipotence. This argument is more controversial, and challenges many established assumptions on the issue, so I deal with it in the next section within the context of contemporary discussion on the compatibility between impeccability and omnipotence. So far, however, I assume I have proven that, for Aquinas, God's inability to sin is not just a feature of God's moral character, but a metaphysical necessity directly grounded on the identity of God's will and power, and ultimately grounded on His nature.

Impeccability, omnipotence, and liability

The contemporary accounts of *de dicto* divine impeccability mentioned above have been proposed as a way of avoiding two main recurrent arguments against the Classical Theist conception of impeccability as a metaphysically necessary inability to sin. In the first place there is the argument based on the apparent incompatibility between impeccability and omnipotence. Even though this argument is not new, it has received many recent formulations,[17] all of which may be summed up as follows: an omnipotent being should be able to bring about any consistently describable state of affairs; there are some consistently describable (i.e. logically conceivable) states of affairs, the production of which would be morally reprehensible, and which a perfectly good being could not bring about; therefore, there cannot be an omnipotent and perfectly good being.

Even if Aquinas never addressed the problem in those terms, in a very well-known place of his *Summa Theologiae* he presents an argument for God's impeccability that has been mistakenly regarded as a sort of counter-argument for the above-mentioned difficulty: 'To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence' (*ST* Ia, 25, 3, 2). Pike (1969, 210)[18] and Davis (1983, 87–88) have criticized this argument, interpreting the expression 'to be able to fall short in action' in terms of moral weakness, a feature that they find logically conceivable, and therefore ascribable to an omnipotent being.

These critiques are inadequate because they assume that 'omnipotence' means something different from what it actually means for Aquinas in the context of the quoted argument. What is the meaning of 'omnipotence' in the context of the

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argument? In a parallel text, Aquinas explains that there are two ways God is said to be 'unable to do something': one of them concerns His power and the other concerns the possible things considered in themselves (*DP* 1, 6). Regarding the second alternative, God is said to be unable to do something when the thing in question implies a contradiction (*DP* 1, 6). This sense of God's inability is correlative to his classical definition of omnipotence, based on logical non-contradiction (*ST* Ia, 25, 3).[19]

Regarding the first sense in which God is said to be 'unable to do a thing', Aquinas states the following: 'His power considered in itself, since it is infinite, lacks nothing that appertains to power' (*DP* 1, 6),[20] and so He is unable to do anything that implies in itself a lack of power. Even if it is not a proper definition,[21] omnipotence is described here as 'infinite' power, meaning that we can attribute to God everything that can be properly called a 'real and positive power', as opposed to mere 'nominal' power. For Aquinas, sometimes we describe as 'powers' some things that are really a lack of positive and real power. These things are imperfections and therefore cannot be predicated of God:

> There are certain things, however, which in name denote power whereas in reality they are wanting in power. Such are many negations that are expressed affirmatively: as when we say that so and so can fail, the terms would seem to imply some sort of power, whereas it is rather a lack of power that is signified. For this reason, according to the Philosopher (*Metaph.* v, 12) a power is said to be perfect when it is unable to do such things: because while such affirmations are in reality negations, the corresponding negations have an affirmative force. Hence we say that God cannot fail, and consequently that he cannot be moved (since movement and failing imply imperfection), and therefore that he cannot walk nor perform any other bodily actions, since these are inseparable from movement. (*DP* 1, 6)

It can be concluded then that the ability to sin, i.e. of 'falling short in action', must be regarded as a liability, a lack of power, a merely 'nominal power'. This does not entail, as Morriston suggested in his interpretation of the argument above, the denial of the existence of the 'akratic' power of knowingly choosing evil (Morriston (2001), 157).[22] It rather means, as Morris suggested, that there is no discrete power of sinning, no power the exercise of which is, in itself, *sufficient* for doing evil (Morris (1986), 165–168).

Indeed, a sin is an act of the will and the will for Aquinas is a capacity essentially ordained towards willing the good and choosing good objects and actions. Even in sinning the will tends to an apparent good, or to a real good, but in a disordered way. Thus, being able to sin does not add any specific object to the natural capacity of the will. In other words, 'sin does not specify the power of free will' (*SS* III, d. 12, 2, 2). There is no specific good that can be willed or any specific end that can be achieved by sinning that cannot be willed or achieved through a morally good action. Since sin is a type of privation, the ability to sin is not provided by any distinctive capacity, but by a defect of the will: 'given that the power of the human will is by its own nature ordained towards good, a defect from good in its own action is caused by some defect in it' (*SS* II, d. 44, 1, 1).

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Hence, if being able to sin is being capable of acting imperfectly, the expression 'power to sin' does not denote any real power. It is rather just a name free will receives in those subjects that have a defective free will: 'free will, as is evident from what has been said, cannot be called power of sinning absolutely speaking, unless in those [subjects] that can sin' (*SS* III, d. 12, 2, 2, ad 7). As I shall explain later, for Aquinas the ability to sin is something present in rational creatures not as a specific feature, but as a resulting condition of the imperfect and finite mode in which they possess free will.

Omnipotence, non-contradiction, and evil

Aquinas's claim that God's omnipotence is not just compatible with impeccability, but that it is its ultimate foundation, makes clear sense if omnipotence is defined as 'infinite power', which includes only 'real, positive, and non-nominal powers'. Nevertheless, using this argument as a reply to the problem of the apparent incompatibility between impeccability and omnipotence exposed above would be mistaken. As seen in the previous section, the way contemporary authors present the problem is based on a definition of omnipotence expressed in terms of logical possibility.

Many contemporary authors try to block the objection through a distinction between 'conceivability' and 'real possibility' (Hoffman (1979), Morris (1982), Flint & Freddosso (1983), and García (1984, 1987)), arguing *a priori* that there are some states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible that, even though 'conceivable', are not 'really possible', or at least they are impossible for God to bring about, given His perfection (see Gellman (1977)). This line of argumentation has some disadvantages. First, it would not be an accurate argument for Aquinas, who defines omnipotence negatively in terms of non-contradiction, and claims that the conceivable and the really possible have equal extension (*ST* Ia, 25, 3).[23] On the other hand, Pike and the other objectors provide concrete examples of allegedly morally unjustifiable states of affairs, accepted as such by their opponents, which are not only conceivable, but also actual (e.g., 'an innocent child suffering a slow and tortuous death by starvation') (Pike (1969), 209).

In order to solve this problem it is important to make some preliminary remarks:

(a) God's omnipotence does not imply for Aquinas that God can perform any task that is absolutely possible, since there are things that creatures can do, but God cannot, such as walking or being angry.[24] Even if Aquinas defines the scope of omnipotence in terms of logical non-contradiction, not every consistently describable state of affairs can be an object of divine omnipotence. God's omnipotence implies that He can bring about all states of affairs that are 'producible' without a contradiction following.[25]

Now, even if for Aquinas creatures have the ability to do some things (such as walking or suffering) due to the imperfect degree in which they imitate divine perfection – and thus they cannot be attributed to God (*SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1) – God,

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as the primary cause of every being, has the power to produce every state of affairs the creature has the power to produce:

> although the proper actions of such powers, according to their determinate degree, do not belong to divine power as their proximate principle, however all the actions that proceed from those powers according to the reason of the order in which they are constituted, are reducible to God as their primary cause. Hence, even though we don't say that God can walk or have passions, yet we say that God creates walking and passions in others. (*SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1)

It is important to note that, in this case, God does not produce directly the state of affairs in question (walking or suffering), but produces substances with their own operative powers, which, as secondary causes, are the direct causes of those states of affairs. States of affairs such as walking or suffering have intrinsic requirements of actualization, which make it impossible for God to actualize them without the secondary causes being involved.

(b) For Aquinas, no consistent describable state of affairs is *per se* morally reprehensible, independently of other circumstances, including the condition of the subject who produces it. Sin is a voluntary action, whose moral value depends, among other things, on the quality and the intention of the subject who performs it. Indeed in his attempt to provide another possible interpretation of Aristotle's assertion 'God can do evil things', Aquinas says that this may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil which, however, if He did them, would then be good (*ST* Ia, 25, 3, ad 2).[26] This assertion does not imply, as Pike interprets it (Pike (1969), 212), that the concept of moral goodness is equivocally predicated of God and creatures. It only means that the objective description of a state of affairs is not sufficient to define the morality of an action, without any further consideration. As Aquinas explains:

> Nothing prevents an act that is in itself a mortal sin from becoming virtuous through the addition of a circumstance. Thus absolutely speaking it is a mortal sin to kill a man: yet it is not a mortal sin but an act of justice for the judge's minister to put a man to death for justice's sake in pursuance of the judge's sentence. (*DP* 1, 6, ad 4)

From these two remarks it can be concluded that the problem of God 'being able to bring about morally reprehensible states of affairs' requires taking into consideration: (a) the conditions or requirements of actualization of the possible states of affairs which are said to be possible but are excluded by divine impeccability; (b) the possible moral value that can be charged to the primary cause of those states of affairs. The problem, then, does not consist in determining whether those states of affairs are, *per se* and objectively, really possible and morally reprehensible, but whether there is any possible state of affairs in which God causes certain evils, and in which that causation can be regarded as a sin.

For Aquinas, this question has different answers depending on the type of evil considered. Regarding 'moral evil' (which Aquinas calls 'evil of fault'), Aquinas clearly states that God cannot be its cause, either directly, or indirectly (*ST* I-

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IIae, 79, 1). A sinful act requires essentially for its actualization a defective free cooperation of the creature, irreducible to God as first cause:

> it must be said that since God is the first principle of the motion of all things, some are so moved by Him that they also move themselves, as in those that have free will. For if these are properly disposed and rightly ordered to receiving the motion by which they are moved by God, good actions will follow, which are totally reduced [i.e. referred] to God as the cause; but if these lack the proper order, inordinate action i.e. the act of sin will follow: and thus whatever action is present will be referred to God as the cause, but whatever deordination or deformity is present does not have God as its cause but the free will alone. And for this reason we maintain that the action pertaining to the sin is from God, but the sin is not from God. (*DM* 3, 2)

The sinful act, insofar as it has being and actuality, is to be referred to God as to its first cause; but insofar as it has the deformity of sin, it must be referred to the creature's free will and not to God (*DP* 1, 6, ad 5). God is not even the cause of the 'power of sinning' in itself (*SS* III, d. 12, 2, 2, ad 6), since that power is a liability creatures have insofar as they come 'from nothing,' i.e. insofar as they are limited beings (*DV* 24, 3 and 7). Therefore, with regard to God 'we cannot say that He can sin, or that He can produce sin in others' (*SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1). The proposition 'God causes moral evil' or 'God makes a creature sin' implies a contradiction and does not express a possible state of affairs.

In the case of 'physical evil', which includes suffering, corruption, and natural evil in general, Aquinas says that it cannot be directly 'caused' by God; nevertheless, He can cause it indirectly or *per accidens*, as a secondary effect of the perfection of the universe, which would not be complete without all the degrees of being, one of which is corruptible being (*ST* Ia, 49, 2). For Aquinas physical evil is not evil in its primary sense, since it does not deprive rational creatures of the absolute goodness towards which they are oriented (*ST* Ia, 48, 6). Physical evil can be ordained towards a greater good for the creatures, and that is why physical evil can be an indirect object of God's will, if there is a sufficient reason to allow it.[27] The proposition 'God (indirectly) causes physical evil' implies no contradiction and expresses a possible state of affairs, but this does not mean that God can sin in doing so, in the same way that a doctor does not sin in inflicting suffering to cure a patient.

Impeccability, free will, and praiseworthiness

Another frequent objection to the classical view of impeccability as a metaphysically necessary attribute is based upon its apparent incompatibility with free will and praiseworthiness. Reichenbach built this objection on Plantinga's definition of a *morally significant free action* (Reichenbach (1980), 55). According to Plantinga, a person is free with respect to a given action if he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; in its turn, an action is *morally significant* if it would be wrong for someone to perform that action but right to refrain, or vice versa; finally a person is *significantly free* if he is free (i.e. can perform or refrain from doing it) with respect to an action that is morally significant for him

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(Plantinga (1974), 165–166). Based on these definitions, Reichenbach and also Morriston (1985) claim that, if it is metaphysically impossible for God to choose evil (or to refrain from choosing good), then His actions are not morally significant free actions, so He does not deserve praise for them.[28] This objection has led some theists to deny that God is significantly free, providing alternative ways of guaranteeing divine praiseworthiness.[29]

From Aquinas's perspective there is no need for making that move. As explained above, the ability to sin is not for him a real power, nor is it a specific capability that adds something to the nature of free will, but it results from freedom of choice as it can be found in creatures: 'being able to sin, according to Anselm and Boethius, does not belong to the freedom of the will, but is rather a condition of the deficient will insofar as it comes from nothing' (*SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1 ad 3).[30] Hence, although free will in creatures is open to good and evil choices, it is not naturally directed towards evil, but only towards good (*SS* III, d. 18, 1, 2 ad 5).

Certainly, for Aquinas, free will excludes necessity, so the ability to act in a different way to which it actually does is an essential feature of the freedom of the will; when the will inclines to any object, it retains the ability to tend to the opposite object (*DV* 24, 10). This is so also in the case of God, who has free will with respect to those things that He does not will by necessity. This means that He is free with respect to His creatures, but not with respect to His own nature, which He loves necessarily: 'God necessarily wills His own goodness, but other things not necessarily, as shown above, He has free will with respect to what He does not necessarily will' (*ST* Ia, 19, 10).[31]

Since God does not necessarily will anything different from Himself, He is free with regard to both the exercise and the specification of His voluntary actions, even if He is not able to sin:

> God's will is indifferent to this or that, since it is not fixed to one object. For he is able either to do a thing or not to do it, to do this or to do that: yet it does not follow that in either case he can do ill, which is to sin. (*DP* 1, 6, ad 7)

Indeed, even though God lacks the ability to sin, the existence of every being other than Him depends on His free decision to actualize it, therefore 'He can make choice of one of two opposites, inasmuch as He can will a thing to be, or not to be. In the same way we ourselves, without sin, can will to sit down, and not will to sit down' (*ST* Ia, 19, 10, ad 2).[32]

One may object that this argument only proves that God has free will with regard to actions that have no significant moral content. If a free action is praiseworthy only in those cases in which one can refrain from doing evil, to sit down or not to sit down seems to have no moral value in itself. Aquinas prevents this type of objection by showing that praiseworthiness and moral significance does not have the same requirements in different subjects with different natures. Something laudable in a lower nature could be reprehensible in a higher nature, so that which is said in praise of man is not always becoming to the

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praise of God: 'such as being fierce is praiseworthy in the dog and the lion, but is reprehensible in man, so not sinning, being able to do it, is praiseworthy in man, but it is a blasphemy if it is predicated of God' (*SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1 ad 4).[33]

Aquinas's move allows for maintaining the validity of Plantinga's definition, but restricted in its extension to *morally significant 'human' free actions*. For Aquinas, the ability to sin does not contribute *per se* to the praise of an action, but only contributes to the manifestation of the free and voluntary character of the actions of rational creatures: 'Nevertheless, the ability to sin concerns praiseworthiness only by accident, inasmuch as it shows that the praised action has not been performed by necessity' (*SS* III, d. 12, 2, 1 ad 2).[34]

According to Aquinas, the only requisite for a free good action deserving of praise, i.e. to be morally significant, is that it must be performed by an agent who has control over it (*SS* III, d. 18, 1, 2). Praiseworthiness can only be suppressed by the 'impotence of coercion' (*impotentia coactionis*), which removes the voluntary character of the action; on the contrary, voluntariness (and, thus, praiseworthiness) cannot be removed by the 'impotence' that results from the perfection in goodness, which confirms the will to one alternative (*ad unum*) (*SS* III, d. 12, 2, 1, ad 3). The confirmation of God's free will in the good doesn't prevent Him from having control over His voluntary actions, because His will is not determined to one alternative with regard to any token or specific action, but with regard to the type (*genus*) of action, which is the good (*SS* III, d. 18, 1, 2, ad 5). Hence:

> There is no contradiction between being naturally impeccable and having the mastery over one's own actions, since both are verified in God. But there is a contradiction between natural impeccability and the possession of the mastery over one's own actions by a created nature, which is a particular good; for no creature which has determined actions directed to a particular good has the mastery of its own acts. (*DV* 24, 7, ad 2)

A creature naturally fixed or confirmed in good could not refrain from choosing particular tokens of actions, and therefore would not have control over them. On the contrary, since God's will is naturally fixed in His own goodness, but is not naturally bound to any other particular good, He could always refrain from willing what he contingently wills,[35] without sinning. Hence, for Aquinas God can have control over His free actions, be praiseworthy and significantly free, without having the ability to sin.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to present a precise picture of Aquinas's conception of divine impeccability, through replying to some contemporary objections. I have argued that, since moral goodness is something specifically distinct from ontological goodness only in metaphysically composed, i.e. created, beings, God's moral goodness is directly grounded on His ontological goodness. On this basis, I argued that, contrary to some contemporary approaches, for Aquinas

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the proposition 'God cannot sin' must be understood as necessary *de re* and not just *de dicto*. I also argued that the essential connection between God's will and God's power excludes the interpretation of impeccability as a feature of God's moral character. After that I dealt with the objection based on the apparent incompatibility between impeccability and omnipotence. On the one hand, I showed that for Aquinas the ability to sin is not a real and specific power. On the other hand, I showed that arguments against essential impeccability based on logical non-contradiction definitions of omnipotence fail to prove that it is logically possible for God to sin. Finally, I dealt with the objection based on the apparent incompatibility between impeccability and free will, showing that for Aquinas control over one's own actions is the only requisite for praiseworthiness, and that the ability to sin is a morally significant feature only for a created free will.[36]

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Notes

1. All the references to the works of Aquinas are taken from <www.corpusthomisticum.org> (Thomas Aquinas (2000)).
2. Translations of this work are taken from Thomas Aquinas (1993).
3. See also *SCG* I, ch. 39. This argument shows that any simple being would be impeccable, so it seems that it is simplicity rather than goodness that is incompatible with sin. Nevertheless, for Aquinas there are no other simple beings other than God (for instance Platonic universals) to share this feature.
4. Translations of this work are taken from Thomas Aquinas (1947).
5. Translations of this work are taken from Thomas Aquinas (1924).
6. Although the quotation is taken from an objection, Aquinas considers this premise true. Translations of this work are mine.
7. Translations of this work are taken from Thomas Aquinas (1952). In this case I made a correction to translate the word *peccatum* as 'sin'.
8. See also *ST* Ia, 19, 9.
9. When Aquinas says that God is pure act with no mixture of potentiality he is referring to 'passive potentiality', i.e., the capacity to receive perfection from another, and not to 'active potentiality', i.e. the capacity of acting upon another. The former implies ontological imperfection and cannot be found in God, whereas the latter can be attributed to God, since it is based on His ontological perfection. For this distinction see *ST* Ia, 25 1 and *De potentia* 1, 1. For this reason, the denial of potentiality in God does not imply that God cannot act differently from what He does. On this, see Stump & Kretzmann (1985), 355–363, and Grant (2004), 130–134.
10. See also *SS* II, d. 23, 1, 1 and *SS* III, d. 3, 1, 2, qc. 3. Aquinas does not directly address the problem of why God does not bestow impeccability right away for every rational creature. Nevertheless, it is plausible to think, on the one hand, that, on his view, no creature can be made impeccable without previously accepting that kind of grace through a free and naturally fallible act. On the other hand, even if God could supernaturally bestow impeccability to every rational creature, this does not immediately imply that He should do so, provided that He has some reason to allow evil.
11. In his paper Manis proposes the Molinist thesis that, given middle knowledge, God has 'transworld goodness', a property that guarantees that He would not sin in any possible world, even though it is not an essential property, but a contingent one.
12. Loke (2010) has recently affirmed that the view that God is morally perfect *simpliciter* is preferable to the view that He is *essentially* morally perfect, but he does explicitly not ground God's moral goodness on His moral character.

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13. The same argument can be found in *De potentia* 1, 6, ad 3, *Quaestiones de quodlibet* V, 2, 2, and *SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1, ad 2.
14. Pike (1969), 211. Pike quotes the same text in a different translation, saying 'God can sin if He wants to.'
15. Translations of this work are mine.
16. See also *ST* Ia, 19, 9 and 10.
17. See Pike (1969), Carter (1982), and Morriston (2001).
18. Loke (2010), 530, has recently endorsed Pike's critique.
19. See also *DP* 1, 3.
20. Translations of this work are taken from Thomas Aquinas (1932).
21. Aquinas says explicitly that infinite power is the root of omnipotence, not its definition: see *DP* 1, 7.
22. See also the subsequent discussion on this point with Mawson (2002) and the reply by Morriston (2003). It is worth noting that Aquinas has a very sophisticated account of *akratic* power. See, for instance, *DM* 1, 3.
23. See also *DP* 1, 3.
24. In *SCG* II, ch. 25 Aquinas provides a very detailed list of things that God cannot do.
25. For Aquinas' account of omnipotence see Leftow (2012).
26. See also *SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1, ad 2.
27. For a Thomistic account of the problem of suffering, see Stump (2010).
28. I am thankful to one of the referees, who called my attention to a similar argument, by Howard-Snyder (2008). This argument claims that there is an incompatibility between God's unsurpassable Goodness and the prayers of thanksgiving and praise. Howard-Snyder bases his argument on the assumption that if God is essentially unsurpassably good, He is unable to do something worse in place of his good acts. I think this is a premise that Aquinas would plainly reject. For him, even if God always acts perfectly, His goodness is not tied to any course of action, and He can always do better things than He does (*ST* Ia, 25, 6). In any case, this is a discussion for another paper.
29. Wierenga (1989, 210) argues that God's moral goodness consists in doing always what is right; Bergmann and Cover (2006) have proposed an agent-cause definition of responsibility to show that significant freedom is not required for thank-worthiness.
30. See also *DV* 24, 7, ad 4.
31. William Rowe has explored some difficulties of Aquinas's view of God's freedom with respect to the act of creation (Rowe (2004), 36–53). For a cogent reply to this arguments see Leftow (2007).
32. See also *SS* I, d. 42, 2, 1 ad 3. This is why in Heaven creatures can have full-scope free will, even if they have already been made impeccable by means of glory. See on this regard Timpe & Pawl (2009).
33. See also *DP* 1, 6 ad 2 and *SS* III, d. 12, 2, 1, ad 2.
34. See also *DV* 24, 9.
35. One may argue that there are some particular acts that God would be determined to perform if He is confirmed in good, for instance, promise-keeping. Nevertheless, God's promise-keeping can be conceived as conditionally necessitated by the very fact of God's freely deciding to make a particular promise. Given God's atemporality, there is no temporal gap between God's promise and its keeping. Thus, both the promise and the keeping are but different aspects of one and the same free act, so they are not determined by each other. On this regard, see Leftow (1989), and Stump (2003), 108–109.
36. I am grateful to Brian Leftow, Eleonore Stump, Alexander Pruss, Matthew Sweeney, Tim Pawl, Jeffrey Brower, Gloria Frost, Ben Page, Luke Martin, Juan Martín Pardo, Juan Francisco Franck, and two anonymous reviewers for discussions and comments on earlier versions of this paper. The final version of this article is an output of the Project 'The Problem of Evil: From Leibniz to Analytic Philosophy of Religion' (FFI2017–84559-P: Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, Gobierno de España). Preliminary drafts were supported by a 'José Castillejo' grant (CAS15/00258: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Gobierno de España). An earlier and longer version of this article was given at the Classical Theism Workshop, University of St Thomas (St Paul, MN), 21–23 July 2016.