

REASSESSING THE EVIL-GOD CHALLENGE: A THOMISTIC RESPONSE TO SEMANTIC REVERSAL ARGUMENTS*

REAVALIANDO O DESAFIO DO DEUS MALIGNO: UMA RESPOSTA TOMISTA AOS ARGUMENTOS DA REVERSÃO SEMÂNTICA

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines Stephen Law's *Evil-God challenge*, especially its semantic reversal of classical theodicies, from the standpoint of Thomistic classical theism. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas's doctrines of the convertibility of being and goodness and the privation theory of evil, it argues that the Evil-God hypothesis fails within a classical metaphysical framework. The hypothesis of this article is that *The evil-God challenge* commits a category mistake by granting ontological parity to good and evil, thereby undermining the intelligibility of being. A creator essentially malevolent would be metaphysically incoherent, since pure actuality is necessarily good. The proposed semantic reversal collapses into contradiction by implying a will directed toward non-being, contrary to every entity's natural inclination toward existence and perfection. Although the challenge may trouble some neotheistic models, it becomes conceptually empty when assessed against the ontological depth of classical theism, revealing both the resilience of Thomistic theodicy and the inadequacy of mere semantic inversion.

KEYWORDS: challenge; evil-God; metaphysics; semantic reversal; Thomas Aquinas.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina criticamente *O desafio do Deus maligno* de Stephen Law, especialmente sua reversão semântica das teodiceias clássicas, à luz do teísmo clássico tomista. Com base nas doutrinas de Tomás de Aquino sobre a convertibilidade entre ser e bondade e na teoria da privação do mal, sustenta-se que a hipótese do deus maligno fracassa dentro da metafísica clássica. A hipótese do artigo é a de que *O desafio do Deus maligno* comete um erro categorial ao atribuir paridade ontológica entre bem e mal, comprometendo a inteligibilidade do ser. Um criador essencialmente malevolente seria metafisicamente incoerente, pois a pura atualidade é necessariamente boa. A reversão semântica colapsa em contradição ao implicar uma vontade orientada ao não ser, contrária à inclinação natural dos entes à existência e perfeição. Embora desafie modelos neoteístas, torna-se conceitualmente vazia diante da profundidade ontológica do teísmo clássico, evidenciando a robustez da teodiceia tomista e a insuficiência de meras inversões semânticas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: desafio; Deus maligno; metafísica; reversão semântica; Tomás de Aquino.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental pillars of classical theism¹ lies in the affirmation of a single God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely good. In contrast, Stephen Law (2010, p. 353) has more recently advanced what he calls the “Evil-God Hypothesis”, which posits the existence of a being who is likewise unique, omnipotent, and omniscient, but essentially and maximally malevolent. Both conceptions thus share the assumption of a supreme being endowed with absolute power and knowledge, but diverge with respect to the moral nature attributed to such a being.

Law presents what he terms the “Evil-God Challenge” with the aim of pressing theists to justify why the hypothesis of a good God (in the broad theistic sense) should be regarded as more plausible than that of an evil God. To this end, he seeks to show that, in general terms, the arguments for and against the existence of an evil God are structurally analogous – and comparable in strength – to those traditionally formulated for (or against) the existence of the God of classical theism. Given this argumentative symmetry, he concludes that there are no sufficient reasons to rationally privilege one hypothesis over the other. Thus, if a theist considers the evil-god hypothesis implausible or intellectually unacceptable, consistency would require applying the same judgment to the theistic hypothesis he or she defends.

In this context, Law’s argument can be formulated as follows:

- (1) If theistic arguments justify belief in an all-good God, they also justify belief in an all-evil god;
- (2) It is not rational to believe in the existence of an all-evil god, given the good present in the world;
- (3) Therefore, by the same criteria and in light of the quantity of evil in the world, it is not rational to believe in the existence of an all-good God.

In this article, I aim to demonstrate that the challenge posed by Stephen Law commits a categorical error, being applicable – plausibly, at best – only within the framework of

¹ I refer to *classical theism* as the theological and philosophical conception that characterizes God as a unique being who is absolutely perfect, necessary, eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. This view maintains that God is the subsistent being by essence (*ipsum esse subsistens*) – that is, whose essence is identical to His act of existence. Although this terminology encompasses a range of authors, in this work the term will be employed with specific reference to the theological and metaphysical conception articulated by Thomas Aquinas, grounded in the Augustinian tradition as expressed in his major works.

neotheism², and not within the more robust framework of classical theism. Furthermore, even if one were to grant the validity of his proposal as a dialectical exercise, such a hypothesis inevitably leads to insurmountable contradictions. This conclusion is of particular importance, since Law maintains that his challenge would undermine all forms of theism equally.

1 THE HISTORY OF THE CHALLENGE

In recent years, Stephen Law has sought to unsettle traditional discussions of the problem of evil, particularly through his article *The Evil-God Challenge*. There, he argues that although classical theistic arguments may provide plausible grounds for affirming the existence of a supernatural intelligence responsible for the origin of the universe, they say very little about the moral character of that intelligence (Law, 2010, p. 353). In other words, even if one grants the central hypothesis underlying cosmological, teleological, or design arguments, such arguments do not meaningfully clarify who or what this God would be in moral terms. As Law later reiterates, arguments pointing to a creator “fail to provide any clue as to our creator’s moral character” (Law, 2010, p. 356).

On this basis, Law (2019, p. 7) maintains that even if a design argument could successfully demonstrate the existence of an ordering intelligence, it would lack sufficient probative force to establish that this being is supremely good rather than supremely evil. The same reasoning that allegedly supports a benevolent creator could, in principle, support a malevolent one. Still, Law acknowledges that the mere logical compatibility between God and evil does not decisively refute theism³. His more substantive claim is evidential: the amount and kinds of evil present in the world constitute significant empirical evidence against the existence of a morally perfect God, even if they do not render such existence strictly incoherent⁴.

² The concept is presented by Norman Geisler (1997) in his work *Creating God in the Image of Man?*. While labeling this tendency as “theistic personalism”, Brian Davies (2001) advanced the same critique in the first chapter of his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. The critique is further developed throughout the pages of his later work *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Davies, 2006).

³ The logical problem of evil argues that the coexistence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God with evil is logically impossible. The classic formulation, championed by J. L. Mackie, holds that if God is capable of eliminating all evil, desires to do so, and knows all instances of evil, then the presence of evil indicates a contradiction in the very concept of God. See Mackie (1955, p. 200-212), *Evil and Omnipotence*.

⁴ The probabilistic problem of evil does not claim a logical contradiction but argues that the magnitude and apparent gratuitousness of certain instances of suffering render the existence of a good God improbable. William Rowe formulated this objection by showing that there are evils for which no apparent justification can be found,

Given this perspective, Stephen Law argues that traditional theodicies, such as appeals to free will, soul-making⁵, or the claim that certain goods presuppose certain evils, can at best offer only partial justification for the existence of evil. Consequently, the evidential problem of evil remains a serious challenge to belief in a supremely benevolent God. Even if such theodicies mitigate the force of the logical problem, they fail, in Law's view, to neutralize the weight of empirical evidence drawn from the scale and distribution of suffering in the world.

Law's central innovation, however, is the formulation of the "Evil-God Hypothesis" (Law, 2010, p. 356). He contends that the concept of an omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely malevolent being is, in logical and epistemic terms, no less plausible than that of a morally perfect God. By postulating such a being, critics can construct "reverse theodicies" structurally parallel to traditional ones. Free will, for instance, might explain why an evil god permits certain goods he cannot directly eliminate; likewise, a world containing transient goods could serve as a "vale of soul-destruction," intensifying suffering through their eventual loss⁶.

Accordingly, for every classical theodicy there would be a reverse counterpart of comparable plausibility, generating what Law calls the "symmetry thesis"—the claimed equivalence between theodicies and reverse theodicies. Although similar ideas appeared earlier in Cahn's (1977) "cacodemonies," Millican's (1989) "antitheodicies", and Stein's (1990) "demonodicies"⁷, Law's distinctive contribution lies in arguing that the evil-god hypothesis stands on the same, or at least a comparable, level of plausibility as belief in a supremely good God.

Earlier proponents of a malevolent-deity hypothesis held that belief in a good God and in an evil god possessed identical epistemic probability, a parity later termed "diabolical

which serves as inductive evidence against theism. See Rowe (1979, p. 335-341), *The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism*.

⁵ John Hick (1966) proposes the concept of the 'vale of soul-making' in his work "*Evil and the God of Love*" — published in Portuguese by Editora Universidade de Brasília under the title *O Mal e o Deus do Amor*, de 2018 —, according to which the suffering and adversities present in the world have a teleological and epistemological role in the moral and spiritual formation of human beings (Hick, 1966, p. 292). Unlike a theodicy that merely justifies evil as a necessary evil, Hick maintains that evil and suffering are essential conditions for the development of virtues and character, enabling a dynamic process of spiritual growth and ethical maturation. This model is grounded in the idea that the existence of challenges and trials is compatible with divine benevolence insofar as such experiences foster the building of the soul toward a greater fullness of spiritual well-being — one that transcends the mere absence of pain.

⁶ This is the inversion of the idea that, by virtue of free will, God may permit certain types of evil in order to bring about some greater good, such as the perfecting of human virtues.

⁷ Millican's "antitheodicies" seek to demonstrate that any attempt to justify evil in relation to God is morally mistaken and logically impossible. Stein's "demonodicies" are attempts to justify evil as the result of the actions of an evil god, just as traditional theodicies seek to explain evil as stemming from a good God. Finally, Cahn's "cacodemonies" offer similar proposals to demonodicies but in a more radical form, envisioning the universe as governed by an evil demon or a primordial principle of evil.

isomorphism”⁸. Stephen Law, however, does not defend strict isomorphic equivalence, but rather argues that the two hypotheses occupy comparably plausible positions (Lancaster-Thomas, 2018, p. 4). This moderation reflects his recognition that not every theodicy or argument concerning a morally perfect God has a direct symmetrical counterpart concerning a maximally malevolent being.

To illustrate his symmetry thesis, Law (2010, p. 359-360) employs the analogy of a balance scale, with rationality represented as a needle shifting along a *continuum* between two extremes. When evidence for a good God and for an evil god is placed on opposite sides, the scale would allegedly settle at roughly equivalent points. Although Law concedes that the evil-god hypothesis is not a robust standalone doctrine, he contends that it is no weaker than traditional defenses of a supremely good God: if belief in an evil omnipotent being is irrational, belief in a morally perfect one cannot claim rational superiority.

Despite its rhetorical force, this proposal raises a crucial question: does the symmetry apply indiscriminately to all forms of theism? Its plausibility appears to depend on particular conceptions of divine nature, characteristic of neotheism rather than classical theism. A rigorous metaphysical analysis is therefore required to determine whether the classical concept of God coherently permits the symmetrical articulation of a maximally malevolent deity.

2 CLASSICAL THEISM AND THEISTIC PERSONALISM

The problematic raised by Law falls within the scope of so-called neotheism, a current that tends to conceive God as a personal being endowed with properties, subject to temporal succession and, consequently, capable of change. From this perspective, God is often spoken of univocally, conceived as a supreme person – similar in certain respects to human persons – although infinitely superior in power, knowledge, and goodness, and free from the limitations inherent to the human condition.

This orientation has been subject to criticism by Brian Davies (2006)⁹ and Norman Geisler (1997)¹⁰, who lamented the tendency of contemporary philosophy of religion – both in its theistic and atheistic branches – to presuppose an excessively anthropomorphized image of God. This is a pertinent warning, for it is precisely when God is ascribed attributes that can only

⁸ See King-Farlow (1978).

⁹ See chapter 1 of Davies (2006).

¹⁰ See Geisler (1997).

be intelligibly understood as belonging to temporal beings that it becomes plausible to debate, attack, or defend His moral virtue (which, apparently, is the procedure adopted by Law).

In light of the above, we propose the following argumentation:

- (1) In classical theism, God is pure act and first cause; therefore, God is necessarily perfect in being and, consequently, essentially good.
- (2) Attributing univocal moral properties to God is a categorical error, since such predication belongs to a different concept of divinity, distinct from classical theism.
- (3) The “evil-god challenge” presupposes that God possesses univocal moral properties, like those of a finite and temporal agent.
- (4) Therefore, the evil-god challenge either commits a categorical error when applied to classical theism or is logically incompatible with Thomistic doctrines, since an essentially good God cannot be evil.

Thomas Aquinas belongs to the tradition of so-called classical theism (1). The Angelic Doctor maintains that, in our present state, we do not enjoy direct and immediate knowledge of the divine essence, but only an analogical and relative understanding of God’s nature (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.12, a.12)¹¹. Human knowledge of God therefore proceeds indirectly, by way of creatures, tracing a path from contingent and finite effects to their transcendent and necessary cause. What can we then say about (2)? With respect to the ontological relation between God and creation, Aquinas insists on carefully distinguishing modes of causality and predication to avoid confusion. Divine causality is not univocal, as in the case of a father and son who share the same specific nature. Nor is it simply equivocal. Rather, it is analogical, since the cause is infinitely disproportionate to the effect (Tomás de Aquino, 2017, *SCG* I, c.29, 2). God is Pure Act, a mode of actuality that no creature can share.

In light of this metaphysical structure, theological language is necessarily analogical and thus limited in expressive adequacy. Because God is immutable and entirely devoid of potentiality, for “in God there is absolutely no potentiality” (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I,

¹¹ In the present article, references to the works of Thomas Aquinas follow the technical citation conventions established in the specialized Thomistic literature, in order to ensure greater philological precision, methodological consistency, and the immediate identifiability of the cited passages. Accordingly, references to the *Summa Theologiae* are abbreviated as *STh*; to the *Summa contra Gentiles*, as *SCG*; to the *Compendium Theologiae*, as *CTh*; and to the *Quaestiones Disputatae De Malo*, as *De malo*. Whenever appropriate, citations indicate the internal structure characteristic of the Thomistic corpus — namely, the work, question (*quaestio*), and article (*articulus*) — in accordance with the prevailing scholarly practice in contemporary research on Aquinas's metaphysics and epistemology. This citation format is intended not only to facilitate the reader's identification of the relevant texts but also to conform to the technical and editorial standards ordinarily employed in the international scholarship on medieval philosophy and Thomistic studies.

q.3, a.6), no accidental predicates can properly be attributed to Him. Even essential predication requires caution, since the perfections found in creatures exist in God in a supereminent and non-proportional manner. Consequently, terms applied to creatures cannot be transferred univocally to God. Nevertheless, what such names signify in themselves - when they express pure and simple perfections - is not restricted by the limitations of our cognitive mode. Although our intellect cannot fully comprehend their divine mode of realization, these perfections can be truly and properly predicated of God, not merely metaphorically, insofar as they denote realities that belong to Him essentially and in the highest degree.

For Thomas Aquinas, what names signify in themselves (*res significata*) is not limited by our mode of cognition. Although we cannot fully comprehend what such terms mean when applied to God, insofar as they express pure and simple perfections, they can be properly and essentially predicated of Him, and not merely metaphorically. Thus, while our *modus significandi* remains inadequate, the realities signified can truly refer to God. This distinctive mode of predication situated between univocity and equivocity is called analogy¹². From a metaphysical standpoint there is no middle ground between being and non-being, yet logically there can be an intermediate mode of predication. Aquinas therefore appeals to degrees of being, affirming an ontological hierarchy in which perfections exist eminently in the first principle and derivatively in creatures.

Aquinas illustrates analogy through the example of “health” (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.13, a.5): an animal is properly healthy, whereas food is called healthy only insofar as it causes health. The term is thus related to a primary reference, revealing how unity can be grounded in a first term while allowing derivative attributions. This model clarifies how predicates apply analogically to creatures in relation to God.

Within this framework, classical theists attribute intellect and will to God on the principle that whatever exists in an effect must preexist in its cause. Since God is the cause of all reality beyond Himself, the essences of all possible things must exist in Him eminently. As noted by Edward Feser (2021, p. 6), Thomists understand these essences as existing in God analogously to ideas in the human intellect, serving as archetypes according to which creation occurs.

¹² This doctrine finds support in Aristotle (1984), who, in his work *Categories*, defines “synonymy” (Aristotle, *Cat.* 1a5-6) and “homonymy” (Aristotle, *Cat.* 1a1-2), later rendered in Latin as “univocal” and “equivocal.” However, Aristotle makes no reference to any intermediate position between homonymy and synonymy, admitting only the differentiated signification of the term “being” when applied to accidents and to substance.

However, it is not on these grounds that Stephen Law articulates his challenge (3). By proposing an “inversion” of theodicy arguing that just as theists attempt to justify God’s goodness despite evil, one might justify an evil god’s wickedness despite the good in the world, he implicitly shifts the ontological category to which God belongs. Such an inversion treats God as though He were an ordinary moral agent. Yet within classical theism, especially as formulated by Thomas Aquinas, God is not one moral being among others, but Goodness itself, Truth itself, and Being itself. To “invert” God in moral terms is therefore to misconstrue His metaphysical status.

This raises the question: which “god” is Law opposing? His challenge might plausibly target mythological deities or certain neotheistic conceptions in which God is conceived as a powerful but categorically finite agent. However, the idea of an “evil god” does not penetrate the core of classical theism. Within that framework, positing an evil God is as contradictory as affirming a “square triangle,” since God is not a morally qualified being but Subsistent Being itself. The so-called evil-god challenge thus reflects a conceptual confusion about what “God” means in classical metaphysics.

Indeed, the challenge gains plausibility only by abandoning classical theism’s metaphysical foundations. Given the doctrines of analogy, the privation of good, and the convertibility of being and goodness, God cannot be conceived as morally defective or as the source of positive evil. These principles not only exclude an absolutely evil being but also reinforce (4) as a sound conclusion: the evil-god hypothesis is ontologically incoherent and incompatible with the metaphysical horizon of classical theism.

3 THE INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN GOD AND THE EVIL GOD

Since the Evil God Challenge encompasses theism in its entirety, it seems plausible to maintain that, for Law, the privation theory likewise appears compatible with the hypothesis of a malevolent god, insofar as, from his perspective, good and evil stand in ontological parity. This view is supported by Collins, who holds that the Augustinian conception of evil as privation is vulnerable to the so-called symmetry thesis, for, “The diabolist may avail herself of a similar argument for a privation theory of good, in which being is evil and good the absence of being” (Collins, 2018, p. 4).

Thus, the privation theory of evil could be reformulated in a symmetrical and seemingly plausible way under an inverted perspective – that is, as a privation theory of the good. In this

scenario, an evil god could ground his case in a structurally symmetrical argument, conceiving being as essentially evil and good as the mere absence of being. Such a formulation resonates with Collins's reading of Augustine's *Enchiridion*, in which Augustine affirms that once healed, illnesses and wounds do not migrate elsewhere, but simply cease to exist. Analogously, the maltheist could argue that when one becomes ill, health is not transferred but extinguished; and in moral corruption, virtue is not relocated but nullified. On this basis, one could conclude that whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the privation theory of the good, they parallel those of the privation theory of evil, implying that the Augustinian conception inevitably falls under the symmetry thesis. It is worth noting, however, that Collins merely affirms that the maltheist *could* appeal to such argumentative symmetry, without, however, formally demonstrating how such a reversal would be effected in logical-metaphysical terms.

Evidently, the philosopher himself recognizes that a classical theist could respond by claiming that "good cannot be a privation of evil because good is conceptually prior to evil, but there is no clear road from conceptual priority to ontological priority" (Collins, 2018, p. 5).

Aware that some philosophers seek to integrate the privation theory with the doctrine of the convertibility of the transcendentals as a way of refuting the Evil God Challenge, Collins warns that if the privation theory of the good is committed to the convertibility between being and good, this would entail, among other problematic theses, that non-existence would constitute the ideal state of all natural beings, that an absolutely evil being would be ontologically impossible, or that all beings would tend teleologically toward their own annihilation (Collins, 2024, p. 129).

In this regard, the author precisely distinguishes the respective scopes of application of the two doctrines: convertibility constitutes a general metaphysical thesis according to which being and good are coextensive, whereas the privation theory presents itself as an axiological construction, concerning the moral valuation of the being and its imperfections. Therefore, although they are often treated as interdependent, there is no necessary logical implication between them.

This distinction is epistemologically relevant, for if convertibility necessarily implied the privation theory, the theist would be ensnared in an argumentative structure that could be reversed symmetrically by maltheism. However, once the conceptual autonomy of these doctrines is recognized, it becomes possible to uphold convertibility as a metaphysical principle without thereby committing to the moral claims of the privation theory – and the converse proposition likewise.

- (1) If God is Subsistent Being by essence, then God is Subsistent Goodness, absolutely perfect, without any deficiency.
- (2) If God is absolutely perfect, then He cannot be the source of absolute evil, since evil is the absence or privation of good.
- (3) God is Subsistent Being by essence (acceptance of the Thomistic doctrine).
- (4) Therefore, God cannot be the source of absolute evil; an evil god is ontologically impossible.

In Thomas Aquinas, the convertibility between being and good¹³ arises from the fact that everything that exists possesses, to some degree, perfection (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.5, a.1). Moreover, that which all things desire (the good) can only be effectively attained insofar as it participates in being¹⁴. Thus, insofar as things exist, they are considered good; therefore, every being, as such, is good (Tomás de Aquino, 1977, *CTh*, 118). This ontological structure implies that evil cannot subsist as a being in itself, since being and good are naturally correlative. In this sense, the privation theory emerges as a metaphysically necessary consequence of convertibility: if everything that is, is good, then evil can only be understood as a lack or corruption of the good in something that, by nature, ought to possess it.

As for the claim that not every absence of good constitutes evil, this is equally accounted for in Aquinas's thought. This distinction is present in the very formulation of the privation theory, where Aquinas distinguishes between *privation* in the technical sense and mere negation (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.48, a.1). Furthermore, he asserts the ontological priority of good over evil, stating that "evil cannot be matter, nor form... likewise it cannot be agent... nor can it be end... Therefore, evil cannot be the cause of anything. Hence, if something is the cause of evil, it must be so insofar as it is good" (Tomás de Aquino, 2017, *SCG* III, c.10). Thus, evil is ontologically parasitic upon good, and not vice versa: evil has no existence of its own, but depends upon good for its intelligibility.

¹³ For Thomas, "although being and goodness are in reality identical, nonetheless, since they differ rationally, these two notions do not, taken absolutely, have the same signification." This distinction arises from the fact that, whereas *being* properly denotes what is actual in its specific sense it stands in relation to potentiality; thus, *ens* in the absolute sense is what is distinguished primarily from pure potency. Hence, "it is by its substantial being that a thing is called a being in the absolute sense" (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.5, a.1). On this basis, it may be affirmed that the distinction between *ens* and *bonum* is not real but rather one of reason - that is, one does not truly differ from the other except with respect to their conceptualizations.

¹⁴ For Thomas, "a thing is good insofar as it is desirable." Moreover, "every being desires its own perfection." The perfection and form of an effect are in a certain way a likeness of the agent, since every agent produces an act similar to itself. Consequently, the agent, in itself, is desirable and assumes the character of the good, for participation in it is desired by reason of likeness (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.6, a.1).

To this conception one must add the notion that He who is Being itself by essence - whose essence is *ipsum esse subsistens* - must *ipso facto* also be Subsistent Goodness (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.6, a.2). For in God there is no potency to be actualized, nor any possibility of deficiency, failure, or corruption. In other words, the Being that is absolutely full, devoid of any composition or limitation not only possesses goodness but *is* Goodness itself, in the absolute degree, without mutability, lack, or imperfection. In the words of Aquinas, “God alone is good by essence” (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.6, a.3).

Furthermore, in light of the principle of proportional causality, every good that exists in the world in a limited way must pre-exist in its cause in an eminent manner. Now, if the created world manifests a multiplicity of goods, it must be concluded that these goods exist in a higher and eminent way in their First Cause. Since God is the cause of all that is, all finite goods we encounter in the universe must pre-exist in Him supremely and infinitely. God does not merely communicate goodness to creatures; He is the origin, measure, and plenitude of all goodness that exists.

From this it follows that premise (2) is true: the postulation of a malevolent creator god is ontologically inconsistent, for in creating He necessarily communicates being – and therefore goodness – to creatures. This very communication invalidates the possibility of an absolutely evil being, thereby undermining, at its root, the symmetry thesis. It follows that evil lacks autonomous substantial reality; it is not a being, but a deficiency in a being, which is by definition good. The symmetry thesis thus fails not merely for pragmatic or moral reasons, but because it subverts the ontological order structuring reality.

Therefore, since God is Subsistent Being itself, the proposition “If God exists, then He is good” must be considered a truth of metaphysical necessity, whereas the proposition “If God exists, He can be evil” is necessarily false.

To evade this conclusion, one might propose that what we understand by “evil” does not apply univocally to an evil god in the same way it applies to human beings. This is precisely the strategy adopted by Law.

So-called *semantic theodicies*¹⁵ rest on the idea that the term “good” is used analogically when applied to God and to human beings. Following this reasoning, Law argues that a reverse semantic theodicy could be formulated by simply inverting what we call “good” and “evil.” For, once those who defend the hypothesis of the good God hold that the term “good” means

¹⁵Law (2010, p. 367-368) calls *semantic theodicies* those that describe God using concepts that are applied in a different sense when predicated of mere human beings, as in the case of “God is good” or “God is evil”.

something different when applied to God than when applied to humans, the maltheist may likewise affirm: “When we describe God as being ‘good’, the term means something different to what it means when applied to mere humans. This difference in meaning at least partly explains why a good god would do things that we would not call ‘good’ if done by us” (Law, 2010, p. 367). Thus, the proponent of the Evil God Challenge could argue that, although there is no reason to think such a deity would wish or allow His creatures to be happy, this would not be conclusively true, since the concept of “evil” would apply to Him in a way different from how it applies to us. In this way, the reverse semantic theodicy would imply that both the good and the evil in the world function as equally probable evidence in favor of either the theistic God or an evil god; and therefore, the existence of one would be no more plausible than the other.

An additional attempt to challenge the connection between being and good is found in the objection presented by Collins (2024, p. 126), who denies the real identity between the two, arguing that the thing itself and its tendency (or end) are not ontologically identical. To illustrate his position, he appeals to the example of the airplane: the being (the airplane) is distinct from its end (flying).

Although such a view may sound intuitive to the modern mind, it rests upon an artificial dualism between essence and end. This objection assumes that the goodness of something is an extrinsic property to its being, as though the good were an accidental quality merely superimposed upon an ontologically neutral substrate. However, this assumption contradicts precisely the central point of Thomistic metaphysics, according to which the good is not a contingent addition to being, but the very ordered actualization of its nature. To deny this coextensivity is to distort the essential structure of the convertibility between the transcendentals.

Being and good (as well as unity and truth) are convertible because they are coextensive with being. That is, wherever there is being, there will also be unity, truth, and goodness – albeit under distinct formal aspects. In other words, these properties are not additions to being, but distinct modes of intelligibility of the same reality, apprehended from different analytical perspectives. Thus, when the intellect apprehends something as existing, it employs the concept of being (*ens*); when, on the other hand, it considers it as in conformity with its nature and therefore desirable, it employs the concept of good. Both concepts, however, express only different rational aspects of the same ontological reality. Hence, the distinction between being and good is merely formal and logical, not real or metaphysical.

For Thomas Aquinas, all beings tend toward the good, which is why one may say that the good is what is desirable. Since every nature desires the preservation of its being and the attainment of its perfection, it must likewise be said that the being and perfection of any nature are goods (Tomás de Aquino, 2009b, *STh* I, q.48, a.1). This inclination (or appetite), moreover, does not arise from a movement extrinsic to the being, but flows from the very ontological structure of being. The end, therefore, is not an adventitious or accidental element, but is inscribed in the very essence of the being as such.

Thus, regarding the example proposed by Collins, we may say that, as an artifact, the goodness of an airplane is measured by its conformity to the end for which it was conceived: to fly. In affirming that a given airplane is “good,” we do not introduce into it a quality extrinsic to its being, but recognize that it adequately fulfills what constitutes it according to its form and end. Even in the case of an artificial being, goodness is understood as the perfection relative to the assigned essence.

Another objection raised by Collins maintains that “But even if we allow the equivalence between what is good and what is desirable, what we observe in nature is not that being as such is desired, but that each individual desires or aims at its own best existence” (Collins, 2024, p. 10). This would imply that the desire to be better does not presuppose that being, in itself, is desirable; therefore, being and good would not be identical or equivalent.

This objection can be answered on two levels. On the ontological level, the thesis of the convertibility between being and good rests on the premise that being is desirable insofar as it is actual - that is, insofar as it realizes, or tends to realize, its essence fully. The above objection seems to presuppose that convertibility would only hold if being, in its abstract universality, were the object of desire. However, this premise commits a category mistake. For Aquinas, the good is not being taken abstractly, but being as concretely participated according to a form – in short, being in act in accordance with the nature of the being. Thus, to desire the realization of one’s own nature is to desire being as good.

On the psychological level, to affirm that each being desires the fullness of its own being, and not being in the generic sense, does not refute convertibility, but rather confirms it. Indeed, every desire is ordered to some good, and every being tends to persevere in being. It follows, therefore, that being, insofar as it is actual and perfect according to its nature, is the object of desire and thus identical with the good.

The objection formulated by Collins appears to rest on a misunderstanding: supposing that, since not every being is desired, but only one’s own being as realized according to its form,

there is no true convertibility between being and good. Yet this is precisely the Thomistic conception of the good: being as conformed to its form and desired as an end. The universality of convertibility, therefore, does not consist in desiring “being as being” in the abstract, but in the fact that every being, by its very natural inclination, desires being as actualized according to its essence.

Ultimately, on the logical-formal level, one may affirm with Aquinas that the distinction between “being” and “good” is not real, but only a distinction of reason (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.5, a.1).

The objection under examination begins from the premise that, since there is a distinction between the desire to be and the desire for an idealized being, it follows that “being” and “good” are not identical. This, however, is a fallacy of reifying conceptual distinctions. That which the intellect discriminates under different aspects remains, in the order of being, one and the same ontological reality, considered only from different angles. Thus, what is desired under the aspect of good is precisely the same being, insofar as it is actual or tends toward its form, only apprehended under the aspect of its desirability.

Notwithstanding the intrinsic fragility of objections based on the symmetry thesis and on the rejection of the convertibility between being and good, it must be recognized that, beyond their ontological inconsistency, the Evil God Challenge can – and should – be problematized even more profoundly. To this end, we propose in the next chapter an argumentative exercise in which, as a methodological concession, we shall accept *ad argumentandum* some of the central presuppositions of the maltheistic hypothesis, in order to demonstrate that even under such conditions the resulting conceptual system falls into internal contradictions, insoluble paradoxes, and irrecoverable metaphysical dead-ends. Such an approach will not only highlight the limits of the symmetrical model but will also serve to reinforce, by way of negation, the robustness of the classical conception of divine goodness as necessary and inherent to Subsistent Being itself.

4 A MINOR CONCESSION TO THE EVIL GOD CHALLENGE

Still with regard to the problem of evil in Thomas Aquinas - especially concerning the privation theory - the Angelic Doctor develops a profound reflection on the ordering of the universe, conceived as the supreme good in the harmonious relation between the parts and the whole. In this sense, the natural order manifests an ontological gradation of perfection, truth,

and nobility, as well as an intrinsic inclination of beings toward the attainment of their respective ends (Tomás de Aquino, 2009a, *STh* I, q.2, a.3).

Since the creative act is “a proper operation belonging exclusively to God” (Tomás de Aquino, 2009b, *STh* I, q.45, a.5) and considering the multiplicity and variety of beings that compose the universe, it follows that God Himself is the author of this ontological diversity (Tomás de Aquino, 2009b, *STh* I, q.45, a.1). The excellence and perfection of the cosmos, therefore, do not lie in homogeneity, but in the ordering and complementarity of its parts, which presuppose distinction and hierarchy among beings. It is precisely by virtue of this internal disposition, oriented toward the common good of the whole, that the universe achieves its fullest realization. Hence Thomas’s assertion that the good of the universe consists in the order of things (Tomás de Aquino, 2017, *SCG* II, c.42).

Now, since the good is that which is universally desired - that is, everything that beings seek, namely their existence and perfection - something can only be deemed perfect insofar as it is in a state of actuality; and something is in act if, and only if, it possesses being. This is why Thomas states: “non-being is never desired, except insofar as by some non-being the being itself is preserved” (Tomás de Aquino, 2024, *De Malo*, q.1, a.1, ad.17). Thus, that which all things desire – the good – can only be truly attained to the extent that they participate in being.

Since God is the Supreme Good, it is ontologically incompatible with Him to will evil. Nevertheless, He may permit it, provided that sufficient moral reasons exist for doing so. From this perspective, God does not will, in Himself, death, disease, or any other evils, which are, in the final analysis, natural consequences of the condition of contingent beings who, endowed with freedom, voluntarily choose to distance themselves from the supreme source of all good. Yet, in the inexhaustible wisdom of God, even the effects of such wrongful choices can be employed as means for leading creatures toward conversion, repentance, and ultimately love of God.

It is true that God could have created a world free from evil: it would suffice for Him to create beings devoid of freedom. But let us imagine – with subtle irony – how dreadful it would seem to Law and Collins to be compelled to sing praises to God under coercion. Likewise, He could eradicate evil at its root, but this would imply, however, the suppression of the good in the order of the universe – or even the elimination of the human being, the principal agent of moral evil. Yet it is hardly defensible, without falling into existential contradiction, that non-existence should be preferable to existence.

Accordingly, I do not see how the symmetry thesis, as formulated by Law and Collins, could be validly applied to semantic theodicy within the context of Thomistic metaphysics. This impossibility, in addition to the reasons already presented, may be brought to light in two fundamental points.

First, it should be emphasized that Thomas's conception of the divine attributes does not present itself as a mere speculative hypothesis, but as the corollary of a rigorous argumentation that begins from sensory experience and unfolds through logical-rational inquiry. Thomas's natural theology does not admit conceptual arbitrariness: the divine attributes are inferred from the metaphysical analysis of being as such, and their articulation culminates in the identification of God as Subsistent Being itself and, therefore, as Subsistent Goodness.

Now, if we were to admit a reverse semantic theodicy within a Thomistic framework, we would be forced to accept that, being supremely evil, such an evil god would provide no rational criteria for discerning whether he ought or ought not to permit good. Consequently, the presence of goods in reality would not constitute evidence against his existence. Even if we accepted an inversion of the classical thesis – according to which good would be a mere privation of evil – we would encounter an even deeper impasse: existence, being good, would then be conceived as a lack of evil, making nothingness the supreme ideal. In this scenario, reality would be construed as an ontological defect and non-existence as absolute perfection. Such a conception, however, proves metaphysically untenable, for nothingness is devoid of any act of being and therefore cannot be desirable nor produce any effect.

Even granting, *ad argumentandum*, this semantic inversion, a decisive logical paradox would arise from it. If such an evil god were the first cause of all reality, it would follow that he would have to be pure act. In other words, he would have to be absolutely perfect in being. But to be perfect in being is, within Thomistic metaphysics, to be perfectly good. Therefore, an infinitely and necessarily evil being cannot exist, for to be infinite is to possess the fullness of being and, *ipso facto*, the fullness of goodness. A semantic inversion of this relation would result in the contradiction of affirming that goodness, in such a being, would not be accidental but essential, since being and goodness are coextensive. The consequence is absurd: the evil god, in order to be the source of all being, would have to be infinitely good, which contradicts his essential wickedness. In short, the postulation of an absolutely evil god collapses into an antinomy: he would be both the foundation of all reality – and therefore full in being and goodness — and infinitely evil, a logically irreconcilable position. Reverse semantic theodicy,

at this point, collapses under the weight of a metaphysical structure whose internal logic can sustain only the existence of an absolutely good God.

Second, Law's proposal (2010, p. 358) – according to which the evil god could allow the existence of good things (such as love, beauty, and justice) for reasons that transcend our understanding – seeks to illustrate that the strategies of traditional theodicies can be replicated symmetrically. However, this suggestion proves conceptually problematic, for it presupposes that the term “evil,” when applied to this hypothetical god, is analogous, or at least comparable, to the meaning of “evil” when applied to human beings. This semantic ambiguity undermines the intelligibility of the thesis and weakens its explanatory force precisely by dissolving the criteria that would make the notion of divine evil genuinely comprehensible.

This implies that, in a reverse theodicy, the malevolent deity would will the non-being of all its creatures, since non-being, in this context, would be deemed desirable. Such a conception inevitably leads to the conclusion that, for all things to be analogously evil, they would also have to desire non-being. Yet this hypothesis is profoundly disconnected from the observation of the sensible world.

Thomas Aquinas observes that evil acts, when freely chosen, are always motivated by some perceived good (Tomás de Aquino, 2024, *De Malo*, q.2, a.1), albeit in a disordered way, since the human will is naturally oriented toward the good and toward being. Thus, one who steals does not do so out of a desire for injustice as such, but because he judges that the good obtained – whether an object, a pleasure, or even a subjective sense of reparation – is worth more than the justice violated. Moral evil thus has an accidental cause, in which “the will lacks the direction of the rule of reason and of the rule of divine law” (Tomás de Aquino, 2009, *STh* I-II, q.75, a.1).

This shows that the human being, even when choosing evil, acts moved by the search for something he mistakenly judges to fulfill his longing for fullness (Tomás de Aquino, 2009, *STh* I-II, q.19, a.6). In other words, he seeks more being, not non-being. Pain, suffering, ignorance, and unhappiness are not, in this view, ends in themselves, but side effects arising from a dysfunctional ordering of goods.

However, when it is asserted that the evil god desires “evil” in an analogous way to how humans desire it, the very structure of analogy is broken. This is because the human being does not desire evil as evil, but a perceived good in a distorted manner (Tomás de Aquino, 2009, *STh* I-II, q.77, a.2). The malevolent deity, by definition, would will evil as such, non-being as such.

Such a will is ontologically antithetical to the very structure of reality, for according to Thomistic metaphysics, everything that exists naturally tends toward being.

An evil god who wished for the absolute annihilation of his creatures would not only fall into incoherence but would also prove incapable of sustaining any reality whatsoever. Indeed, the will to destroy absolutely everything is, by definition, the will to suppress creation itself, which implies an active negation of the foundation of being.

It therefore seems evident that both Collins and Law err in proposing, uncritically, the reversal of the privation theory. In fact, they limit themselves to a merely terminological operation without providing any substantial demonstration of how such an inversion could be sustained ontologically. In practice, they simply invert the signs: calling “evil” what is good and “good” what is evil, suggesting that a reverse metaphysics could justify, by analogy, a world created by an essentially evil deity, in the same way that Christian metaphysics justifies a world created by God.

Such an attempt, however, fails by ignoring the ontological structure underlying the Augustinian-Thomistic doctrine of privation. For both Augustine and Thomas, evil has neither substantiality nor the status of a positive principle in opposition to good. Collins’s proposal, in this respect, reveals itself to be a mere semantic inversion, devoid of ontological force. By claiming that “being is evil” and “non-being” is good, he merely swaps linguistic labels without altering the real content of the categories involved.

In the order of reality, beings continue to act and move toward the perfection of their natures; they continue to seek their fulfillment and to desire being. Existence remains desirable, and nothingness undesirable. The ontological substratum of reality remains untouched, even if the names are arbitrarily substituted.

The fundamental error of Collins lies in believing that a simple terminological maneuver would suffice to subvert the metaphysical structure of reality. But regardless of how we name “good” or “evil,” the natural inclination of all things remains directed toward perfection, being, and goodness.

It follows, therefore, that the proposal of a “privation of good theory” as a reverse analogy to the classical doctrine of the privation of evil proves entirely fallacious. Far from constituting a genuine ontological inversion, it amounts to a mere linguistic reconfiguration that, because it does not affect the substance of the concepts, fails to undermine the foundations of the traditional theodicy.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the foregoing analyses, it is possible to conclude that Stephen Law's "evil god challenge" – especially in its reverse-theodicy form – fails in a substantive way when confronted with the presuppositions of classical theism. Unlike contemporary personalist theism, classical theism, particularly in the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition, rests upon a robust ontology in which being and goodness are convertible, and evil is conceived not as a substance or positive principle, but as an ontological deficiency, that is, a privation of good.

From this perspective, the attempt by Law (and, by extension, Collins) to execute a semantic inversion of the privation theory commits a serious category error: it assumes that "evil" could occupy the same ontological structure as "good," without recognizing that, in classical metaphysics, such an inversion would radically undermine the intelligibility of being itself. By positing "evil" as the absolute foundation and creative principle of reality, the argument becomes self-contradictory, for evil, as privation, lacks the ontological positivity required to ground any reality – let alone the totality of being.

Even if one were to grant, *ad argumentandum*, the hypothesis of an absolutely evil deity, the proposition would still collide with the very presuppositions of classical metaphysics. A being that sustains the order of reality would have to be pure act, ontological plenitude, and therefore perfectly good. But such a condition, by definition, rules out any notion of essential wickedness. Moreover, the attempt to ascribe to evil a teleological positivity analogous to divine goodness proves incompatible with the structure of desire, causality, and finality inherent in the created order.

It follows, then, that the most the evil god challenge can achieve is to place some degree of pressure – albeit with a measure of merit – on neotheistic models, which conceive of God in finite, contingent, and psychological terms. As a critique of classical theism, however, it fails utterly: the metaphysical foundations of classical theism do not admit of semantic reversibility without thereby annihilating the very notion of reality. In this respect, Law's objection is not only ineffectual against the internal coherence of classical theism; it also serves, by contrast, to highlight the depth and ontological robustness of the framework upon which it rests.

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