

Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, translated by Richard Regan, edited with an introduction and notes by Brian Davies. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xviii + 535 pp.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*. translated by John A. Oesterle and Jean T. Oesterle. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. (Paperback edition 2001.) xxii + 547 pp.

The *Quaestiones disputatae de malo* are a neglected masterpiece. Composed around 1270, these sixteen questions show Thomas Aquinas at his very best, arguing in careful and extended detail for a wide range of theses surrounding the ethical questions that he cared so deeply about. As the title suggests, the questions are all clustered around the nature of the bad (*malum*), particularly moral badness. To my mind, the *De malo* is Aquinas's finest work in moral philosophy.

After an initial, highly difficult question (Q1) on the metaphysics of the bad (it is, in short, a privation), Aquinas turns his attention to bad action (*peccatum*), and then very quickly turns to focus on the sort of bad actions most relevant to theology: voluntary bad action (*culpa*). At this point we are squarely in the moral domain, and so we might as well speak (as both translations do) of bad actions as *sins*. In Q2, Aquinas takes up questions regarding the character of sin, assessing the way in which intentions, actions, objects, and circumstances contribute to the moral status of an action, and exploring questions about omissions and neutral actions. (He covers similar ground in *Summa theol.* 1a2ae QQ18-20, but the discussion here is much more clear and expansive, offering many illuminating examples.) In Q3, he takes up the causes of sin, distinguishing between temptation, ignorance, weakness, and malice. QQ4-5 turn to original sin; Q6 contains his most extensive and sophisticated treatment of free will; Q7 discusses venial sins (a more philosophically interesting topic than

one might suppose); QQ8-15 discuss the seven deadly sins (or “capital sins,” as he calls them); finally, Q16 rounds out the volume with a fascinating discussion of the psychology of devils, and their relationship to us.

Ten years ago, there were no published English translations of the *De malo*; now, suddenly, we have two. The main thing to report about these two volumes is that, unsurprisingly, each is perfectly solid and dependable, but neither is ideal. Regan’s volume has the immediate advantage of OUP’s elegant design and typesetting, which in comparison makes the efforts of the UND Press appear even clumsier than usual. But if one manages to get past the appearances, one finds that each volume has its advantages. For instance, although both volumes are based on the 1982 Leonine edition, Jean Oesterle has gone to the trouble of translating the Leonine source apparatus word-for-word, while Regan has supplied only the basic references. Although I myself would have followed Regan’s approach, assuming that readers interested in the fine scholarly details would have the Leonine edition in front of them anyway, there will no doubt be some who are glad to have Oesterle’s more detailed notes. The Oesterles further supply a very detailed appendix of English translations for all the sources that are cited. Regan doesn’t give us that, but does supply a brief biography for each of Aquinas’s many sources, as well as an index, a glossary of terms, and a fairly extensive bibliography (all lacking in the Oesterle volume). Moreover, Regan has the very good fortune of being able to include a 53 page introduction by his colleague Brian Davies. John Oesterle’s introduction, in contrast, is best skipped, not least because its information about the dating of the *De malo* is badly obsolete.

As for the translations themselves, they are generally quite reliable. A close reading of several dozen pages from each volume against the Latin turned up only a handful of outright mistranslations. The Oesterle volume seemed to have somewhat fewer of the slips and

omissions that plague all translations, but these were few enough even in the Regan volume. The Oesterle volume, however, has the annoying habit of occasionally inserting explanatory phrases into the text without marking them as editorial insertions. Moreover, the Oesterles seem to have only a dim sense of where Latin stops and English begins. Their version contains the rather amusing claim, for instance, that “Sin consists in affection (*affectu*)”, and speaks of “deordination (*inordinatio*) in the flesh” and “opinionable matters” (*opinabilia*) – all within Q3a3. Regan, in contrast, gives us “sin consists of desire,” “disorder in the flesh,” and “probable things.” But Regan’s translation is not always superior. For instance, the long series of initial objections often note and then reply to preliminary responses, using the phrase “Sed dicebat quod .... Sed contra ...” (e.g., Q1a3 obj. 6-7). Regan renders this as “People have said .... But...” – which entirely obscures what is happening. The Oesterles get this right with the phrases “But it was argued .... But counter to this ....”

What tips the scale toward the Regan volume is the notably superior quality of its prose. Whereas the Oesterles tend to follow Aquinas’s word order quite closely, Regan takes great pains to produce something that sounds like English. (This is his best feature as a translator.) Consider this passage from Q3a1c:

Peccatum enim communiter dictum secundum quod in rebus naturalibus et artificialibus invenitur, ex eo provenit quod aliquis in agendo non attingit ad finem propter quem agit. Quod contingit ex defectu activi principii; sicut si gramaticus non recte scribat, contingit ex defectu artis, si tamen recte scribere intendit; et quod natura peccat in formatione animalis, sicut contingit in partibus monstruosis, contingit ex defectu activae virtutis in semine.

Here are the Oesterles:

For sin commonly so called as it is found in the things of nature and of art arises from this that someone in acting does not attain the end for which he acts. Which occurs from a defect of the active principle; for example, if a grammarian writes incorrectly, it happens from a deficiency of the art, at

least if he intended to write correctly; and that nature sins, i.e., fails in the formation of an animal, as occurs in the birth of monstrosities, happens from a defect in the active power of the seed (3.1c). The problem with this translation is not that the Oesterles have a poor grasp of Latin, but that they have a poor grasp of English. Regan does much better:

For sin in the general sense, as found in things of nature and artifacts, comes about because persons' actions do not attain the ends as they intend. And this happens because of a deficiency in the causal source. For example, a grammarian's poor composition, if he intends to write well, comes about because of his deficient skill. And nature's sin in forming animals, as happens in the birth of monsters, comes about because of the deficient causal power of semen.

It should be noted that both translations obscure the meaning of the passage by translating *peccatum* as sin, when in this context it has the general meaning of *defective action*. There is perhaps no good solution to that problem in English, other than to supply a note – but neither translation provides clarifying footnotes of this sort (and Regan's glossary oddly omits 'sin'). The Oesterles' strategy of adding the phrase "i.e. fails" is surely an unhappy solution.

Ultimately, both translations are quite serviceable in most respects. What a close comparison of the two reveals, more than anything, is just how important it is to read Aquinas in the original Latin.

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