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DOES GOD INTEND DEATH?

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Abstract. In this paper, I argue that God never intends a human being's death. The core argument is essentially Thomistic. God wills only the good; and human life is always a good, and its privation always an evil. Thus, St. Thomas holds that "God does not will death as per se intended," and he gives an account of the act of divine punishment that conforms to this claim. However, some further claims of St. Thomas are in tension with this position – particularly his claims as regards the permissibility of intentional killing by agents of the state. I argue that alternative conclusions on these matters are in fact more harmonious with St. Thomas's claims about God and God's willing than are his own.

Keywords: God, death, Thomas Aquinas, permissibility of killing.

The claim that God occasionally kills – intentionally kills – human beings is one which finds widespread agreement among Christians and apparently widespread confirmation in sacred scripture, particularly in the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament. That claim is then taken by many Christians to be morally important in the following way: God has authority to kill and thus may delegate that authority, whether in special cases, as in the case of Abraham; or more generally, as to rulers of polities. Thus, the view that God kills has been understood to underpin the view that humans may, whether in defense of the realm, as in military killing, or in punishment for evils, as in capital punishment.

The view that God can intentionally kill has other possible ramifications, of which I will mention three. First, St. Augustine argued that is was never morally permissible to lie;[1] but contemporary thinkers have argued that since Augustine accepted the delegated authority view of killing, he should also accept a delegated authority view of lying, so that, while lying might be impermissible for private persons, it might nevertheless be permissible for agents of the state.[2] So the view

[1] Augustine wrote two influential treatises on lying: *De Mendacio* (On Lying), available at newadvent.org/fathers/1312.htm and *Contra Mendacium* (Against Lying), available at newadvent.org/fathers/1313.htm.

[2] David Decosimo, *Just Lies: Finding Augustine's Ethics of Public Lying in His Treatments of Lying and Killing*, "Journal of Religious Ethics" (28) 2011, p. 661–697.

that God kills promises, or threatens, to open up further prerogatives for those with authority generally.

Second, the view that God authorizes killing has been used as a premise for a particular kind of divine command theory of ethics. Killing is clearly most often wrong; yet apparently God's *willing* that Abraham should kill Isaac, or that the Israelites should kill the Canaanites is sufficient for it to be right that they should do so. Accordingly, one might think that God's will is the right-maker here, and thus adopt a form of ethical voluntarism.[3]

Third, and relatedly, the view that God can authorize killing, and thus order an otherwise disordered act to Himself has been used by contemporary moral theologians to suggest that there are no acts that in themselves cannot be so ordered. Moreover, one might wonder why God must be the orderer of an act to Himself, and conclude that *any* act might be excused, permissible, or even laudatory were it ordered *by the agent* to God. In this way, one strand of proportionalist thought in Catholic moral theology attempted to justify the denial of moral absolutes.[4]

All these arguments and views take their starting point from the unquestioned assumption that God can and does intentionally kill human beings. If this assumption is false, then the inference that God can delegate authority to intentionally kill is likewise false, and the plausibility of each of these suggestions suffers; so, to draw attention to a concrete practical case, does the apparent legitimacy, for Christians, of intentional killing in warfare or the legitimacy of capital punishment.

So why should we think that God does not intentionally kill? In this paper, I'll give a relatively straightforward argument for this claim; I'll then raise and address a couple of objections; then I'll draw some of the obvious practical conclusions. The core argument is essentially Thomistic, and while some of the further conclusions I draw are notably at odds with St. Thomas's views – particularly as regards the permissibility of intentional killing by agents of the state – I believe that my conclusions on these matters are in fact more harmonious with St. Thomas's claims about God and God's willing than are his own.

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[3] See Philip Quinn, *The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics*, "Philosophical Perspectives" (6) 1992, p. 493–513.

[4] Variants of this view are to be found in John G. Millhaven, *Moral Absolutes in Thomas Aquinas*, [in:] Charles Curren (ed.), *Absolutes in Moral Theology*, Corpus, Washington, D.C. 1968, p. 154–185; and John Dedek, *Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas*, "Thomist" (43) 1979, p. 385–413.

Life as a Basic Human Good

The starting point of my argument is a claim about human life: life is a basic – intrinsic – good of human beings, an irreducible aspect of human well-being and flourishing. I take this to be Thomas Aquinas's position; it has been explicated and defended at greater length by contemporary natural law theorists.[5] This claim is denied by many who believe that life is only an instrumental good, good so long as it serves our purposes, perhaps, but of no value when our ability to pursue other goods runs out. But this view serves to alienate us from an aspect of ourselves, for we *are* living, organic beings: we are not spiritual beings who possess our biological lives. Willingness to see our biological existence as merely of instrumental value is thus a willingness to see ourselves as having only such instrumental value. This might not be irrational, but it strongly goes contrary to our sense of ourselves as ends-in-ourselves, as beings of some sort of fundamental worth.[6]

Moreover, the claim that life is a basic and intrinsic good of human persons finds evidence in our experience of agency: we act so as to save and protect our lives and the lives of others, not simply for the sake of some further end, but simply because in so acting human life is preserved, protected, promoted. If we can so act, that is because we apprehend human life as giving us a basic reason for action. Since all action is performed for the sake of the good, this implies that we recognize human life as a basic good.

What relationship to basic human goods ought we to adopt in our moral lives? With St. Thomas I hold that that all action is performed *sub specie boni*, under the "guise of the good," as it is now said.[7] But because it is precisely insofar as a possibility is good that it is desirable, it is unreasonable ever to act contrary to a basic good – to deliberately damage or destroy an instance of it – save for the sake of some greater good. But since I do not think the category of "greater good" has application where basic goods are concerned – instances of basic goods such as life, knowledge, or friendship are incommensurable with one another – I do not think that there is ever a greater good for the sake of which one could reasonably

[5] See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 94, a.2. For the discussion of this text in relation to the claim that human life is a basic good, see Joseph M. Boyle, *Sanctity of Life and Suicide: Tensions and Developments within Common Morality*, [in:] Baruch A. Brody (ed.), *Suicide and Euthanasia*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1989, p. 221–250.

[6] See Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen, *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life* 2nd ed., Witherspoon Institute, Princeton, NJ 2011; and Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2008.

[7] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.27. Joseph Raz has defended against contemporary objections the "guise of the good" thesis: *On the Guise of the Good*, [in:] S. Tennenbaum (ed.), *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 111–137.

destroy an instance of a basic good. So a critical moral norm is: never, in acting, intentionally seek to damage or destroy an instance of a basic human good.

What would it mean to violate this? I think it would involve seeking, for the sake of some other good mistakenly appraised as "greater", a privation of a basic good. One would seek the privation not for its own sake – that could hardly be rational – but for the sake of some further benefit the privation would bring about.[8]

Now death is *the* privation of life; if life is a basic human good, and death that good's privation, then to intentionally seek that privation in oneself or another is always wrong. Seeking that privation for the sake of a good is not unintelligible: I get the inheritance if Uncle John is deprived of his life; I relieve my suffering if I deprive myself of my life. But if goods are incommensurable, then such actions cannot be justified and are, insofar as they involve action directed, just themselves, *against* the only thing that gives meaning to action, namely, good, they are practically unreasonable. (Such unreasonableness is not present in destroying or damaging a merely instrumental good for the sake of a basic good.)

So it is always wrong, I believe, to intentionally seek the death of a human being, whether oneself or another.

Why should we think that this argument tells us anything, though, about what God does or does not, can or can not, will? Even if it is wrong for human beings, could not God, who is Lord of life and death, intend the death of a human being? I do not think so.

God's will, which is identical with His being, is a will only of good.[9] And that will is efficiacious, albeit in a mysterious and incomprehensible way, in the act of creation, both of the world at large, but specially, of human beings. On a traditional view, held by Jews and Christians, and perhaps some Moslems as well, God creates human beings for their good, out of love for that part of His creation. God has a further purpose in mind, the expression of His glory, but that further purpose does not instrumentalize human creation, for God's glory is achieved by creating beings with whom friendship with God is possible. But friendship requires willing the good of the friend; so both in origin – creation out of love – and in end – friendship for the sake of glory – God must will the good of human beings. This is simply what it is to love and be friends with. Correlatively, God could

[8] See my discussion in Christopher Tollefsen, *Intending Damage to Basic Goods*, "Christian Bioethics" (14) 2008, p. 1–11.

[9] Aquinas makes the first claim in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 19, a. 1; and the second a few articles later, in a. 9 of the same question.

will no evil for a human being, where evil is understood as a privation of a good specific to human nature.

But death is, as we have seen, a privation of such a good; in consequence, it does not seem possible to me that God could ever intend the privation of the good of life for a human being, or the privation of any other basic good, for that matter. And if this is the case, then God never intentionally kills a human being: it is an action incompatible with His nature.

I believe that this is Aquinas's position also: Aquinas quotes the book of Wisdom: "God hath not made death" and goes on to say: "the sense [of this] is that God does not will death as per se intended."[10] Perhaps, though, Aquinas is using "intended" here in a narrow sense, as meaning only "as an end". If so, it might be his view that God can will death for the sake of something else, i.e., as a means. Aquinas seems to suggest this in the immediately following words: "Nevertheless the order of justice belongs to the order of the universe; and this requires that penalty should be dealt out to sinners."[11] "Penalty" here means, it is clear, the penalty of death. So it looks as if God kills as punishment for sin, choosing death as a means to the achievement of justice, and thus intending death in the broad sense that encompasses both ends and means.

However, this overlooks important aspects of what seems to be Aquinas's view of the way in which God dispenses justice. For God does not in fact, as seems plausible for all human agents, choose death as a means to the end of justice in administering capital forms of punishment – indeed, God does not will means separately from his goodness at all. But, more specifically, Aquinas says that "God in inflicting punishment does not intend the evil for those punished but intends to imprint the ordination of his justice on things, just as water's privation of its form results from the presence of fire's form."[12] It is clear that the "evil" of which Aquinas speaks is the evil of death: that is what follows upon the administration of divine justice.

The order of morality is an order of reason, and the sinner is, as it were, out of order through his willful assertion of self beyond the standard set by reason. In administering justice, for Aquinas, God restores that order in a single integrated act, with regard to which the death of the sinner is outside the divine intention, as the removal of water is outside the "intention" of fire. It is thus not the case that

[10] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 49, a. 2: Sed quod dicitur Sap. I, quod *Deus mortem non fecit*, intelligitur quasi per se intentam.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, Richard Regan (trans.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, q. I, a. 3, r. 10.

God intentionally kills in administering punishment, in either a broad or a narrow sense, nor that He orders an otherwise disordered act to Himself, thereby rendering it right.[13]

Aquinas does think that there is a kind of delegation possible here, however, for he holds that Abraham was innocent of intended murder of Isaac by virtue of being made the executor of God's sentence upon Isaac.[14] But this notion of delegation is problematic. On Aquinas's account of the way in which public authority *at* large has been delegated by God to wield the sword, Aquinas is quite clear that such authorities wield the sword intending to kill malefactors for the sake of justice.[15] While it is impermissible for private citizens to kill intentionally – a view that led to Aquinas's formulation of an early version of the doctrine of double effect – the same is not true of those with public authority.

Yet that account of the administration of earthly justice, which has its own difficulties, seems particularly inapt for Aquinas's discussion of Abraham, for there Abraham is carrying out divine justice for original sin as a direct executor of God. If it were necessary for that execution that Abraham *intend* the death of Isaac, then it would seem that God also intended Isaac's death, for in willing Abraham to be his executor, God surely willed whatever it was necessary for Abraham to do in order to carry out his duties.

Here are two possible solutions to this difficulty. First, this delegation need not have been a delegation to intentionally kill, so long as it was not *solely* a delegation of authority. Rather, it could have been a delegation of a kind of power as well: the power to administer justice in a single act of which the death was outside the intention. Abraham would have acted not only as God's executor, but in the way that God acts, in sacrificing Isaac. That delegation of power should be thought of as a kind of miracle, and is surely not available for the larger range of cases of state authorized killing.

Second, one could hold that Abraham did not need to intend the death of Isaac even if he were not empowered to act in a particularly divine way; indeed,

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[13] See Patrick Lee, *Permanence of the Ten Commandments: St. Thomas and His Modern Commentators*, "Theological Studies" (42) 1981, p. 422–443. Lee also notes St. Thomas's words in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Book II, d. 37, q. 3, a. 1, ad. 2: "The 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."

[14] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 1.100, a. 8, ad. 3.

[15] See ibidem, II–II, q. 64, a. 7, where St. Thomas contrasts the killing which a private person may do in self-defense, which must be *praeter intentionem*, with that of those "such as have public authority, who, while intending to kill a man in self-defense, refer this to the public good."

I do not think he *could* have intended Isaac's death. For Abraham believed, without doubt, that Isaac would be the father of many nations, which means he also believed that regardless of what happened on Mt. Horab, Isaac would be around in the coming days. It is impossible to intend what you believe it is impossible to achieve, and Abraham believed it was impossible for God to go back on His promises, and thus that it was impossible for anything permanently privative to happen to Isaac. So regardless of God's intention, Abraham did not intend Isaac's death.

So Aquinas can, and I think does, hold both that God never intentionally kills, as an end or as a means, and he could, and perhaps did, hold that neither did Abraham intend to kill. What of the various other cases in which it appears that human agents have been delegated by God to intentionally kill? In one well-known passage, for example, God's angel commands the Israelites to massacre the Jerichoites. Mark Murphy has recently argued that because God and the Jerichoites do not stand in the same "dikaiological order' – he borrows the notion from Michael Thompson – then God cannot wrong the Jerichoites, and therefore cannot do wrong.[16] But this solution works by making God's relation to the Jerichoites exclusively one of justice, and I concede that it need not have been unjust to kill the Jerichoites. However, if the earlier account of God's willing is correct, God could not have intended their death, even if that death would not have been unjust: it is incompatible with God's love, including His love of human goods.

That argument should exercise a constraining effect on those who accept it in their interpretation of Old Testament texts. Here, then, are two possible solutions that one could take – I'm sure there are more – that are compatible with the argument and with *some* sense of the inerrancy of Scripture.

One possibility is that God in various cases withdraws protection from this or that person or people. There are various reasons one might withdraw protection from someone, and those reasons need not entail intending the harms that would occur in consequence. You might not deserve *my* protection any more, or it might be the case that I cannot afford to provide it any more – anything that might come about as a result need not be intended by me in withdrawing, however. Now God's reasons for action are obscure; we don't have a very good sense of

[16] Mark C. Murphy, *God Beyond Justice*, [in:] Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (eds.), *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 150–167. Thompson's discussion of dikaiological order is in Michael Thompson, *What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle About Justice*, [in:] R. Jay Wallace et. al. (eds.), *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 333–384.

why he might withdraw protection from someone. But He could do it, and it would not be tantamount to intentional killing.[17]

A second possibility, which could overlap in some cases with the first, is that the Israelites misunderstood whatever message they were being given. Not every communication by God to the Israelites *was* understood clearly, and Israelite *reports* of their understanding of what God communicated to them do not need, I think, to be taken to be unerring as to the content of the communication.[18]

It is not really to my purpose here to give a complete account of how one should interpret the Scriptural evidence in favor of the view that God intentionally kills. I will simply note my belief that the passages in question can be dealt with. More crucial here is to return to the various lessons drawn from those passages, to show that they are all mistaken.

First, we should not think that God has delegated authority to human persons to intentionally kill: if God cannot intentionally kill, He cannot delegate the authority to do so humans. And even if He could delegate the power to punish lethally without intentionally taking human life in individual cases, it seems hugely implausible to think that power has been delegated at large to all who hold public authority. On a reasonable view of human action, capital punishment involves the intentional taking of human life; with the delegated authority argument gone, there is little reason for theists and especially Christians to support the practice.

No more can God delegate authority to kill in defense, whether of individual life, or of the state. Accordingly, the use of force in war should be undertaken only in defense, and its lethality should be outside the intention of those fighting, and those commanding. A plausible, and if true, important, consequence of this view is that defense is the *only* legitimate purpose for war.

If God cannot delegate the authority to kill, neither should He be thought to delegate the authority to lie. Those who accept Augustine's (and Aquinas's) absolute prohibition of lying as a matter of personal morality have no good reason to

[17] Withdrawing protection, and its consequences, are structurally similar to the withdrawal of life preserving technology at the end of life, which could be carried out for variety of reasons, and which need not involve an intending of the death which would occur as a result.

[18] Germain Grisez notes that "Sharing in the fallen human condition and living in the early stages of the divine pedagogy which culminates with Jesus, the Israelite conscience was necessarily somewhat immature and cannot be criticized as if it had access to perfect moral truth. Their general error of conscience was sincere, and God's people were not set against human goods in trying to do his will as they understood it." *The Way of the Lord Jesus, Vol. 1, Christian Moral Principles*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, IL 1983, p. 219. In consequence, it would be an error to infer the legitimacy of intentional killing – practiced by the Israelites in many circumstances – from their understanding of what God willed them to do.

reserve its permission to those with public authority, certainly no good reason based on God's delegation of authority over human life. (In fact, the view that God could lie would have seemed scandalous to Augustine and Aquinas, the latter of whom seems to speak for the tradition when he asserts simply that God "cannot lie."[19] My view is that St. Thomas's views on God as liar and God as intentional dealer of death are quite similar: the God who is Life and Truth would act intentionally against neither good.)

The argument of this paper has concerned the divine being, but it is not itself theological, in the sense that it is not based on matters of revelation. Yet it has concluded to a rationally grounded understanding of what God *cannot* will. The most extreme forms of theological voluntarism and divine command ethics are thus false.

Finally, it is simply not the case that God can order an intrinsically disordered human act – such as an act of intentional killing – towards His own goodness thus rendering what is intrinsically impermissible occasionally permissible. If so, then neither can human persons direct their willing towards the ultimate good to the exclusion of considerations of the means; and if the means involve intentional destruction of a basic good, then they are not to be chosen, regardless of their ultimate orientation. The doctrine that God can intentionally kill poses a significant challenge to the doctrine of moral absolutes, a challenge that this paper has tried to meet.

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[19] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa…*, II–II, 1.2, a. 4; Aquinas no doubt has in mind Paul's claim in Titus (1:2) that "God…does not lie."

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