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BONUM SEQUITUR ESSE

In order to take a closer look at the problem of the connection of the good with being, and at what the expression “*bonum sequitur esse rei*” means, (1) we will briefly consider the history of the word “good” to see what is hidden behind it and to what we should direct our thoughts and searches. (2) We will then look at the beginning of inquiries on the nature and sources of the good. (3) We will do this so that then we can better see the originality of one of the most interesting solutions in this controversy, which appeared in the thirteenth century and which was contained in the short sentence, “*bonum sequitur esse rei*”¹—“the good is a consequence of the existence of a thing.”

On the History of the Birth of the Word “Good”

The Greeks used the noun “ἀγαθόν” (*to agathon*) to mean benefit, gain, possession, property, or inheritance. The Romans enriched the meaning of the noun “*bonum*” with meanings such as good fortune, success, happiness, merit, or virtue (Plaut. Rud, 639, CIC, Quint. 25). As an adjective, the term “ἀγαθός” (*agathos*) was used to mean something that is useful, salvational, valuable, or profitable. It is therefore not strange that the meaning of the word “good” at the sources of its birth was connected with economic values and useful things.

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¹ This expression presents the essence of Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of the truth, and it is a paraphrase of an expression that refers to the truth and probably is from Book IX of Avicenna’s *Metaphysics*.

Plato gave the first philosophical meaning to the word “good.” In one of his dialogues on the creation of language, the *Cratylus*, he wrote that “the first men who gave names were no ordinary persons, but high thinkers and great talkers.”² At the same time, he argues that the word “ἀγαθόν” (*agathon*) is composed of two words: from the word “ἐκ του αγαστου” (*ek tou agastou*), which means something that is admirable, and the word “θοος” (*thoos*), which means something fast. Plato provides a commentary on this fact: the name “good” (ἀγαθόν) “is intended to denote the admirable (ἀγασθω) in all nature. For since all things are in motion, they possess quickness and slowness; now not all that is swift, but only part of it, is admirable; for this name ἀγαθόν is therefore given to the admirable part of the swift.”³ Thus as we make a whole out of these words, like a medley, we can interpret the good as something that “moves us unexpectedly and quickly,” “something that attracts us suddenly to itself.”

Thus it is not strange that the conception of the good as “something that has the power suddenly to grab us and attract us to it” came to the forefront in philosophy. However, philosophers were still left with a controversy to resolve, whether man or the gods are the source of good, or conversely, whether the good is the principle of the existence of the world, of human beings, and of the gods. Also, what was the scope of the good? Is the good present everywhere, or only here and there? Therefore let us try to trace at least one fragment of this controversy and take note of proposed solution, in order better to see the accuracy of Thomas’ solution in which the good appears as a consequence of the existence of being, and for that reason is interchangeable with everything that really exists.

Ancient Conceptions of the Good

I will present four selected visions of how the good has been understood, and four ways it has been connected with being.

Man as the Measure of the Good (*homo boni mensura*)

The doctrine we encounter in philosophy on the topic of the good is that “*homo boni mensura est*” (man is the measure of the good). This means that man makes himself the source of being and the good, and thereby man puts himself above the good and being.

² Plato, *Cratylus*, 401b (this and subsequent translations of Plato are from www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collections).

³ Platon, *Cratylus*, 412c.

In the fifth century BC in the school of the Sophists, who broke away from the Ionian *philosophesantes* and moved in the direction set by the *philosophoi*, they taught the principle that “man is the measure of all things, of the existence of the things that are, and the non-existence of the things that are not.”⁴ The principle “*homo mensura*,” formulated by Protagoras, became not only a principle of being and so a principle of the existence of things, but also an “agathonic” principle, a principle of the good. Man makes himself not only the measure of existing things, that they exist, and non-existent things, that they do not exist, but man also makes himself the measure of the existing good, and of the non-existent good, that it does not exist. Is the principle “*homo mensura*” the “*Magna Charta*” of the relativism of being, the true, and the good? Let us leave the answer to this question to historians, who are still arguing about it.

Plato in the *Theaetetus* also commented on the principle of “*homo mensura*.” Protagoras says that “that individual things are for me such as they appear to me, and for you in turn such as they appear to you—you and I being ‘man.’”⁵ It is the same situation with the good? “The good is such an elusive and diverse thing,” says Plato through the mouth of Protagoras.⁶ Aristotle in turn comments on this principle in book XI of the *Metaphysics*:

he [Protagoras] said that man is the measure of all things, by which he meant simply that each individual’s impressions are positively true. But if this is so, it follows that the same thing is and is not, and is bad and good, and that all the other implications of opposite statements are true; because often a given thing seems beautiful to one set of people and ugly to another, and that which seems to each individual is the measure.⁷

In this way at the very birth of philosophy, man declares himself to be the measure of the good: “*homo boni mensura*.” Man connects the good with himself. In modern and recent times, some philosophers have drawn abundantly from this doctrine.

Aristotle sees the source of views of this type in the fact that those who said such things (Sophists and others) had separated themselves from reality, had looked to the opinions of the physiologists (*physiologon*), and

⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math*, VII, 60; Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151e–152a.

⁵ *Theaetetus*, 152a–b.

⁶ Platon, *Protagoras*, 334b–c.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1062b13–19, trans. Hugh Treddenick (accessible at www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collections).

based their ideas on subjective human feelings or sensations, which could be different with respect to the same thing (for some people, something is cold, for others it is warm; for some, something is good, for others it is evil, etc.).

The Good as the Measure of Man and God
(*bonum dei et hominis mensura*)

The good is the measure of gods and men. As a measure, the good is above all being. This is how the presentation begins of the second doctrine that we encounter in Plato's philosophy, a doctrine that would later take a more radical form in the philosophy of Plotinus. The world in which we live lacks the good as an immanent property of it. At most, a shadow of the good falls upon the world, but it also quickly disappears.

In his quest for the good, Plato leads us beyond the world of men, gods, and things, and leads us to a place called Hyperouranian, "the region which is above the heaven."⁸ Plato writes that the beauty of that place "was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be . . . For the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul."⁹ Among the objects of true knowledge, along with the beautiful and the true, there is the good. They are divine elements by which the gods and the souls are nourished.¹⁰ The good has the power to make gods gods and to make human souls divine.

In what way does the good exist? The true good exists separately from all particular goods and things. It is the good through itself or the idea of the good, and everything is good by participation in it, as Aristotle comments on Platonic doctrine, and as Thomas Aquinas does following Aristotle.¹¹ The idea of the Good is above all a "paradigm," a primordial model for all goods and all things.

The idea of the Good is not a Platonic god, as G. Reale reminds us in his commentary on Plato, but that god is the Demiurge understood as the Supreme Mind (the best of all rational beings), while the idea of the good

⁸ Platon, *Phaedrus*, 247c–d.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id., 246d–e.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1096b8–1097a14; Thomas Aquinas, "De Bono," in *Quaestiones disputatae. De veritate* (Taurini 1964), 21, 2, resp.

is “something divine” (*to theion*).¹² For this reason, Plato puts the “good” (or the idea of the Good) above every being, and he makes the ultimate reason for what is “really real.” The Platonic idea of the Good is also the highest rule by which the god is inspired, and he tries to realize it at all levels of being.¹³ G. Reale comments on Plato’s thought: “God is good in the highest degree precisely because He acts in view of the idea of the Good, that is, Unity and the Supreme Measure.”¹⁴

The Good is nothing other than UNITY, MEASURE, and ORDER. To bring MEASURE, UNITY, and ORDER into that which is unordered, plural, and indefinite is to produce good. In the *Timaeus*, Plato writes of this constantly:

For God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil; wherefore, when He took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder, deeming that the former state is in all ways better than the latter.¹⁵

Therefore measure, unity, and order are the essence of the good, and are the good in itself; they are the divine principles of action. Order, unity, and measure hold the entire world in existence, and therefore the world is a “cosmos” and not a chaos. The cosmos is a good, and chaos is an evil. This is because the good is most perfect measure, and according to measure the world is brought out from chaos to cosmos, from plurality to unity, and from non-being to being.

From the Platonic presentation of the good we learn that in the world, *bonum sequitur ordo, mensura et unitas* (good is a consequence of order, measure, and unity). This means that neither the world nor individual things bear the good in them. The good is given to them from the outside, from measure and from order.

The Good as the End of All Appetite or Desire
(*bonum est quod omnia appetunt*)

Aristotle provided us the third presentation in the history of philosophy of how the good is understood. Aristotle connected motion with be-

¹² Cf. G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytnej* (*A History of Ancient Philosophy*), II, Polish trans. I. E. Zieliński (Lublin 2001), 186 ff.

¹³ Id., 186.

¹⁴ Id., 187.

¹⁵ Platon, *Timaeus*, 30a–b.

ing—unlike his predecessors, who either put motion before being (Heraclitus), or thought it was apart from being (Parmenides, Plato)—and Aristotle searched for a key to resolve the riddle of the dynamism of the world of people, animals, plants, and things, and the universal phenomenon of motion. The key is the good, understood as the reason for all appetite or desire. Aristotle's answer was that the good is always present in action.¹⁶ Wherever there is action, there must also be a good, and conversely, wherever there is a good there is a reason for action. Thus there is no action apart from the good. Everything that acts, acts for some sort of good. The good of the agent is realized in action, and the good is the reason for all action.

What is the good that manifests itself in action? The good is the end and purpose of all action. The discovery of the end as a previously unknown cause is one of the most important discoveries that Aristotle made. That discovery allowed him to explain in ultimate terms why the world is at all, and why the world is a cosmos rather than a chaos.

What is that end? Aristotle at the same time remarks that “the final cause is not only the good for something but is also the good which is the end of some action.”¹⁷ So it is also a good for something (a means), and the good is an end in view of which all action is undertaken.

The end-good of the action of individual beings is the specific form composed in them; the individual beings are supposed to achieve the specific form as their good and perfection. However, the individual exists for the sake of the species, and therefore the good of the individual is the good of the species, and not the good of the individual alone. Thus the good is an immanent property of individually existing things, but it is a transcendent property. Individual things are not good by a goodness contained in them, but by a goodness that is inherent in the species. The good is not a consequence of existence, but at most it is the reason (or end) of the action and appetite of beings. *Bonum sequitur actionem*—the good is a consequence of action, since *bonum est quod omnia appetunt*—the good is what is desired by all things.

The second important element in the Aristotelian doctrine of the good is the discovery of the good as the “end of all becoming and motion.”¹⁸ The good is not really interchangeable with the being of things, but

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Met.*, 1078a32.

¹⁷ Id., 1072b3–4.

¹⁸ Id., 983a33.

it is interchangeable with the scope (or end) of their appetite. The good as the end is not before or above being, but it is written into the dynamism of being (and the world), and in some way it is the foundation for that dynamism. The entire cosmos strives for the good, and all beings strive for the good, “Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good.”¹⁹

However, to unite different actions into a whole and to give them unity, there must be one end for the entire world, and end is the Supreme Good. For this reason, the first science is that “which knows for what end each action is to be done; i.e. the Good in each particular case, and in general the highest Good in the whole of nature.”²⁰

The Good as the Consequence of the Existing of Things
(*bonum sequitur esse*)

In the quest for the good, Thomas leads us out into the “fields of things that are,” to use a Platonic metaphor.²¹ He shows the things that are as “*inter duos voluntates constitutae*”—set between two wills. One is the will of the Creator, and the other is the will of man. The will of the Creator is the will, the freedom of which is manifested in calling beings to existence and in creating the good.²² The being that is called to existence by an act of intellect and will is the bearer of the truth and the good. The truth is nothing other than the realized thought of the Creator, and the good is the Creator’s realized will. The fact of the being or existence of a thing primarily manifests “the realized will of the Creator,” and also manifests by the Creator’s will the end written in things by the will of the Creator (or of the human maker in case of beings that are products). Thomas explains:

[E]ach thing will be called good by reason of an inherent form because of the likeness of the highest good implanted in it, and also

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a12–15.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Met.*, 982b5–8.

²¹ Thomas writes: “An essence is denominated good in the same way as it is denominated a being. It is good by participation. Existence and good taken in general are simpler than essence because more general, since these are said not only of essence but also of what subsists by reason of the essence and even, too, of accidents.” *De veritate*, 21, 5, 6, translation from St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on the Truth*, vol. III, 27, trans. Robert W. Schmidt SJ (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954).

²² Thomas explains: “A creature is from God not only in its essence but also in its act of existing, which constitutes the chief characteristic of substantial goodness; and also in its additional perfections, which constitute its absolute goodness. These are not the essence of the thing.” *De veritate*, 21, 5, ad 5, translation from *The Disputed Questions on Truth*.

because of the first good taken as the exemplar and effective cause of all created goodness . . . We say, therefore, following the common opinion, that all things are good by a created goodness formally as by an inherent form, but by the uncreated goodness as by an exemplary form.²³

The good is therefore the consequence of the existence of a thing—*sequitur esse rei*. Let us take note of this as a typical element of Thomas' doctrine on the good and its nature. The very fact of the existence of each thing is the GOOD.

The will of the Creator (and of the human maker in beings that are products) is the will that establishes and determines the good, just as it establishes and determines being. Therefore an existing being is a good in two senses: first, by the very fact that it exists, and second by the fact that it is the bearer of the will of the Creator (or a human maker), whose “desire” was written in beings under the form of the end. Thus the measure of the good was established in existing beings under the form of the end, and the measure of the good assigns the end's status of being and power.

The human will is the will that when directed by the good of things becomes “free in a good way” (*recta voluntas*), that is, free in the selection of the good and of action toward the good. However, the difference between the will of the Creator and the will of man is fundamental. The Creator acts by virtue of his free will, which as it acts creates the good. The will of man acts by virtue of the good of existing beings. The good of being establishes or constitutes the will of man, and by the good of beings, man actualizes his will. *Recta voluntas*, or right will, is will that is directed by the good of existing beings. Let us also ask, in what does the nature of the good manifest itself?

The Perfective Power of Being-Good

Thomas remarks that a being can be perfective in two ways.

[First,] it can be so just according to its specific character. In this way the intellect is perfected by a being, for it perceives the formal character of the being. But the being is still not in it according to its nature existence. It is this mode of perfecting which the true adds to being. For the true is in the mind, as the Philosopher says; and ever being is called true inasmuch as it is conformed or conformable to

²³ *De veritate*, 21, 4, resp.; *The Disputed Questions...*, 20.

intellect. For this reason, all who correctly define *true* put intellect into its definition . . . [Second,] a being is perfective of another not only according to its specific character but also according to the existence which it has in reality. In this fashion the good is perfective; for the good is in things . . . Inasmuch as one being by reason of its act of existing is such as to perfect and complete another, it stands to that other as an end . . . First of all and principally, therefore, a being capable of perfecting another after the manner of an end is called good; but secondarily something is called good which leads to an end (as the useful is said to be good), or which naturally follows upon an end (as not only that which has health is called healthy, but also anything which causes, preserves, or signifies health).²⁴

Let us take note here of two important observations. First, the good is a perfection composed in things. Second, beings-goods exist in order to perfect others.

This aspect in the understanding of the good is the most original aspect for Thomas' lectures on the good. The conception that was in first position for Aristotle, namely the conception of the good as that "*quod omnia appetunt*," is in a secondary position in Thomas' presentation. That which perfects all things—"*bonum est quod omnia perficiunt*"—is in first place.

Why Does the Good "*sequitur esse rei*?"

From the response, we learn that "since the essence of good consists in this, that something perfects another as an end, whatever is found to have the character of an end also has that of good."²⁵ Now, the nature of an end includes two elements. First, that the end is always "sought or desired by things which have not yet attained the end," and second, "it must be loved by the things which share the end, and be, as it were, enjoyable to them." Taking this into consideration, Thomas explains:

Existence itself, therefore, has the essential note of goodness. Just as it is impossible, then, for anything to be being which does not have existence, so too it is necessary that every being be good by the very fact of its having existence, even though in many beings many other aspects of goodness are added over and above the act of existing by

²⁴ *De ver.*, 21, 1, resp; *The Disputed Questions*..., 7.

²⁵ *De ver.*, 21, 2, resp.; *The Disputed Questions*..., 10.

which they subsist . . . It is impossible for anything to be good which is not a being. Thus . . . good and being are interchangeable.²⁶

Cognitive Consequences

First, the discovery of the universality of the good as a consequence of the existence of things reveals before us the world as the natural environment of various goods marked by an end (or meaning). Secondly, the discovery of individual finality or purposefulness in individual beings is the foundation for the discovery of an understanding of the love-based action of all beings, and of the whole world. Thirdly, the good of existing things indicates the love-based aspect of the fulfillment of being. In this way, we place the accent on the power of the perfective action of being, in which acts of love are inscribed in the nature of each being. This has especially essential significance for the fulfillment (of the existence) of the personal being.

For this reason, as Aristotle writes in the *Exhortation to Philosophy*, or *Protrepticus*,

someone who does not use a plumb line, or another tool of that type, but takes the measure from other builders, is not a good builder. So it is with a legislator or one who manages the affairs of a state who looks at and imitates the way things are managed by others . . . for the imitation of what is not good cannot be good, and likewise the imitation of what is not divine and constant in its nature cannot be immortal and constant . . . Therefore only he who lives with his sight directed to nature and what is divine, like a good helmsman, fixes his life strongly in what is eternal and unchanging, casts anchor there, and lives according to his own will.²⁷

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SUMMARY

The article discusses the connection of the good with being along three steps. First, it briefly considers the history of the word “good” to see what is hidden behind it and to what one

²⁶ Id., 11.

²⁷ Arystoteles (Aristotle), *Zachęta do filozofii (Exhortation to philosophy)*, Polish trans. K. Leśniak (Warsaw 1988), frg. 49–50.

should direct his or her thoughts and searches. Second, it looks at the beginning of inquiries on the nature and sources of the good. Three, it analyzes the originality of one of the most interesting solutions in this controversy surrounding the good, which appeared in the thirteenth century and which was contained in the short sentence, “*bonum sequitur esse rei*”—the good is a consequence of the existence of a thing.

KEYWORDS: good, being, thing, existence, metaphysics, Thomas Aquinas.