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The Consideration of the Intrinsic Goodness of Beauty & Its Relation to the Cause of Stephen
Dedalus's Sensual Sins Through St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*

Fran O'Rourke, in his article "Joyce's Early Aesthetic" discusses James Joyce's use of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* to discuss goodness, beauty, and truth in his novels including *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (O'Rourke 129). O'Rourke asserts that Joyce is drawn to include Aquinas in his work due to Aquinas's "lack of moral emphasis" when describing beauty in his aesthetic theory stating, "The teaching on the convertibility of the transcendental implies that Beauty points to Goodness and Truth simply by being what it is: beautiful. As a matter of fact, this lack of additional moral emphasis is the precise feature of Aquinas's aesthetics that won the admiration of Joyce" (O'Rourke 129). It is interesting to consider that Joyce was drawn to Aquinas's aesthetic theory in this way and therefore I would like to explore this aspect of Aquinas's theory. With the support of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and examples from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I argue that goodness is an intrinsic aspect of beauty and that the evil that Stephen commits as a result of his lust for women is a result of his privation of form and not the beauty of the women to which he is attracted.

In his philosophical work, known as the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas, a medieval theologian, explores the answers to a vast array of theological questions (Aertsen 449, "Summa Theologiae"). Jan Aertsen's article "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas" and Aquinas's objections and replies to Question 49 of the *Summa*

Theologiae, “The cause of evil,” support the assertion that goodness is an intrinsic quality of beauty (Aertsen 449, “Question 49”). In his article “The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas,” Jan Aertsen explains that “[t]he teaching on the convertibility of the transcendental” (O’Rourke 129) refers to the idea that “‘being and good are convertible’... That is to say, ‘being’ and ‘good’ are interchangeable terms in predication... ‘Good’ is an attribute which pertains to every being... it is one of the so-called... ‘transcendentals’. The transcendental of good... is the foundation of [Aquinas’s] reflection on the good” (Aertsen 449-450), which is further explored in his work, the *Summa Theologiae* (“Summa Theologiae”).

In Aquinas’s response to Question 49 of the *Summa Theologiae*, “The cause of evil,” he describes “two first principles” as the following, “there is no one first principle of evil, as there is one first principle of good... because the first principle of good is essentially good... nothing can be essentially bad. For it was shown... that every being, as such, is good... and that evil can exist only in good as in its subject” (“Question 49”). Essence refers to “that whereby a thing is what it is... The essence is thus the radical or ground from which the various properties of a thing emanate and to which they are necessarily referred (Aveling). Therefore, the first two principles indicate that if something is essentially good, then the essence or “ground from which the various properties of [that] thing emanate” is good, and the “ground from which the various properties of [that] thing emanate” cannot be bad (Aveling). Therefore, he has concluded that every being is essentially good, nothing is essentially bad, and that evil can only exist in something that is good (“Question 49”). As a result, I argue that beauty is intrinsically good, because every being is essentially good (“Question 49”). Though he uses the word “being,” I assert that every *thing* is essentially good because he also stated that “nothing can be essentially bad” (“Question 49”). This logic is supported by his response to Objection 3, in Article 1, Question 49 in which he

concluded, “Even matter, as a potentiality to good, has the nature of good” (“Question 49”). If beauty is intrinsically good, then how can it cause evil, and specifically, how does the beauty of a woman relate to Stephen Dedalus’s sinful lust? This is a question that will now be discussed and once answered, will be applied to Stephen Dedalus’s experience with lust and sin in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Aquinas refers to the above stated two first principles when expounding on the concept of the essence of good in his response to Article 3, of Question 49, “[w]hether there be one supreme evil which is the cause of every evil?” stating,

For on that account, if [those who upheld the two first principles] found a thing hurtful to something by the power of its own nature, they thought that the very nature of that thing was evil; as, for instance, if one should say that the nature of fire was evil because it burnt the house of a poor man. The judgment, however, of the goodness of anything does not depend upon its order to any particular thing, but rather upon what it is in itself, and on its order to the whole universe, wherein every part has its own perfectly ordered place (“Question 49”).

If the judgment of the goodness of a thing is dependent upon “what [a thing] is in itself,” (its essence) and the relation of that thing to the order of the universe, then how does evil result from good? (Aveling, “Question 49”). Aquinas, in the following excerpt from his *Summa Theologiae* examines how if the essence of every thing is good, then it cannot be the essence or nature of the thing then that creates evil, but rather that thing’s relation to the order of the universe (“Question 49”).

Article 1, Question 49, explores the answer to the question, “[w]hether good can be the cause of evil?” stating,

For evil is the absence of the good, which is natural and due to a thing. But that anything fail from its natural and due disposition can come only from some cause drawing it out of its proper disposition...But only good can be a cause; because nothing can be a cause except inasmuch as it is a being, and every being, as such, is good.... But evil has no formal cause, rather is it a privation of form ("Question 49").

A privation is defined as “[t]he loss or absence of a quality or attribute that is normally present” (Oxford University Press). Therefore if, as previously stated, the nature of a thing cannot be evil and “the goodness of anything does not depend upon its order to any particular thing, but rather upon what it is in itself, and on its order to the whole universe,” the above logic explains how evil can result from something good; by a privation of form ("Question 49"). The question of how a privation of form causes evil, is examined in Aquinas’s response to Article 9, Question 19, “[w]hether God wills evils?” in which he states,

I answer that...it is impossible that any evil, as such, should be sought for by the appetite, either natural, or animal, or by the intellectual appetite which is the will. Nevertheless evil may be sought accidentally, so far as it accompanies a good, as appears in each of the appetites. For a natural agent intends not privation or corruption, but the form to which is annexed the privation of some other form, and the generation of one thing, which implies the corruption of another....the fornicator has merely pleasure for his object, and the deformity of sin is only an accompaniment. Now the evil that accompanies one good, is the privation of another good. Never therefore would evil be sought after, not even accidentally, unless the good that accompanies the evil were more desired than the good of which the evil is the privation ("Question 49").

In his response to Question 19, Aquinas establishes that evil cannot result from any appetite, including a natural, animal, or intellectual one ("Question 49"). The Catholic Encyclopedia defines "appetite" in reference to Aquinas's philosophies as that which "includes all forms of internal inclination...The inclination to what is good and suitable, and consequently the aversion to what is evil" (Dubray). The Catholic Encyclopedia defines "natural appetite" as "the inclination of a thing to that which is in accord with its nature, without any knowledge of the reason why such a thing is appetible" (Dubray). Sex, arguably falls under this category. The "intellectual appetite" is defined above as one's will ("Question 19"). Once again, Aquinas asserts in his notion above that, "[n]evertheless evil may be sought accidentally, so far as it accompanies a good, as appears in each of the appetites. For a natural agent intends not privation or corruption, but the form to which is annexed the privation of some other form" ("Question 19"). Here, Aquinas argues that evil can occur accidentally through the good that is present in each of the appetites as a result of the privation of one good in the midst of seeking another ("Question 19").

In the novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce describes when Stephen Dedalus commits the sin of fornication by sleeping with prostitutes, proclaiming that "[s]uch moments passed and the wasting fires of lust sprang up again....Women and girls dressed in long vivid gowns traversed the street from house to house. They were leisurely and perfumed....He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips" (Joyce 106-108). Let us consider that the fornicator in the above passage is Stephen Dedalus in the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* so that I may argue that, it is not the beauty of the prostitutes that he sleeps with that cause him to sin, but rather the privation of one good over another; one good being his appetite

for sex and the other being his self will ("Question 19," Dubray, Joyce). As mentioned above, "the form to which is annexed the privation of some other form" refers to the form of Stephen engaging in premarital sex, which is a form accomplished through the annexation of the privation of another form, which I've argued is his will ("Question 19," Joyce). As previously stated, sex and one's will are appetites, which include "[t]he inclination to what is good and suitable, and consequently the aversion to what is evil" ("Question 19," Dubray). Therefore, as single entities, the natural and intellectual appetites in question, sex and will, are good ("Question 19," Dubray). However, I argue that as a result of the privation of Stephen's will, he sins by having pre-marital sex. Reiterating its definition, privation is defined as "[t]he loss or absence of a quality or attribute that is normally present" (Oxford University Press). Therefore, the action of Stephen having sex is an act of privation of his will because he, by having sex, is attempting to do what is good in accordance with his natural appetite, but in the process, has drawn away from his will's moral "inclination to what is good and suitable, and consequently the aversion to what is evil" by carrying out that which is considered good, before marriage ("Question 19," Dubray, Joyce). This is a sin and therefore it is evil. It is interesting to consider that when this sin occurs, it is simply a result of Stephen's greater desire for one good over another, as noted by Aquinas in his assertion that "[n]ever therefore would evil be sought after, not even accidentally, unless the good that accompanies the evil were more desired than the good of which the evil is the privation" ("Question 19"). Stephen's sin is not the cause of the beauty of the prostitutes because beauty is intrinsically good, as previously concluded.

The following passage exemplifies another instance of Stephen's lustful behavior as it describes how, "[t]he image of Emma appeared before him and, under her eyes, the flood of shame had rushed forth anew from his heart. If she knew to what his mind had subjected her or

how his brutelike lust had torn and trampled upon her innocence! What that boyish love? Was that chivalry? Was that poetry? The sordid details of his orgies stank under his nostrils” (Joyce 124). It is apparent in this quote that Stephen experienced a great amount of torment as a result of the shame of his lustful sins, which elicited in his mind, many questions that lead him to think about love and art (Joyce 124). O’Rourke’s prior assertion that “[t]he teaching on the convertibility of the transcendental implies that Beauty points to Goodness and Truth simply by being what it is: beautiful. As a matter of fact, this lack of additional moral emphasis is the precise feature of Aquinas's aesthetics that won the admiration of Joyce” (O’Rourke 129) is ironic and comical because the simple foundation of St. Thomas Aquinas’s theory that beauty is intrinsically good, and that all things are essentially good (which Joyce appreciates and is drawn to) ends up posing so many problems for Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (“Question 49,” Joyce). With the support of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* and examples from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I argued that goodness is an intrinsic aspect of beauty and that the evil that Stephen commits as a result of his lust for women is a result of his privation of form and not the beauty of the women to which he is attracted. Though the “lack of moral emphasis” of the theories used to prove this argument made them appeal to Joyce in terms of aesthetics, they interestingly enough, proved to contribute to a great moral dilemma for Stephen Dedalus (O’Rourke 129, Joyce).

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