

PERMANENCE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: ST. THOMAS AND HIS MODERN COMMENTATORS

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RECENT ARTICLES by John G. Milhaven and John F. Dedek have challenged the usual interpretation of St. Thomas' moral theology with respect to moral absolutes, that is, that he unqualifiedly supported the existence of certain exceptionless moral prohibitions. According to Milhaven and Dedek, Thomas' position on God's power to grant dispensations from the Decalogue amounts to saying that the only actions in relation to moral objects other than God that are universally prohibited are actions already described in moral, evaluative terms.¹

In my judgment, the conclusion reached by Milhaven and Dedek is inaccurate; the interpretation rests on a number of confusions, and apparently on simply ignoring a number of key Thomist texts. In this article I propose to establish these points and to clarify Thomas' thought on moral absolutes. I shall first present briefly the problem raised by Thomas' texts on the question of dispensations, then present in more detail the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation, and finally criticize that interpretation and explain what I think is Thomas' position.

MAIN TEXTS OF THOMAS

Thomas gave two answers to the question whether God can grant dispensations from the Decalogue. The first was simpler: God can grant dispensations from precepts of the Decalogue's second table (the last seven precepts) but not from those of the first table (the first three precepts). Because man's moral goodness ultimately depends on his order toward God, and the goodness of his order toward other men depends on that first order, it follows that God can (miraculously) preserve man's order toward God even if man's order toward other men be removed. God can, therefore, dispense men from precepts of the Decalogue's second table, since these precepts order men only toward one another. But God cannot dispense men from precepts of the first table, since these precepts order men directly toward God.²

¹ John G. Milhaven, "Moral Absolutes in Thomas Aquinas," in *Absolutes in Moral Theology?* ed. Charles Curran (Washington: Corpus, 1968) 154-85; reproduced in John G. Milhaven, *Toward a New Catholic Morality* (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 136-67, 228-36; John F. Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas," *Thomist* 43 (1979) 385-413.

² *In 1 Sent.*, d. 47, q. 1, a. 4.

This answer Thomas gave in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Book I³ and Book IV,⁴ and in the disputed questions *De malo*.⁵ In each of these texts, the formal question of the article was on something other than dispensations from the Decalogue. The question of dispensations usually arose because of difficulties created by events in the Old Testament. For example, God commanded Abraham to kill his innocent son Isaac, Osee to "take to [himself] a woman of fornication," and the Jews to despoil the Egyptians. To such difficulties Thomas sometimes responded simply that God can grant dispensations from the precepts of the Decalogue's second table.

Thomas' second answer to the question of dispensations was that God cannot dispense anyone from any of the Decalogue's precepts, including those of the second table. He gave this answer both in the early *Commentary on the Sentences*, Book 3, and in the later *Summa theologiae*, *prima secundae*. These were the only places where Thomas raised the question of dispensations as the formal title of the article.

Here is his argument in the *Commentary on the Sentences*. The lawgiver produces a law as a measure for the acts of his subjects, directing them to the constitution and preservation of rectitude. If a law falls short of the intention of the lawgiver, then a subject may go beyond (*praeterire*) the published law, to follow what is in fact the lawgiver's intention. (Aristotle's virtue of *epikeia*, Thomas said, is precisely the virtue perfective of such acts.) But if any precepts perfectly express the lawgiver's intention, no dispensation is possible. Now the precepts of the Decalogue do just that, expressing God's intentions; hence no dispensation is possible.⁶

An objection cited God's commands to the Jews to despoil the Egyptians, and to Osee to take to himself a woman of fornication. Since God's commands are never unjust, it seems that God can dispense someone from precepts of the Decalogue. In reply, Thomas distinguished: the precept or force of the precept is one thing, and the conditions required for an act to be against that precept are another. The precept "Thou shalt not steal" is absolute, but to steal is to take what is another's, and the condition of a thing's being owned by another can change. Ownership can certainly be changed by God, since He owns all things, in the deepest sense. Hence when the Jews despoiled the Egyptians, since they did so on God's command, they merely took what was theirs.⁷

Likewise, a man fornicates only by sexually uniting with a woman who is not his wife, who is not "his own." But the condition of a woman's not being "his own" can change: either by God (the author of marriage) or by

³ Ibid.

⁴ *In 4 Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 2.

⁵ *De malo*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 17.

⁶ *In 3 Sent.*, d. 37, a. 4.

⁷ *In 3 Sent.*, d. 37, a. 4, ad 3.

nature (through death of a spouse), though not by man (since he is not the author of that institution). Hence God did not grant a dispensation to Osee, but changed a condition of the act—removing the condition of the woman's not being his own, "non suam"—so that the act was not fornication and not against the Decalogue.⁸

As mentioned, Thomas took the same position in the *Summa theologiae* (1-2, q. 100, a. 8), with his arguments there also basically the same. But his response concerning Abraham (ad 3) showed interesting developments. In the *Summa theologiae* he said that it is God, the Lord of life and death, who inflicts the punishment of death for the sin of the first parent upon both just and unjust men. And if a man is carrying out this sentence by divine authority, then he is no more a murderer than is God. Thus, it seems, as with Osee and the Jews in Egypt, Abraham did not receive a dispensation, but a condition of his act was changed so that his act was no longer the act prohibited by the Decalogue.⁹

Thus in some places Thomas taught that God can grant dispensations from the precepts of the second table, but not from those of the first; and in other places he insisted that, though it seems God granted such dispensations, as with Abraham and Isaac, in reality God did not and, from the natures of things, He could not. Note that Thomas gave both these apparently conflicting answers within the same work, the *Commentary on the Sentences*. In fact, in that same work he appears to have changed his mind on this not once but twice: in Book 1 he affirms dispensations (d. 47, a. 4), in Book 3 he denies them (d. 37, a. 4), and in Book 4 he affirms them again (d. 33, a. 4).¹⁰

It is true that Thomas changed his mind, or substantially developed his position, on some significant questions during his career, a career that spanned some twenty to twenty-five years. But he would scarcely have changed his position within the same work, and it is still less likely that he would change his position twice within the same work. This fact suggests that the two answers are compatible, that is, conflicting only verbally.

At any rate, the interpreter of Thomas must ask the following questions. Given the two answers—God can grant dispensations from the second table; God cannot—are these two contradictory? And if so, why does Thomas change his mind so frequently, sometimes even within the same work? If the answers are not contradictory, how are they compati-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3.

¹⁰ Similarly, in one place in the *De malo* (q. 3, a. 1, ad 17) Thomas describes Osee's act as fornication, permitted because of a dispensation from God, while at another place in the *De malo* (q. 15, a. 1, ad 8) he describes Osee's act as not fornication at all, but an act essentially changed by God's command.

ble, what underlying position harmonizes the two verbally conflicting answers?

INTERPRETATION OF MILHAVEN AND DEDEK

Both the seriousness and the difficulty of the questions mentioned above are shown by the articles of Milhaven and Dedek. Since Milhaven's is the more detailed treatment, I shall follow his article and note the differences in Dedek's arguments as I move along.

Opening his essay with a brief discussion of the current debate on absolute moral norms, Milhaven locates the area of disagreement in the controversy at the traditional proposition that the end never justifies the means. This principle, he explains, includes two essential meanings: (1) a good end can never justify the use of immoral means, and (2) "there are certain acts (specifiable by their effect) which, if used as means, are always immoral."¹¹ It is only the second of these meanings, and Thomas' position on it, that Milhaven wants to discuss in his article.¹²

He first tells us that Thomas does maintain the existence of negative moral absolutes: "certain actions, identifiable by their physical effects [sc., ontological effects as opposed to moral effects] are never to be used as means."¹³ Yet he then says there is common ground for "dialogue," because Thomas also brings into the picture the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the fact that God could command Abraham to kill the innocent Isaac, Osee to have sexual intercourse with a prostitute, and the Jews to despoil the Egyptians.¹⁴ Yet the problem still remains: "How is it possible for God to authorize what otherwise would be absolutely wrong for a man to do?"¹⁵

In answering this last question, Milhaven takes as normative (and perhaps as meaning more than they intend to say) the text from the first book of the *Commentary on the Sentences* (d. 47, a. 4) and a text from the *De malo* (q. 3, a. 1, ad 17). In both passages Thomas says that God can grant dispensations from the second table but not from the first. Milhaven says: "Both passages come to the same principle. God can do what he wants with men and human relations as long as he is still relating them positively to himself as their final end. . . ." ¹⁶ Thus, according to Milhaven, Thomas' explanation of why God can authorize what otherwise would be absolutely wrong for a man to do is simply that God is bound only to direct creatures to Himself; He is not bound by any relation of men to one another. Thomas' view is "uncomplicated and, in several respects, close to that of contemporary Christian ethicists. Both they and Thomas find in the God of revelation a free Lord who can bypass

¹¹ Milhaven, "Moral Absolutes" 158.

¹² Ibid. 155.

¹³ Ibid. 158.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. 163.

any moral order among men and any human good and can authorize any means for man to take on his way to God."¹⁷

He adds that for Thomas the authorization of actions bypassing the normal moral order among men must be exceptional and miraculous, and that in this view Thomas differs from "contemporary Christian ethicists." But it is precisely on this point that Milhaven believes there could be some fruitful dialogue: "For twentieth-century theologians like Brunner and Thielicke, on the other hand, God has worked the miracle for all men through Jesus Christ and the authorization Thomas spoke of is, for them, just one aspect of the freedom every Christian has."¹⁸

Milhaven then deals with those passages in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and in the *Summa theologiae* where Thomas denies that even God can grant dispensations from any of the Decalogue's precepts. His method here is to argue that Thomas interprets the Decalogue's precepts so loosely as to prohibit only actions already described in moral, evaluative terms. He lists the immutable principles that Thomas cites in discussions about dispensations,¹⁹ such as "What is undue should be done to no one,"²⁰ "No man should be killed unjustly,"²¹ "It is always just to keep the mean,"²² to support his point: as if to say, "Do not what is immoral." According to Milhaven, the negative absolutes Thomas does hold have no teeth in them.

Dedek's article in the *Thomist* reaches the same conclusion. In a previous article in *Theological Studies* he had argued that for Thomas' immediate predecessors the only acts that God cannot allow by dispensation are acts already described in moral terms.²³ His article in the *Thomist* centers on the meaning of the expression "*secundum se* evil." He argues there that (1) all of Thomas' immediate predecessors understood the term in a "formal," not material, sense; and (2) there is no evidence in any of Thomas' texts that he understood this term in any other way than it was (allegedly) commonly understood in his time. (In this article I abstract from, without conceding, 1, but dispute 2. Hence, if Dedek is right about Thomas' immediate predecessors, then my argument merely shows a development, or at least a departure from previous doctrine, on Thomas' part. At the same time, perhaps my interpretation of Thomas' texts will suggest a more critical reading of some of his predecessors' statements. To explore these possibilities, however, would require another paper.) Thus, of St. Albert's position Dedek writes: "In

¹⁷ Ibid. 164.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ From *ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 8c.

²¹ From *ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3.

²² From *In 3 Sent.*, d. 37, a. 4, ad 3.

²³ J. Dedek, "Moral Absolutes in the Predecessors of St. Thomas," *TS* 38 (1977) 654-80.

other words, acts that are *secundum se* evil, that God can never command or allow by dispensation, are acts which are sinful by definition. . . . But the material acts themselves are not *secundum se* evil."²⁴ Later in his article Dedek attributes the same doctrine to Thomas.²⁵ In other words, the precepts of the Decalogue's second table are irrevocable only if understood in a "formal" or tautological sense—prohibiting "acts which are sinful by definition."

Milhaven finds his thesis confirmed when he turns to Thomas' treatment of particular difficulties about events in the Old Testament. He looks at the six passages where Thomas justifies God's command to Abraham to kill Isaac, all of them referring to God's dominion over life and death or to the fact that death is a just punishment for original sin.²⁶ These approaches " . . . all prove that God can dispose of man's life without restriction as a means to carry out his good purposes."²⁷

Milhaven concludes the same for God's authority over property and His authority over human generation: God may dispose of these as He wills, and, it is implied, He may authorize man to do so also, as long as He directs these acts to Himself as an end.

Milhaven does not miss the implication of this view. On this interpretation the basis for any moral absolutes, any moral rules whatsoever, concerning relations among men depends not on the natures of things but on God's free decision to limit the amount of authority possessed by man. Certain actions are wrong not because they are intrinsically unfitting but because they surpass the amount of authority God has freely chosen to share with man.²⁸ Milhaven argues that only this principle explains why Thomas condemns the killing of any man by private persons but allows the killing of criminals by the state.²⁹ He questions whether in Thomas' mind God could ever authorize such acts as usury or contraception, but he suggests that Thomas' principles logically lead to that position.³⁰ His general conclusion is that Thomas and twentieth-century Protestant writers differ not on whether some act is intrinsically and always wrong, but simply on how far God has shared His authority with man.³¹ Finally, he suggests that Thomas was not aware of the degree to which God has in fact shared His authority with man, that its extent is

²⁴ Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts" 397.

²⁵ Ibid. 408-9.

²⁶ E.g., *ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3; *ST* 1-2, q. 94, a. 5, ad 2.

²⁷ Milhaven, "Moral Absolutes" 171.

²⁸ "Any negative moral absolutes that bind man in this area are grounded simply on God's free refusal to grant authorization for using the particular act as means. He could grant authorization but in his wisdom and love chooses not to do so in the normal course of events" (ibid. 176).

²⁹ Ibid. 175.

³⁰ Ibid. 182.

³¹ Ibid. 183.

much wider than Thomas realized:

Might it not be that what he "forgot" was something he never knew because western man had yet to learn it: the extent of man's fantastic power over nature and human life and the extent of his inescapable moral autonomy? And might not the modern vision of the greater dominion and authority that God has shared with men have led Thomas by his own principles to rethink his conclusions on negative moral absolutes?³²

Dedek's conclusions on Thomas' position are the same. He explains Thomas' two apparently conflicting positions on whether God can dispense anyone from the Decalogue as follows: "One [approach] was to understand the decalogue as forbidding actions in this formal sense, that is as inordinate or unjust."³³ The other approach was, of course, to say that God could dispense men from precepts of the second table but not from those of the first. Again, the only decisive factor is how much authority God has freely chosen to share with man.

ST. THOMAS' POSITION

The substance of Milhaven's and Dedek's arguments to support their interpretation falls into two parts. First, and primarily, both believe that the texts bearing directly on dispensations support their interpretation; second, Milhaven believes the Thomist doctrine on killing—the discussions of capital punishment, killing on "private" authority, etc.—supports his view. My criticism of their interpretation, and my exposition of what I think is Thomas' position, will be divided according to those subjects: (1) the question of dispensations, especially the case of Abraham; (2) Thomas on killing; (3) conclusions.

Dispensations, Especially the Case of Abraham

As we have seen, there is a conceptual problem and a textual fact which any interpreter of Thomas must face. The conceptual problem is that in one place Thomas says God can grant dispensations from precepts of the Decalogue, while in another place he denies that God can do so. The textual fact is that both places occur in the same work, the *Commentary on the Sentences*. This fact tells strongly against what might otherwise be an obvious solution, namely, that Thomas simply changed his mind. If he did not change his mind, it must be that the two positions

³² Ibid. 185. Even if Milhaven's interpretation of Thomas were correct his suggestion here would be extremely questionable. Even if morality were basically a matter of how much authority God has chosen to share with man, the question would remain *how* God communicates to us His decision to share this or that amount of authority. We would need a fairly clear divine communication for this purpose. Does Milhaven mean that the "modern vision," or that of "western man," is in fact a divine abrogation of the Ten Commandments?

³³ J. Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts" 409.

conflict only verbally. On that assumption, there remain only two possibilities. First, he could mean different things by "dispensation" in the two assertions. Second, he could mean different things by "precepts of the second table of the Decalogue," that is, he could be interpreting the precepts of the Decalogue differently in the two assertions.

Milhaven and Dedek embrace the second possibility, without considering the first. They claim that when Thomas denies dispensations, he is interpreting the Decalogue's precepts so loosely that they prohibit only actions already described in moral terms. Presumably, when Thomas teaches that God can grant dispensations from the Decalogue, he then understands the Decalogue in a more literal way, as prohibiting actions describable in nonmoral terms.

At first sight the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation seems to solve the textual problem: Thomas did not really change his mind, he only reinterpreted the meaning of the Decalogue's precepts. Apparently, Milhaven and Dedek are not too interested in what the Decalogue's precepts mean. Their chief interest is whether there are any moral absolutes. And on their interpretation Thomas never really believed in true moral absolutes. But what they overlook is that their interpretation would still have Thomas changing his mind on a question vital to him: what the Decalogue's precepts mean. For Thomas, the Decalogue is immutable divine law, it expresses God's commands for the conduct of mankind. What exactly these precepts say is for him an important theological question.

In other words, the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation is textually unsound. Instead of reducing Thomas' apparent contradiction (twice within the same work) to a merely verbal one, their interpretation simply shifts the contradiction from philosophical to theological grounds. The textual problem mentioned above remains unsolved by their interpretation.

Milhaven rightly expresses the central doctrinal problem for interpreting Thomas on this subject when he asks: "How is it possible for God to authorize what otherwise would be absolutely wrong for a man to do?" But he fails to grasp that the question itself is still extremely ambiguous. As indicated before, Thomas often takes pains to show that in *some* sense it is not the same act for a man to kill his son without divine dispensation and for a man to do so with divine dispensation; or that it is not the same act to have intercourse with a woman who is not one's wife and to have intercourse with a woman who is. God's command made Abraham's act not homicide, and Osee's act not fornication. Thomas argued both in the *Commentary on the Sentences* (Book 3) and in the *Summa theologiae* (1-2, q. 100, a. 8) that God's command changed a condition of the act rather than dispensed from a precept.

Now such explanations, at least initially, could be understood in three different ways. (1) They could be taken to mean simply that God's action

made what was otherwise immoral moral, and that the divine action left intact the essential ontological elements of the act. The claim would be that the same *human act* that would otherwise be immoral now became moral.

But surely this cannot be Thomas' meaning. If it were, he would be forthrightly arguing in a circle. For Thomas' argument in the texts cited is that a change in a condition of an act *causes* it to become moral, where otherwise it would have been immoral.³⁴ But on this first understanding Thomas would at the same time be saying that the change in a condition of the act *consists in* its becoming moral. That is, for Thomas an ontological change in the act accounts for its moral change. To say that the only essential change in the act is its new moral evaluation is to make the argument a nonargument, a mere begging of the question.

2) One might grant that some ontological change accounts for the change in moral evaluation, but claim that a sufficient ontological change would be God's ordering the human act to Himself as a final goal.³⁵ That is, the object of will would be exactly the same as in an act otherwise immoral, but still the act would be ontologically changed by God's ordination of it. This seems to be the interpretation of Milhaven and Dedek.

But this cannot be Thomas' meaning either. His whole point in arguing that a condition of the act must be changed for its moral evaluation to change is that something intrinsic to the human act must change for it to become *referable* to God as a final goal. Otherwise, again, Thomas' argument becomes a tautology. Instead of saying that a change in the human act accounts for its new moral character, he would simply be saying that God's ordaining it to a final end has as a *consequence* an intrinsic change in the human act.

In sum: the problem is about the *source* of the change in the act's moral character. Is this source an intrinsic, ontological character of the human act? Or is it only God's free choice, even if His free choice orders the act to Himself as a final goal and has a consequent ontological effect in the act? Thomas' argument is precisely that some new condition or element *of the act* accounts for its moral change. This new condition, I shall argue, is a new element in the object of the will. In apparent dispensations some action of God accounts for the ontological change spoken of. But again, this action by God does not simply order the human act to Himself as final goal, leaving the act's object unchanged; it changes, in one way or another, the intrinsic object of the human act. Nor is this

³⁴ See nn. 7 and 41.

³⁵ Obviously, the ontological change accounting for the moral change cannot be merely the *agent's* ordering the act to God as the final goal. This understanding would attribute to Thomas the subjectivist view that a good ulterior intention suffices to make an act good.

point mere quibbling. Upon it hangs the question whether an *exception* was made to rules of the Decalogue: if the object of an act (say of Abraham, Osee, etc.) was changed, then no exception was made, since the act was no longer the act prohibited by the rule.

3) The third way of understanding Thomas' explanations is, I think, the correct one. The question is: How is it possible for God to authorize what otherwise would be absolutely wrong? An identical act is wrong when done without God's command and right when done with it; what is this identical act? It must be the act in the order of nature. Granted there must be some ontological change in the act for its moral evaluation to change, what kind of ontological change is required? It must be a change in the object of the will, i.e., a change precisely in the *human act*. The act of nature is distinct from the human act, though the two are related. The human act is the internal act of will proportioned to some intellectually proposed, external effect, whereas the act of nature is an overt physical behavior.

As Thomas explains, acts can be identical in the order of nature and yet differ in the order of morals. But by the order of morals Thomas does not mean a nonontological, purely evaluative order, or merely the ontological ordering of the act to an ulterior final goal by God, regardless of the anterior, intrinsic constitution of the act. He means the ontological order of the relation of a proposed object to reason and will:

... sexual intercourse is indeed an act commanded by the will, but by means of another potency; and therefore it is only per accidens in the genus of morality. Hence they can be considered in two ways: either according to the genus of nature, and then matrimonial sexual intercourse and fornication do not differ in species, and their natural effects are the same in species; or they can be considered as they relate to the genus of morality, and then their effects differ in species, as, to merit or to demerit. . . .³⁶

The thing to note is that acts identical in relation to one potency can differ in relation to the will (or in relation to reason; since he is actually speaking of the act's relation to reason *and* will, the formulas come down to the same).³⁷ Hence for the act's moral evaluation to differ, there must be some differences in what the will wills. Acts which are the same, as acts of nature, can differ in the order of morality if and only if there is some difference in what the will wills.

Two examples: (1) Compared to the procreative potency, the acts of marital intercourse and fornication are the same in species. But compared

³⁶ *In 2 Sent.*, d. 40, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4; cf., e.g., *In 4 Sent.*, d. 16, q. 3, a. 1, sol. 2, ad 2; *ST* 1-2, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3.

³⁷ On this topic see Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Louvain: Abbaye du Mont César, 1948-54) 2, 460-65; 4/2, 489-517.

to the will (or to reason and will), they differ precisely because conditions or elements of the essential object of will differ between them. (2) An act of murder and an act of killing in self-defense may be the same in species so far as the act of nature is concerned; but they would differ in the order of morality, because the acts are not related to the will (or reason and will) in the same way; for the will does not bear on the same object in the two cases. In murder, the will aims at the death of an innocent person; in a moral killing in self-defense, the will aims at stopping the attack, the assailant's death being an effect of that which is directly willed.³⁸

The distinction lies neither in the purely evaluative order nor merely in God's extrinsic ordering of the act.³⁹ The distinction is between the act ontologically considered in relation to one potency, and the act ontologically considered in relation to will and reason. Hence for Thomas "fornication" does not mean *immoral* sexual intercourse with someone who is not one's spouse; it means the deliberate choosing or willing to have intercourse with someone who is not one's spouse.⁴⁰

If this interpretation is substantially correct, then we can begin to see why in discussing God's command to Abraham, the test case in these questions, Thomas insists that Abraham was carrying out the sentence of God as Judge. The discussion of this question in the *Summa theologiae*

³⁸ ST 2-2, q. 64, a. 7.

³⁹ Note also that both Milhaven and Dedek confuse the question further by equating the words "justly" with "morally," and "unjustly" with "immorally." For Thomas, to say that not every killing is immoral but only "unjust" killing is not tautological. For him, justice is primarily an external relation in the possession or distribution of goods, a type of simple equality as in commutative justice, or a type of proportional equality as in distributive justice. It is true that justice ought to be pursued; but it ought to be pursued just as human life, knowledge, the procreative good, and friendship ought to be pursued. In sum, justice is an ontological good which is perfective of the community of rational creatures; whence it ought to be pursued and its contrary avoided. "Just" is not as such an evaluative term, just as "human life," "knowledge about God," or "the bearing and raising of children" are not as such evaluative terms. Thomas' ethics is based on man's natural inclinations to certain basic, ontological goods. The first practical principles prescribe the pursuit of these ontological goods and prohibit actions against them (see ST 1-2, q. 94, a. 2). "Justice" denotes one such ontological good.

⁴⁰ That is, to *commit* fornication is deliberately to choose or will to have sexual intercourse with someone who is not one's spouse. Obviously, one cannot *choose* the external act of fornication without *committing* the human act of fornication. (The external act is not exactly the same as the act of nature. The former is an act of nature *plus* the other morally relevant external circumstances.) In this sense, certain external acts are *secundum se* evil, i.e., can never be direct objects of choice. See ST 1-2, q. 20, aa. 1-2. The same confusion that Dedek makes about the relation between the ontological order and the moral order also vitiates Franz Scholz's suggestion that Thomas' distinction between the two prepares for the rejection of the notion of intrinsically evil acts ("Durch ethische Grenzsituation aufgeworfene Normenprobleme," *Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift* 123 [1975] 341-55). Thomas' distinction between the human act and the act of nature, when correctly understood, is necessary to preserve the insight about intrinsically evil acts.

is worth reading again:

Similarly also, Abraham, when he consented to kill his son, did not consent to murder, because it was due him to be killed through the command of God, who is Lord of life and death. For it is He who inflicts the penalty of death on all men, just and unjust, for the sin of the first parent; and if a man is the executor of this sentence by divine authority, then he will not be a murderer, just as God will not be.⁴¹

The precise human act of Abraham was this: to carry out the sentence of God's justice; this was the direct object of his will.

May we say, then, that according to Thomas Abraham did not directly intend the death of his child at all? This, I think, is exactly what Thomas is getting at in the text above, and in others like it: Abraham's act was similar to God's act, since he was merely God's executor, and God's intention (had He allowed Abraham to carry out the sentence) was toward the order of justice and not directly toward the death. (I shall later explore in more detail God's intention in this case.) Thomas returns to this point in several places, and the argument is almost always the same: first he justifies God's action; then, since Abraham was carrying out God's command, it follows that Abraham's act was no more tainted than was God's.⁴²

The direct object of Abraham's act here is the justice God intends in this act, even if Abraham does not understand *how* it is just. That is, Abraham does not do anything, or intend anything, other than execute God's intention. Thomas is not trying to justify Abraham's act by the principle of double effect. In a true instance of that principle, the bad effect cannot be *per se* related to the good effect, i.e., the bad effect cannot be a condition for obtaining the good effect.⁴³ Abraham's act does not seem to fall directly under this principle. Rather, Thomas' point is that the executor of a superior's project (intention) has no project of his own distinct from that of the superior. This does not mean that every executor of a superior's project is absolved of responsibility, but that the executor's project is moral if and only if he can be (reasonably) assured of the morality of his superior's project, of which he is a participant.

One might object that in Abraham's case the death of Isaac is a condition for Abraham's executing God's project and therefore Abraham must intend the death directly. But Thomas' argument is that the role of an executor is a special case. Acts we perform "on our own" are composed of act-in-intention and act-in-execution; but where a subject executes the intention of a superior, the whole act is divided between the partners,

⁴¹ *ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3.

⁴² *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 6, ad 4; *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 6, ad 1.

⁴³ See *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 7.

with the result that the executor's intention, precisely as executor, is no different from the manifest intention of the superior.⁴⁴ Hence Abraham's intention is the same as God's: if God does not directly intend death, then neither does Abraham.

For Thomas, then, the act of nature (killing) is such that without God's command, in those circumstances it would be a sin, but with God's command it is right. But God's command changes the species of the human act, and this is to say that the object willed is not the same as it would have been otherwise. The direct object of Abraham's will is precisely the same as God's object in this act; what Abraham directly intends is the justice God intends, even though its nature surpasses his comprehension. These points indicate that Thomas had in mind a clear distinction between the human act and the act of nature, and that it was never a question of the same *human act* being in itself wrong but allowed by God in special circumstances. The first error of the Milhaven/Dedek thesis is to blur the distinction between the act of nature and the human act.

Yet, as suggested above, the analysis of Abraham's act and, analogously, of other cases of apparent dispensations remains incomplete until we consider God's act. What could God intend in the killing of an innocent man? How are God's will and authority related to human goods? It is on this point that the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation is most seriously mistaken. According to it, Thomas' view is that God is free to act in any way with respect to creatures as long as He directs them to Himself, and that He can choose any physical effect as a means to His ends. This authority, when shared with man, is the source of man's authority to violate any human good in certain circumstances. Milhaven explains: "God is free from any negative moral absolutes that would restrict his disposing of human life, property and generation. In these matters, God has authority to *take whatever means contribute to his good purposes*."⁴⁵ Now the means in an act are directly intended. And so on this view both God and men can directly intend the destruction of basic (ontological) human goods. God could do so, and man could also, to the extent that God has shared His dominion over various goods with man.

There are two errors here. First, for Thomas, God does not intend means of any kind, whether good or evil. In one single act God wills His

⁴⁴ Cf. *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 6, ad 3: "The minister of a judge condemning an innocent man, if the sentence contains an inexcusable error, should not obey, else the butchers who killed the martyrs would be excused; if, however, it contains no manifest injustice, he does not sin by executing the sentence, because he has no right to discuss the judgment of his superior; nor is it he who kills the innocent man, but the judge whose minister he is." See also *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 3, ad 1.

⁴⁵ Milhaven, "Moral Absolutes" 174 (emphasis added).

own goodness and wills the goodness of creatures, not as means toward attaining "his own good purposes," but as communications or participations of His goodness, as ordered to Him to attain *their* end.⁴⁶ Second, and more seriously, a key tenet of Thomas' thought is that God does not directly will evil, or, as Maritain put it, God is totally innocent of evil. Thomas' God, after all, is the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. More than that, He is the God who became man and died for our sins, the God of love. He does no evil whatsoever.

In Thomas' thought, we can divide all evil into two kinds, moral and physical. Milhaven and Dedek agree that God does not intend moral evil, and Thomas says that God in no way causes moral evil, not even per accidens. Moral evil is caused by a deficiency in the will of the rational creature, i.e., by the nonconsideration of the moral rule (right reason or divine law).⁴⁷ But central to the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation is the assumption that God can intend physical evils. God's authority to intend physical evils (i.e., ontological evils, deficiencies in beings other than acts of will) is supposedly the source of man's authority to do likewise. But in fact Thomas holds that God does not intend these ontological evils.

For Thomas, physical evil can be either in action or in the agent. The evil of action (and this will apply also to voluntary action, hence moral evil as well as physical) is caused by a defect in the agent, just as the evil in a limp is caused by a defect in the leg, e.g., a crooked bone.⁴⁸ But since in God there is no defect, it follows that He does not cause evil of action.⁴⁹

The evil in the agent, however, that evil which consists in the corruption of things, is in some way caused by God. But, Thomas insists, such evil is caused by God not per se but only per accidens. As fire does not per se intend the nonbeing of water but the production of heat, to which is joined by necessity water's evaporation, so analogously, God per se intends and causes the good of the entire universe and by this fact causes, but only indirectly and per accidens, the evils linked inevitably to the good which He directly causes.⁵⁰

God wills the communication of His goodness in the manner He has chosen; that is, in freely creating, He intends the participated goodness which is the universe. But to be as good as it is, this participated goodness must contain creatures which can corrupt, consequently creatures that

⁴⁶ See SCG 2, 35, at *Ad hoc autem*; also *Super epistolam s. Pauli ad Ephesios*, ch. 1, *ad fin.* See also Anton C. Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Greeks* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ., 1939) *passim*.

⁴⁷ *De malo*, q. 1, a. 3; *ST* 1, q. 49, a. 1, ad 3. On this topic see Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ., 1942); *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Doubleday, 1956) 92-128; *God and the Permission of Evil* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966).

⁴⁸ *De malo*, q. 1, a. 3; *ST* 1, q. 49, a. 1.

⁵⁰ *De malo*, q. 1, a. 3c.

⁴⁹ *ST* 1, q. 49, a. 2c.

sometimes do corrupt.⁵¹ Thus God intends only the goodness communicated; the evil to which such goodness is prey falls outside His intention; caused indirectly, insofar as He causes corruptible beings, but not intended by Him.⁵² "And thus God, by causing in things the good of the order of the universe, as a consequence, and as it were per accidens, causes the corruptions of things; according to 1 Kings 2:6: 'The Lord kills and gives life.' But when it is said in Wis. 1:13 that 'God has not made death,' it means as per se intended."⁵²

This brings us back to Abraham. Given the general principle that God does not directly intend evil, how is this principle verified in the case of Abraham and Isaac? As we have seen, in the *Summa theologiae* (1-2, q. 100, a. 8, ad 3) Thomas explains that God's act would have been (had He allowed Abraham to carry it out) an act of punishment. And earlier in that work, on the same topic, he says: "... all men alike, both guilty and innocent, die the death of nature. Which death of nature is inflicted by the power of God on account of original sin, according to 1 Kings 2:6: 'The Lord kills and gives life.' Consequently, by the command of God death can be inflicted on any man, guilty or innocent, without any injustice whatsoever."⁵³

Abraham's killing Isaac, then, would have been an act of punishment. But for Thomas, even in punishing, God does not intend evil, though the punishment entails an evil. What God directly intends is the order of justice. In the *De malo*, for example, he says:

... it is not necessary that the good which is the cause of evil per accidens, be a deficient good. Now in this way God is the cause of punishment, for in punishing He does not intend the evil of the one who is punished, but He intends to imprint the order of His justice on things, upon which follows the evil of the one who is punished, just as to the form of fire follows the privation of the form of water.⁵⁴

And in the *Summa theologiae* he takes the same position: "Now the order of justice pertains also to the order of the universe, and the order of justice requires that punishment be dealt out to sinners."⁵⁵

It is important to note that the defect in the one punished, the death or whatever, is not related to the order of justice as means to an end. Rather, the death and the order of justice applied to this case are two distinct aspects of the same thing, two sides, as it were, of the same physical effect; just as the production of heat and the privation of water

⁵¹ *ST* 1, q. 49, aa. 1-2.

⁵² *ST* 1, q. 49, a. 2c; cf. *In 2 Sent.*, d. 32, q. 2, a. 1; *SCG* 2, 41; *De malo*, q. 1, a. 5.

⁵³ *ST* 1-2, q. 94, a. 5, ad 2.

⁵⁴ *De malo*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 10.

⁵⁵ *ST* 1, q. 49, a. 2c. Cf. *In 2 Sent.*, d. 37, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2: "The just judge intends to place the order of justice on his subjects. This order cannot be received in the sinner unless he is punished through some defect; and therefore, although by reason of this defect punishment is called evil, the judge does not intend this defect but only the order of justice. . . ."

are distinct aspects of the same effect of fire. And just as fire per se intends only the production of heat, so God intends only the order of justice; just as the privation of water is related per accidens to the causality of fire, so the privation in the one punished is outside God's intention.

Now to put all this together for the case of Abraham. Since all natural death is a punishment for original sin, then God's act would have been (had He allowed Abraham to carry it out) an act of punishment. The direct object of His will would have been an order of justice, a particular communication of His goodness, and the death would have been an effect *praeter intentionem* of that which He willed. Abraham's act was to carry out God's sentence, and the direct object of his will was the justice God intended, though how it was just might have surpassed his comprehension. As with God, so with Abraham, the death was an effect, or a distinct aspect, of that which he directly willed; it was *praeter intentionem*. Neither God's will nor Abraham's aimed directly at the (ontological) evil of death. Hence the case of Abraham is not an exception to the prohibition against killing the innocent. In this case, and in others like it, we have not an exception to the rule, but an instance where God's intervention changed the species of the human act, so that it was no longer the act prohibited by the rule.

Once this is seen, the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation collapses. According to it, Thomas' view is that God's authority over human life and all other creatures means that He may use any physical effect as a means toward His own ends, as long as He directs creatures to Himself as their final end; that He may authorize a man to perform any act as a means toward his final end; and that, as a consequence, moral issues are simply questions about how much authority God has shared with man, not about whether some goods are inviolable.

But Thomas' view is that God intends only good, that God does not intend evil of any kind, though He causes it per accidens. This is to say that God does not directly intend the death of any man or the destruction of any human good. Hence, if God makes a man His executor by a direct command, the direct object of that man's action will not be the destruction of any human good. If man as a human being is called to pursue and respect human goods, which calling is the basis of Thomas' ethics, and if therefore some goods are inviolable, never to be acted against, then whatever divine authority God shares with man will not contradict that call and that fact.

St. Thomas on Killing

Milhaven also presents a second argument to support his interpretation, namely, that Thomas' whole position on killing presupposes it. It is Milhaven's interpretation that Thomas allows capital punishment simply

because God has chosen to share that authority with the state; that he prohibits the state's killing an innocent man, not because killing an innocent man is intrinsically wrong but because it is contrary to the common good; and that he prohibits an individual person's killing a man only because God has not shared that authority with individuals.⁵⁶

To examine these claims in relation to Thomas' texts, I shall try to determine (1) his position on capital punishment and why it is limited to the guilty, and (2) the significance that the different levels of authority—God, state, etc.—have for Thomas.

In the *Summa theologiae* 2-2, q. 64, a. 2, Thomas presents his famous justification for capital punishment. The parts are subordinate to the whole; each single person is compared to the community as a part to the whole; so, just as a man should cut off a diseased member of his body if it endangers the whole body, a community (a state) should kill a man who, because of some sin he has committed, is dangerous to and corruptive of the community.⁵⁷

The immediately apparent fault of that argument by analogy—and it has been pointed out by many—is that whereas the total good of a member of the human body consists in its contribution to the whole, this is not so with a human member of a human society: a human being is good in himself, not just in his contribution to the whole. Thus it may seem from Thomas' argument that he does not recognize the intrinsic worth and inviolability of human life. This appearance gives Milhaven's argument plausibility.

Nevertheless, Thomas himself considers the objection mentioned. To kill a man, the third objection argues, is in itself (*secundum se*) evil and therefore should not be done for the sake of a good end.⁵⁸ Thomas answers that in sinning a man departs from the order of reason, and it is through reason that man is naturally free and exists for himself; so when he departs from reason by sinning, he falls in a way to the level of a beast. Now to kill a man "remaining in his dignity" is in itself evil. But an evil man is worse than a beast (recall *corruptio optimi pessima*); and since it is permissible to kill beasts, it is sometimes permissible to kill evil men. "Hence, although it is evil in itself [*secundum se*] to kill a man remaining in his dignity, yet it can be good to kill a man who has sinned, even as it is good to kill a beast; for an evil man is worse than a beast, and more harmful, as the Philosopher says."⁵⁹ This text is decisive. Thomas' position is that it is intrinsically wrong to kill an innocent man, and thus it would be wrong even for the state to kill an innocent man, no matter what the consequences for the common good. To kill that which has

⁵⁶ Milhaven, "Moral Absolutes" 176.

⁵⁷ *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 2c.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, arg. 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, ad 3.

human dignity is *secundum se* evil.⁶⁰ ("Human dignity" refers here to every human being who has not gravely violated the order towards the common good; thus the judgment is not tautological.)

Even if we do not agree with his position, we can understand more clearly Thomas' logic in comparing the excision of a diseased part of the body with the killing of a criminal. If an evil man is worse than a beast, i.e., if an evil man has in some sense lost human dignity, then his temporal existence is subordinate to the good of the community. The analogy applies, in the sense Thomas uses it in the context, only to evil men.⁶¹ Thomas' position on capital punishment, then, does not contradict the position that innocent human life is inviolable. According to Thomas, even for the state to kill an innocent man is wrong intrinsically, not only because of its consequences for the common good.

True, Thomas does argue that it is wrong for the state to kill an innocent man because it is contrary to the common good (*ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 6). But he does not say this is the only reason why it is wrong. Moreover, this argument should be considered more closely. To say that one must not kill the innocent because to do so is against the common good says something about what the common good is, rather than simply presuppose a clear-cut notion of it and then apply it to this question. The argument might seem open to a utilitarian objection that if the common good is furthered by sacrificing innocent people, then murder becomes licit. But I think part of Thomas' point is that the common good is not something over and above the lives of innocent people (in what we would call a totalitarian sense) but consists precisely in those lives, together with the set of goods attained by their common action. His argument is

⁶⁰ Note that the context makes it clear that Thomas does not, at least here, understand the term "*secundum se* evil" in a merely formal or tautological sense. Otherwise the objection would present no difficulty at all. On capital punishment, see also *SCG* 3, 146, at *Quod vero*; *ST* 2-2, q. 25, a. 6, ad 2.

⁶¹ Another way of trying to justify capital punishment might be to argue that, like God, the human judge also only indirectly wills the death of the one punished, and directly wills only the order of justice. It is true that in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, when discussing God's punishment of sinners, Thomas says that the just judge as such directly intends only the order of justice; but he says this only in the context of discussing God's intention; he never, to my knowledge, applies this reasoning explicitly to the human judge. Moreover, the language used in the question on the virtue of vindication (*ST* 2-2, q. 108, a. 1c) seems to indicate that in Thomas' opinion the human judge directly intends death as a means. It may be that the structure of the divine intention as such, rather than of the just judge, precludes God's intending the privation (e.g., death) in the one punished. God does not intend means toward ends at all. As Thomas explains, God does not will *x* because of *y*, *x* as a means to *y*, but He simply wills that *x* be the cause of *y* (cf. *ST* 1, q. 19, a. 5c). Therefore God can will *x* and *y* only as communications or participations of His goodness, and hence *x* and *y* can only be positive realities, not privations (such as destructions of a good).

not that killing innocent people is not a particularly apt means for obtaining the common good, but that the life of an innocent person is "preservative and promotive of the common good."⁶² That is, an attack on innocent human life is (perhaps among other things) directly an attack on the common good. Hence again, innocent human life is valuable intrinsically, not simply as a means toward something else called the "common good."

Nor does the fact of different levels of authority contradict this position. Granted there are different levels of authority—God, the civil ruler, the individual—this does not mean that the whole of morality consists in questions of authority, as Milhaven reduces Thomas' ethics to saying. According to Thomas, the different levels of authority explain, among other things, why (1) only the state, and not an individual, can put a criminal to death, and (2) only God, and not the state or an individual (on his own authority), can punish for original sin. Milhaven's mistake is to think that affirmation 1 proves that possession of authority legitimizes direct violation of basic human goods (he does not seriously consider God's punishment for original sin). Obviously, Milhaven would be right only if the state's action violated a basic human good to begin with; and we have seen that Thomas does not think so. So, let us see why Thomas does hold (1) and (2).

If it be granted that an evil man is worse than a beast, still it does not follow that an individual can licitly kill an evil man, though he can licitly kill beasts. Thomas' position is that a man loses a degree of personal dignity (or his right to life) only by a grave offense against the common good. It follows that only he who has charge of the common good can judge regarding such an offense.⁶³ Legitimate (direct) killing, for Thomas, must always have the character of punishment for grave violation of the order toward a common good (referred to as "the order of reason" in *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3). Only he who has charge of the community may punish for violations against it. Hence, besides God, only the state can put a criminal to death.

The natural goals of the different authorities explain why only God, and not also the state or individuals, can punish for original sin. Discussing Abraham's act in the *De potentia*, Thomas says: "Now, just as the prince of the city has the disposal of men with respect to life and death, and other things which pertain to the goal of his regime, which is justice, so also God has all things at His disposal to direct them to the goal of His government, which is His goodness."⁶⁴ God is in charge of the common good of the whole universe, both temporal and eternal, but the civil ruler has charge only of the temporal common good. Since the stain of original

⁶² *ST* 2-2, q. 64, a. 6c.

⁶³ *ST* 1-2, q. 64, a. 2c.

⁶⁴ *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 6, ad 4.

sin relates to the eternal, and not directly to the temporal, it follows that the civil ruler may not punish for original sin. The temporal common good is the state's goal; it may punish only for violations thereof.

Thus the different levels and extents of authority do not result from arbitrary assignments on God's part. They correspond to the natural goals of the various societies—universe, state, etc. According to Thomas, *none* of those authorities extends so far as to allow the direct violation of innocent human life or, for that matter, of any basic human good.

Conclusions

It remains that, according to Thomas, some acts are intrinsically wrong, some goods are inviolable; and these are the acts condemned, the goods specified, in the Ten Commandments. That is why whenever he specifically addresses the topic whether God can grant dispensations from the Decalogue as the main question of an article, he teaches that God cannot dispense anyone from any of the Decalogue's precepts.

Why, then, does Thomas in one place say that God can grant dispensations from the second table and in another place say that He cannot? The reason is that from different points of view both can be said. First, for God to direct a man immediately to an action by an *immediate* command, whereas the man is naturally directed mediately, i.e., by the natural light of his reason, is a miraculous event. The action is beyond, though not against, the order of nature. Second, if the act of nature would normally be wrong in those circumstances, but now, the man being God's executor, the act takes on a different character, then, focusing on the *act of nature*, it can be said that God granted a dispensation, in a broad sense of the phrase. The same act of nature would otherwise be wrong but is now right because of the divine command.

Yet, speaking more strictly, no dispensation was granted. For no *human act* that is intrinsically wrong was permitted. Rather, with the divine command the species of the human act was changed, just as, analogously, the direct killing of an innocent man, which is murder, is not permitted when one permits killing in self-defense. Since moral questions are primarily about human acts (without ignoring, obviously, acts of nature), this last answer must have been Thomas' preferred explanation; this is the position Thomas took whenever he had time to hammer out its supporting arguments.

To say that the Decalogue is immutable and irrevocable with respect to human acts is not to make the Decalogue applicable only to internal intentions. It is simply to say, in the words of Milhaven's description of the affirmative position on moral absolutes, that "1) A good end can never justify the use of immoral means, and 2) there are certain acts (specifiable by their effect) which, if used as means, are always immo-

ral."⁶⁵ In other words, certain external effects cannot be chosen as means or ends.⁶⁶

Though I am not principally concerned in this article with the *foundations* of Thomas' position, it will be useful to note briefly his philosophical distinction between an immutable precept (one from which God cannot dispense) and a mutable one. The immutable precepts are those which express man's obligation to pursue the objects of his natural inclinations (the essential human perfections) and to avoid acting against those objects. These are the primary precepts or first principles of practical, moral reason. These objects of man's natural inclinations, then, are inviolable goods, inviolable in the sense that man must never act directly against them or unduly neglect them. Among them are human life itself (hence the precept I have been discussing), the procreation and education of children, the knowledge of the truth about God, and life in society (which includes justice).⁶⁷ Consequently, what I have said about Thomas' position on human life applies analogously to his position on these other goods.

The secondary precepts can change in a few instances. These are precepts which specify different ways or means of attaining the goods of the primary precepts. They refer to institutions or practices which usually promote the basic human goods, that is, the objects of man's natural inclinations, the goods of the primary precepts. These secondary precepts can change, but they change without prejudice to the immutability of the primary precepts, since it is only because of primary precepts that a secondary precept changes.⁶⁸

Note that the exceptionless primary precepts prescribe pursuit of specific, real human goods and prohibit any actions directly against those

⁶⁵ Milhaven, "Moral Absolutes" 154.

⁶⁶ Here might be the best place to note the ambiguity in Dedek's brief reporting of the magisterium's position in his article on Thomas' thought on dispensations. He writes: "The magisterium assumes that there are certain physical actions which are morally evil *ex objecto*, that is, so morally disordered in themselves that they never can be justified in any circumstances or for any purposes" ("Intrinsically Evil Acts" 385). His article then goes on to question whether Thomas' position is in agreement with that of the magisterium. From Dedek's characterization of it, it is not clear whether the magisterium's position is that certain physical actions, as opposed to human acts, can never be performed, or that certain physical effects can never be directly willed. The latter, and not the former, is the magisterium's position. To use current language, there are certain premoral evils that must never be chosen as means or as ends, i.e., the choice of certain premoral evils (such as death of innocent persons, prevention of conception, etc.), whether as means or as ends, is always morally evil. This is the magisterium's teaching, and with it Thomas' ethical writings agree.

⁶⁷ *ST* 1-2, q. 94, a. 2. See also Germain Grisez, "The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the *Summa theologiae*, Pt. I-II, q. 94, Article 2," *Natural Law Forum* 10 (1965) 168-201. Most of the article has been reprinted in Anthony Kenny, ed., *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969).

⁶⁸ See *ST* 1-2, q. 94, aa. 4 & 5; compare q. 100, a. 8c.

goods. Any interpretation making Thomas' exceptionless primary precepts merely formal or tautological prohibitions can only come from ignoring significant texts in Thomas (such as *ST* 1-2, q. 94, especially a. 2, as well as *ST* 1-2, q. 18). Hence the Milhaven/Dedek interpretation fits neither Thomas' thought on dispensations nor his basic treatise on the natural law.

Thomas' insistence on the inviolability of certain earthly realities, in addition to the eternal, fits his general concern to emphasize the efficacy and dignity of creatures. Arguing against certain Muslim thinkers who tended to belittle God's creatures in order better to exalt God, Thomas said: "But God is the most perfect agent. Therefore things created by Him obtain perfection from Him. So, to detract from the perfection of creatures is to detract from the perfection of divine power."⁶⁹ What he says here on efficient causality applies also to final causality and to the moral order. This concern explains why Thomas refused in his ethics to make of this world nothing but a mere occasion for the will's essential orientation beyond it, to union with God.

Thomas agrees that orientation to the ultimate end is the ultimate rule for the morality of human acts. The ultimate end is beatitude, and complete beatitude is found only in direct union with God Himself. But he denies that it follows that every created object is only a pure means, a mere steppingstone, to this ultimate end, and hence always dispensable in its moral worth. Complete beatitude comprehends or includes the more proximate goods that are the objects of man's natural inclinations,⁷⁰ such objects as human life, the procreative good, and human society. The objects of man's natural inclinations are participations in man's ultimate end;⁷¹ they are certain beginnings of beatitude,⁷² complete beatitude being found only in God, who is Goodness Itself. As a result, these particular, finite objects can and should be pursued as goods in themselves, neither as pure means nor as, any of them, being man's complete beatitude. As a further result, these objects must never be directly acted against.

To misinterpret Thomas on the question of moral absolutes in relation to objects other than God is not only to misread him on a single question; it is to miss one of the main accomplishments of his ethics. By insisting that moral absolutes refer not only to God but also to God's creatures, Thomas links, without confusing, the eternal with the temporal.

⁶⁹ *SCG* 3, 69, tr. Vernon Bourke in *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa contra gentiles, Bk. III, Pt. I* (New York: Doubleday, 1956) 230. This concern influences Thomas' doctrines of secondary causality and of the agent intellect. Cf. my "St. Thomas and Avicenna on the Agent Intellect," *Thomist* 45 (1981) 41-61.

⁷⁰ *ST* 1-2, q. 10, a. 1; compare *De ver.*, q. 22, a. 5c.

⁷¹ *ST* 1-2, q. 3, a. 2, ad 4; q. 5, a. 3, ad 2.

⁷² *ST* 1-2, q. 69, a. 2.