

# Is Pain Metaphysically Evil (*Malum Simpliciter*)? Some Thoughts from a Thomistic Perspective\*

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**Abstract.** Contrary to the commonly assumed opinion that Christianity sees pain as metaphysically evil (*malum simpliciter*) – where evil is defined as the lack of something good – Aquinas defines pain not as a privation but rather a passion of the soul, i.e., an emotion that depends on sensual and/or intellectual cognition of something evil, is good in itself, and may serve a purpose. This article offers a formalized version of the Thomistic definition of pain and related negative (unpleasant) emotions experienced by humans. It also compares and contrasts this view with some contemporary scientific and philosophical models of pain.

**Keywords:** appetite, Aquinas, emotion, evil, pain, passion, suffering, theodicy.

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## Introduction

The received popular opinion concerning the Christian view of pain assumes that theism classifies it as a phenomenon that is metaphysically evil (*malum simpliciter*) and thus unwanted by God and created (conscious) beings – an outcome of the original sin described in Genesis 3:16–17. This presupposition seems to be problematic in at least two ways. First, the scale and prevalence of pain and suffering in the animal kingdom inspires the atheistic argument against the notion of all-good, all-loving, and all-powerful God who is the source and creator of the universe. To give an example, William Rowe’s challenge to Christian theodicy departs from intense human and animal suffering, which he classifies as evident cases of evil.

In developing the argument for atheism based on the existence of evil, it will be useful to focus on some particular evil that our world contains in considerable abundance. Intense human and animal suffering, for example, occurs daily and in great plenitude in our world. Such intense suffering is a clear case of evil. ... Intense human or animal suffering is in itself bad, an evil, even though it may sometimes be justified by virtue of being a part of, or leading to, some good which is unobtainable without it. (Rowe 1979, 335)

A more sophisticated version of the same argument brings the example of pain as contradicting the classical Christian privative definition of evil. G. Stanley Kane states it is evident that pain is not a privation but something (an entity) that actually exists.

[T]here are certainly some pains that virtually everyone regards as evil. ... The difficulty is that pain seems clearly to be more than merely the absence of its contrary opposite. ... When pain occurs in the body, there is something new and different in a person’s experience ... pain is something more than merely a departure from the state of normal good health. (Kane 1980, 49–50)

Mark Robson refers to particular types of prolonged suffering, such as depression and dread, and forms a similar conclusion:

It seems difficult to equate a feeling of mind-numbing horror with absences, a difficulty made all the more clear by literally seeing ... terrible feelings as identical with physical stuff [i.e., firings between neural connections in one's brain]. We might talk of the shape of the neural net being responsible for certain over-arching mental tendencies, but it is the shape of the net we talk about here rather than the shape of the absences. (Robson 2013, 559)

This makes the problem of theodicy even more acute, on the classical assumption that God is the source and creator of everything that is. For in this case, the total sum of all created reality must include countless exemplifications of natural (physical) and moral evil, "A scheme which permits thousands of generations to live and die in wretchedness" (Fiske 1874, 405).

The second challenge faced by the popular Christian notion of pain as evil comes from natural science. Although it is unpleasant – in fact, precisely because it is unpleasant – pain was most likely selected positively in evolutionary transformations as a highly effective alert incentivizing self-protection in unfavorable conditions which threaten the homeostasis of organisms equipped with sensation. Hence, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, pain appears to be a good, valuable, and useful phenomenon, which radically contradicts the claim that it is metaphysically evil.

However, both arguments against the Christian understanding of pain fail on the assumption that pain is not *malum simpliciter*. Interestingly, it turns out that Thomas Aquinas, back in the thirteenth century, thought precisely this. Building upon the research project on the Thomistic approach to animal (i.e., nonhuman) pain and suffering, developed by B. Kyle Keltz in a series of articles and his monograph dedicated to this topic, I will supplement it with a reference to some specifically human aspects of these undesirable phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

My goal in the first part of the article is to present a formalized and extended version of Aquinas's definition of pain as the passion of the soul,

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<sup>1</sup> See Keltz 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020a; 2020b; 2022b. See also Keltz's more recent (2022a) book on the problem of evil.

i.e., an emotion that depends on sensual and/or intellectual cognition of something evil, is good in itself, and may serve a purpose. In the second part of the article, I will briefly comment on some contemporary models of pain and compare and contrast them with the view developed by Aquinas.

## 1. Aquinas on pain as the passion of the soul

Building on the five questions dedicated to the topic of pain and sorrow in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* (ST I–II, 35–39), I propose a following formalized version of the Thomistic definition of pain and related negative (unpleasant) phenomena experienced by human beings as passions of the soul (emotions).

- (1) Pain is related to something evil, just as pleasure is related to something good.

Just as two things are requisite for pleasure; namely, conjunction with good and perception of this conjunction; so also two things are requisite for pain: namely, conjunction with some evil (which is in so far evil as it deprives one of some good), and perception of this conjunction. ... [I]t is evident that something under the aspect of good or evil is the object of the pleasure or pain. (ST I–II, 35, 1, co.)

- (2) Things that are good or evil are the object of the appetite (cf. ST I–II, 35, 1, co.).

- (2a) Appetite can be defined as a tendency of a living thing toward a given object – an inclination that is either spontaneous or requires a conscious mental evaluation and decision. Modern psychology classifies the latter as the force of conation or motivation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The existence of appetite may be recognized both through internal experience (introspection) and external experience. Our internal experience allows us to recognize the existence of motions which are spontaneous or consequent to our knowledge. Our external experience helps us to discover human beings and animals as inclined toward or turned away from objects they recognize/know.

- (2b) Appetite is characteristic of entities “that have knowledge in a higher manner and above the manner of natural forms” (*ST* I, 80, 1, co.).
- (2c) If the knowledge in question is sense knowledge, the appetite will be sense appetite, i.e., a tendency towards the good which is apprehended by the sense. Such appetite is called passion.
- (2d) If the knowledge in question is intellectual knowledge, the appetite will be intellectual appetite, and is called the will.
- (3) “Consequently it is clear that pleasure and pain belong to the [sensitive or intellective] appetite” (*ST* I–II, 35, 1, co.).

[E]very appetitive movement or inclination consequent to apprehension, belongs to the intellective or sensitive appetite ... Since then pleasure and pain presuppose some sense or apprehension in the same subject, it is evident that pain, like pleasure, is in the intellective or sensitive appetite. (*ST* I–II, 35, 1, co.)

- (4) Appetitive powers are grounded in the soul of a living being.

[A]n inclination surpassing the natural inclination ... belongs to the appetitive power of the soul, through which the animal is able to desire what it apprehends, and not only that to which it is inclined by its natural form. And so it is necessary to assign an appetitive power to the soul. (*ST* I, 80, 1, co.)

- (5) “Consequently pain, according as it is in the sensitive appetite, is most properly called a passion of the soul: just as bodily ailments are properly called passions of the body” (*ST* I–II, 35, 1, co.). In other words, using modern psychological categories, pain is for Aquinas a type of emotion (*passio animae*).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to Aquinas on passions (emotions) see Lombardo 2011 and Manzaneo 2004. For a contemporary take on passions that is open to virtue ethics see Bosch, ed. 2020. One of the anonymous reviewers of this article notes that there seems to have been an evolution in the way Aquinas understands pain. Based on the article by Rodriguez (1957), he/she claims that while in the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas considers pain to be a passion, in earlier works he sees it as a form of perception.

- (5a) For Aquinas, emotions are passive psychological states which depend on sensual or intellectual cognition. And yet, once aroused they can move an organism toward or away from the object of cognition, considered either absolutely (concupiscible passions) or under the aspects of difficulty or arduousness in relation to the organism (irascible passions).<sup>4</sup>
- (5b) Pain – as a general category – is a concupiscible emotion that moves an organism away from something cognized as evil through external senses (hearing, smell, taste, touch, and vision).

Now, in the movements of the appetitive faculty, good has, as it were, a force of attraction, while evil has a force of repulsion. ... [W]hen the good is obtained, it causes the appetite to rest, as it were, in the good obtained: and this belongs to the passion of “delight” or “joy”; the contrary of which, in respect of evil, is “sorrow” (*dolor* = pain) or “sadness” (*tristitia* = melancholy). (*ST* I–II, 23, 2, co.)

- (5c) Sorrow (sadness) – as an extension of pain – is a concupiscible emotion that moves an organism away from something cognized as evil through internal senses of the estimative power and imagination (based on phantasms, i.e., internal formal representations of externally sensed objects, stored in the memory). In addition, specifically human form of sorrow (sadness) is grounded in our intellectual cognition of evil.

Pleasure and pain can arise from a twofold apprehension, namely, from the apprehension of an exterior sense; and from the interior apprehension of the intellect or of the imagination. Now the interior apprehension extends to more objects than the exterior apprehension: because whatever things come under the exterior apprehension, come under the interior, but not conversely. Consequently that pleasure alone which is caused by an interior apprehension is called joy ... and in like manner that pain alone which is caused by an inte-

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<sup>4</sup> The following list of emotions related to evil builds on the analysis offered in Keltz 2020b, 40–42.

rior apprehension, is called sorrow. And just as that pleasure which is caused by an exterior apprehension, is called pleasure but not joy; so too that pain which is caused by an exterior apprehension, is called pain indeed but not sorrow. Accordingly sorrow is a species of pain, as joy is a species of pleasure. (ST I–II, 35, 2, co.)

- (5d) Fear (*timor*) is the irascible emotion “considered not absolutely, but under the aspect of difficulty” (ST I–II, 23, 2, co.). It moves an organism away from something cognized as difficult evil.

[T]he arduous evil, considered as an evil, has the aspect of something to be shunned; and this belongs to the passion of “fear.” (ST I–II, 23, 2, co.)

- (5e) Daring (*audacia*) is the irascible emotion “considered not absolutely, but under the aspect of ... arduousness” (ST I–II, 23, 2, co.). It moves an organism towards something cognized as difficult evil to tackle and overcome it, as to avoid being continuously subjected to it.

[T]he arduous evil, considered as an evil ... also contains a reason for tending to it, as attempting something arduous, whereby to escape being subject to evil; and this tendency is called “daring.” (ST I–II, 23, 2, co.)

- (6) From (1–5) it becomes clear that for Aquinas, while pain is related to cognized evil, it is not evil itself (*malum simpliciter*).

- (6a) Aquinas follows the privative conception of evil, which defines it as the absence of good, which is “natural and due to the thing” (ST I, 49, 1, co.).

[I]t cannot be that evil signifies being, or any form or nature. Therefore it must be that by the name of evil is signified the absence of good. (ST I, 48, 1, co.; cf. *De malo* I, 1, ad 2)

- (6b) According to Aquinas, not all absences of good are evil. He distinguishes between negative and privative absences of good.

The former category, going back to Plato and Plotinus and the concept of the Great Chain of Being, allows us to trace the differences between various kinds of entities, and is not related to the category of evil (e.g., my lacking wings to fly is an objective fact that distinguishes me from birds, but not an evil that I suffer from).<sup>5</sup>

The latter category, going back to Aristotle and his notion of perfection defined as lacking nothing that is proper to an entity belonging to a given natural kind, is related to the category of evil (e.g., a lack of vision in a human being is evil, as sight belongs to human nature and its fundamental dispositions).

Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else; for instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is called blindness. (*ST I*, 48, 3, co.; cf. *SCG III*, 6, no.1)

(6c) Aquinas distinguishes between natural (physical) and moral evil. The former entails “subtractions” of forms: accidental (e.g., blindness or disease) or substantial (death). The latter consists in “withdrawals” of due operation of intellectual creatures (human beings). Both types of evil may ground the emotion of pain and its derivatives (sorrow, fear, and daring).

[E]vil ... is twofold. In one way it occurs by the subtraction of the form, or of any part required for the integrity of the thing, as blindness is an evil, as also it is an evil to be wanting in any member of the body. In another way evil exists by the withdrawal of the due operation, either because it does not exist, or because it has not its due mode and order. (*ST I*, 48, 5, co.)

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<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the category of negative absence of good is sometimes classified as the “absence theory of evil.” See Chignell 2021.



(7) From (6) it follows that pain can be good. Indeed, Aquinas thinks that without the emotion of pain that moves a living being away from the cognized evil, it would remain under its influence, which would be detrimental to its well-being. Hence, pain and related (negative) emotions may serve a purpose. This fact is most evident in the case of daring (*audacia*), mentioned in (5e).<sup>6</sup>

[S]upposing the presence of something saddening or painful, it is a sign of goodness if a man is in sorrow or pain on account of this present evil. For if he were not to be in sorrow or pain, this could only be either because he feels it not, or because he does not reckon it as something unbecoming, both of which are manifest evils. Consequently it is a condition of goodness, that, supposing an evil to be present, sorrow or pain should ensue. (*ST*I–II, 39, 1, co.)

(7a) Aquinas goes even further and states that pain and related negative emotions can become virtuous goods. He explains it in reference to both the bodily pain and intrinsic sorrow.

[S]orrow is a good inasmuch as it denotes perception and rejection of evil. These two things, as regards bodily pain, are a proof of the goodness of nature, to which it is due that the senses perceive, and that nature shuns, the harmful thing that causes pain. As regards interior sorrow, perception of the evil is sometimes due to a right judgment of reason; while the rejection of the evil is the act of the will, well disposed and detesting that evil. Now every

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<sup>6</sup> Note that this assertion stands in agreement with arguments offered by Kane and Robson (see Introduction). Since pain and related unpleasant emotions are not privations, they must be metaphysically good as actual (existent). As mentioned in the Introduction, contemporary researchers have no doubt that pain plays an essential role in survival as alarm signal. See Marchand 2012.

At the same time, we must not ignore the fact that some types of pain and suffering seem to be pointless and not serving any purpose. Many cases of prolonged chronic pain may serve as an example of phenomena that are maladaptive and do not introduce any survival advantage. In answer to this challenge, Keltz refers to a particular study of squid showing that repeatedly-injured squid seem to initiate defensive behaviors much earlier than non-injured squid, which gives them an advantage in response to predators (black sea bass) that pursue them more than healthy organisms. Keltz is of the opinion that “it does not seem difficult to imagine that there are good physiological reasons for other types of seemingly purposeless types of pain and suffering” (Keltz 2020b, 52). However, it seems to me that this argument may not easily apply to specifically human, conscious experience of long-lasting chronic pain.

virtuous good results from these two things, the rectitude of the reason and the will. (*ST I–II*, 39, 2, co.)

(7b) Moreover, virtuous good of sorrow plays a particularly important role in the spiritual life of human beings, as it helps us to avoid sin and occasions to sin.

[T]here are two reasons for which it may be right to avoid a thing. First, because it should be avoided in itself, on account of its being contrary to good; for instance, sin. Wherefore sorrow for sin is useful as inducing a man to avoid sin: hence the Apostle says (2 Cor. 7:9): “I am glad: not because you were made sorrowful, but because you were made sorrowful unto penance.” Secondly, a thing is to be avoided, not as though it were evil in itself, but because it is an occasion of evil; either through one’s being attached to it, and loving it too much, or through one’s being thrown headlong thereby into an evil, as is evident in the case of temporal goods. And, in this respect, sorrow for temporal goods may be useful; according to Eccles. 7:3: “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasting: for in that we are put in mind of the end of all.” (*ST I–II*, 39, 3, co.)

(8) Despite (6) and (7), Aquinas acknowledges that pain and related unpleasant emotions do entail privations. Hence, we may speak about the evil of pain as it hinders organism’s ability to recognize and pursue what is good and leads to abnormal states of consciousness, affecting the user-control of its subject’s thoughts and actions.<sup>7</sup>

[A]ll sorrow is an evil, because the mere fact of a man’s appetite being uneasy about a present evil, is itself an evil, because it hinders the response of the appetite in good. (*ST I–II*, 39, 1, co.)

(9) Aquinas applies this reasoning in his reflection on human pain and suffering caused by natural (physical) evil, where the latter is perceived as God’s temporal punishment for sin. Because such pain and suffering deprave humans of the form or particular disposi-

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<sup>7</sup> See Keltz 2020b, 47–48. He notes, after Swenson (2009, 210–11), that pain is experienced not only as “an unwelcome invader in the inner life of a subject, but it also seems to have an alien presence that is not a part of its subject” (Keltz 2020b, 48).

tions for the good against their will, we may classify them as inducing privation (evil).

[I]ntellectual creatures also suffer evil when they are deprived of forms or dispositions or anything else potentially necessary for good activity, whether the things belong to the soul or the body or external things. And such evil, in the judgement of the Catholic faith, needs to be called punishment. (*De malo* 1, 4, co.)

(10) Interestingly, in *ST I–II*, 22, 1, co., Aquinas suggests that the privative aspect of passions (a removal of form for the worse) is crucial for their most adequate definition. He states that the word “passive” is used in the following ways:

- (i) “in a general way, according as whatever receives something is passive” (this definition can be referred to both perfection and deterioration of things), and
- (ii) “in its proper sense, when something is received, while something else is taken away,” where the relation between what is received and what is taken away can be twofold:
  - (a) “that which is lost is unsuitable to the thing” (e.g., sickness), or
  - (b) that which is lost is suitable for the thing (e.g., health).

Aquinas concludes saying that “here [i.e., (ii*b*)] we have passion in its most proper acceptance.” This, in turn, makes him acknowledge that “sorrow is more properly a passion than joy” (*ibid.*).

However, it should be noticed that on this account the negative emotions are more properly called “passions” not because they include privation – which is the source of evil – but because they have more passivity or potentiality (ontologically speaking).

(11) Moreover, it is important to remember that (8) and (9) do not flatly contradict (6) and (7) once we distinguish the individual/subjective perspective of an organism/human being experiencing pain and

related negative emotions from the objective metaphysical analysis that attributes goodness to those emotions.

(11a) This distinction might be applied to a purely biological (naturalistic) account of pain and related negative emotions.

The alien nature of pain and suffering might seem like an evil from the perspective of the subject experiencing the emotions. Yet the unpleasant sensation and alien usurpation involved with these emotions are the very reason why they exist: to move their subject away from existing evils. Unpleasant emotions [...] are metaphysically good and ensure the survival of their subject. (Keltz 2020b, 48)

(11b) The same distinction fits with a philosophical and theological perspective on pain and related negative emotions, developed by Aquinas.

Usurpation and unpleasantness are certainly the aspects of pain and suffering that contribute to the assumption (without qualification) that pain and suffering are evil. [...] However, pain and suffering are metaphysically good because they are natural and due to creatures. God has determined that humans and nonhuman animals possess these emotions because they are necessary for flourishing. [...] [P]ain and suffering are metaphysically good in that they are actual, physiological processes that are beneficial to their subjects and in that they are natural to animals as determined by God. (Keltz 2020b, 48–49, 48, 49)

(11c) The assertion made in (11b) justifies Aquinas's conviction that a deeper analysis of pain and animal and human response to it tells us that the evil of pain and related negative emotions is not the greatest evil. Much worse is the evil that flows from not recognizing evil that triggers these emotions and failing to reject it.

[P]ain or sorrow for that which is truly evil cannot be the greatest evil: for there is something worse, namely, either not to reckon as evil that which is really evil, or not to reject it. Again, sorrow or pain, for that which is appar-

ently evil, but really good, cannot be the greatest evil, for it would be worse to be altogether separated from that which is truly good. (*ST I-II, 39, 4, co.*)

(12) In light of this formal analysis, it becomes clear that, for Aquinas, pain and related negative emotions are not experiences that the benevolent creator God should be obliged to prevent. Quite the contrary, as actually existent (and not privative) phenomena they are metaphysically good and thus wanted, as they contribute to the fitness and survival of living organisms.

## 2. Contemporary views of pain

As clinical neurophysiologist Serge Marchand points out, the contemporary scientific and clinical analysis suggests that human pain is a complex phenomenon that involves interconnected physiological and psychological mechanisms. He admits that this complexity becomes a formidable challenge for scientists and clinicians who have to deal with anatomical, physiological, cognitive, and affective pain components (see Marchand 2021).

In the same article, Marchand offers a short overview of the evolution of pain mechanisms theories. Earlier on, in his monograph *The Phenomenon of Pain*, he sides (with suggestion of some modifications) with John Loeser's model of four pain components, proposed already in 1980 (see Marchand 2012, Introduction and Chapter 1; Loeser 1980, 313–16). According to this model we should distinguish:

- (i) Nociception = A specific peripheral sensory system, which detects potentially tissue-damaging thermal or mechanical energy by specialized nerve endings. It is a purely physiological process, distinguished from sensation and unpleasantness of pain – a purely neurological activity before it is processed by higher centers of nervous system.
- (ii) Pain = A perceived noxious input to the nervous system – a sensation that is linked to nociception but differs from it. While nociception is a peripheral event, pain is the feature of spinal cord and

brain (central part of the nervous system). Keltz suggests several qualitative categories of pain sensation, including aching, burning, stabbing, throbbing, etc. (see Kelts 2020b, 43).<sup>8</sup>

- (iii) Suffering = A negative affective response engendered by pain and related phenomena such as depression, isolation, anxiety, fear, etc.
- (iv) Pain behavior = Any and all outputs suggesting pain, including posture, facial expression, verbalizing, lying down, taking medicines, seeking medical assistance or receiving compensation.

Loeser adds that the first three components on this list are “private, internal events that cannot be quantified or proven to exist.” Only “*pain behaviours* are measurable. Indeed, it is the patient’s *pain behaviour* which the physician evaluates in the establishment of diagnosis and treatment outcome.” At the same time, he sees the task of the clinician as “to determine which of the four factors, nociception, pain, suffering and pain behaviour are playing significant roles in the genesis of the patient’s problem, and then to direct therapies at the appropriate aetiological factors” (Loeser 1980, 315).

Loeser’s description of the component of pain sensation does not seem to characterize it in terms of an emotion depending on sensual or intellectual cognition. However, other scientists and clinicians do see it in precisely this way. To give an example, an American neuroanatomist and neuroscientist, Arthur Devit Craig, sees pain as a “homeostatic feeling” (a distinct sensation) that generates an emotion which drives (motivates) a homeostatic behavior.

The basic homeostatic ‘feelings’, or modalities, include temperature, itch, visceral distension, muscle ache, hunger, thirst, ‘air hunger’ and sensual touch. All of these inherently generate an emotion that drives homeostatic behavior, and pain is no different. Pain normally originates from a physiolog-

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<sup>8</sup> Loeser suggests that “The linkage between *nociception* and *pain* can be interrupted by surgical, pharmacological or psychological means.” Moreover, he adds that “Not only can we have *nociception* in the absence of *pain*, but there is clearly *pain* without *nociception*. Consider the long list of pain states associated with injuries to the central or peripheral nervous system, often called ‘central pain states’ [e.g., a phantom-limb pain]” (Loeser 1980, 314).

ical condition in the body that automatic (subconscious) homeostatic systems alone cannot rectify, and it comprises a sensation and a behavioral drive with reflexive autonomic adjustments. ... This intuitive perspective of pain as an emotion was professed by both Aristotle and Darwin.” (Craig 2003, 304)

This approach finds confirmation in contemporary philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Colin Klein from the Australian National University argues in his monograph titled *What the Body Commands* that pain is imperative. It is a sensation with a content classified as a command to protect the endangered part of an organism. According to Klein, this imperativism explains pain’s considerable motivating power and its rather uninformative character (he thinks pain is not directed at representing facts about the environment). His view goes along with Craig’s conviction that the biological purpose of pain is to help complex organisms in tackling challenges to bodily integrity (homeostasis) (see Klein 2015, 57).

As Keltz notes, Klein distinguishes between the sensation of pain and its unpleasantness, based on the reflection that “there are pains that do not hurt, and there are also hurtful sensations that are not pains” (Keltz 2020b, 43). Moreover, he also introduces a second order imperative command flowing from the unpleasantness of pain, related to – yet distinguishable from – the imperativism of pain sensation. While the latter motivates an organism to protect its body and its homeostasis, the former turns it toward an action that will end the sensation of pain and restore the ability to perform its regular activity (see Klein 2015, 186–88).

### 3. Aquinas and contemporary views of pain

Our current awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon of pain enabled us to overcome its more mechanistic, and thus reductionist models offered in the past. As Loester notes,

The traditional model of Western Medicine is derived from Descartes, who fractured human existence into ‘mind’ and ‘body’. For him, pain was a reflex response to a physical stimulus; predictable and explicable if the stimulus

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<sup>9</sup> For general introduction to the philosophical analysis of pain see Aydede, 2019.

was known. For us, it is apparent that the physical characteristics of the pain stimulus are often indeterminate. [...] [E]ven when the stimulus is more apparent, as in acute pain, the stimulus alone does not predict the individual's response. (Loeser 1980, 313)

While Aquinas's view on pain was less elaborate and less concerned with the way in which external evils induce it (primarily due to the stage of the scientific knowledge of his time), his classification of this phenomenon as an emotion that depends on sensual or intellective cognition corresponds with the contemporary studies described in the preceding section. Moreover, since he is convinced that pain is good (see premise (7) above), Aquinas would most likely agree that it was evolutionary favored as the effective alert that protects living beings in detrimental conditions.

At the same time, Thomistic theory of pain goes beyond the contemporary purely scientific and clinical – i.e., psychophysics, electrophysiology, biomarkers, and brain imaging-based – approaches and modeling. This becomes apparent in Aquinas's observation that particular forms of pain and suffering may be grounded in primarily intellectual cognition (see premise (5c) above). This may suggest that they have only a remote (if any) reference to physical stimuli in some distant past. In addition, Aquinas seems to be convinced that pain and related negative (unpleasant) emotions experienced by humans may be induced by evils that go beyond threatening a physical (biological) homeostasis of an organism. Grounded in the distinction between natural (physical) and moral evil (see premise (6c) above), this assertion allows him to speak about the role of sorrow (for past sins) in our spiritual growth.

## Conclusion

According to Aquinas, pain is not metaphysically evil (*malum simpliciter*). It is not a privation but rather a passion of the soul, i.e., an emotion that depends on sensual or intellective cognition of something evil, is good, and may serve a purpose. This argument provides at least a partial answer to the objections mentioned in the Introduction.



In reference to Rowe's challenge to Christian theodicy, which departs from phenomena of intense human and animal suffering, we may challenge it as, in principle, based on a wrong assumption that pain and suffering are evident cases of evil. In reference to the argument developed in the main part of the article, we may conclude that God intended for sensitive living creatures to possess the abilities to (anoetically and noetically) experience pain and suffering as homeostatic emotions, i.e., metaphysically and instrumentally good abilities which enable them to flourish in their natural habitats. This conclusion corresponds with the research in natural science which sees pain and suffering as evolutionary adaptive.

Those who side with Rowe's argument may respond saying that what is at stake here is not pain taken in general but examples of enormous and excruciating pain suffered by innocent that clearly goes beyond a simple communication of an illness. A level of pain that we find morally justified to try to alleviate. This would mean that the theodicy question raised by Rowe remains. Still, one can hold that the classical reflection on the metaphysics of pain presented here offers an important contribution to this debate.

The same approach to pain and suffering enables us to challenge Kane's and Robson's argument against the classical definition of evil as privation. The theory in question remains intact as Aquinas would agree that pain and related negative emotions are actually existing phenomena rather than privations. Once again, this does not solve all the difficulties related to Christian theodicy. It only dismisses particular challenges to the Christian defense of the goodness of God, based on the interpretation of pain and suffering as metaphysically (absolutely) evil.

In addition to answering to these objections, the notion of pain and related negative (unpleasant) emotions presented here may potentially offer a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the praeternatural gift of impassibility. For it can be argued that – assuming that these emotions are not privations, are good, and may serve a purpose – they were present and experienced by both lower animals and humans even before the original sin.

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