

## QUESTION 21

### What Accrues to Human Acts by Reason of their Goodness or Badness

Next we have to consider what accrues to human acts by reason of their goodness or badness. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does a human act have the character of being upright or deviant (*habeat rationem rectitudinis vel peccati*) insofar as it is good or bad? (2) Does a human act have the character of being praiseworthy or blameworthy (*habeat rationem laudabilis vel culpabilis*) insofar as it is good or bad? (3) Does a human act have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious (*habeat rationem meriti vel demeriti*) insofar as it is good or bad? (4) Does a human act have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in the sight of God (*apud Deum*) insofar as it is good or bad?

#### Article 1

##### Does a human act have the character of being upright or deviant insofar as it is good or bad?

It seems that it is not the case that a human act has the character of being upright or deviant (*non habeat rationem rectitudinis vel peccati*) insofar as it is good or bad:

**Objection 1:** As *Physics 2* says, “In nature, deviations (*peccata*) are monstrosities.” However, monstrosities are not *acts*, but are instead certain *things* that are generated outside of the order of nature. But as it says in the same place, what exists by art and reason (*secundum artem et rationem*) imitates what exists by nature. Therefore, it is not the case that an *act* has the character of being a deviation (*rationem peccati*) because it is disordered and bad (*inordinatus et malus*).

**Objection 2:** As *Physics 2* says, a deviation (*peccatum*) occurs in nature or in a craft (*in arte*) when the intended end is not attained by nature or by the craft. But a human act’s goodness or badness exists especially in the act of intending the end and in the act of attaining the end. Therefore, it seems that an act’s badness does not bring with it the character of being a deviation.

**Objection 3:** If an act’s badness brought with it the character of being a deviation, then it would follow that whenever something bad exists, a deviation exists. But this is false, since even though punishment has the character of something bad, it does not have the character of being a deviation. Therefore, it is not the case that an act has the character of being a deviation because it is bad.

**But contrary to this:** As was shown above (q. 19, a. 4), a human act’s goodness depends principally on the eternal law and, as a result, its badness consists in its disagreement with the eternal law. But this is what grounds the character of being a deviation (*facit rationem peccati*), since in *Contra Faustum 22* Augustine says, “What is deviant (or sinful) (*peccatum*) is something said, done, or desired against the eternal law.” Therefore, a human act has the character of being a deviation from the fact that it is bad.

**I respond:** *Being bad (malum)* is more general (*in plus est*) than *being a deviation (peccatum)* just as *being good (bonum)* is more general than *being upright (rectum)*. For any privation of a good in any given thing brings with it the character of badness, whereas a deviation (*peccatum*) is, properly speaking, an act done for the sake of some end, where the act does not have the right sort of ordering toward that end (*cum non habet debitum ordinem ad finem illum*).

Now the right sort of ordering toward an end is measured by some rule. In things that act according to nature, this rule is nature’s power itself (*ipsa virtus naturae*), which inclines them toward such-and-such an end. Therefore, when the act proceeds toward that end from a natural power in accord with a natural inclination, uprightness (or straightness) (*rectitudo*) is preserved in the act, since what is in the middle does not deviate from the endpoints, i.e., the act does not deviate from the active principle’s being ordered toward the end. On the other hand, when an act departs from this sort of uprightness, then the character of a deviation emerges.

By contrast, in things that act through their will, the proximate rule is human reason, whereas the highest rule is the eternal law. Therefore, when a man's act proceeds toward the end in accord with the order of reason and the eternal law, then the act is upright (or straight), whereas when it deviates from such uprightness, it is called a deviation (or sin) (*peccatum*).

Now it is clear from what has been said (q. 19, aa. 3-4) that every bad voluntary act is bad because it departs from the order of reason and the order of the eternal law, and every good act agrees with reason and with the eternal law. Hence, it follows that a human act has the character of being upright or being a deviation (or sin) from the fact that it is good or bad.

**Reply to objection 1:** Monstrosities are said to be deviations insofar as they are produced because of a deviation that exists in an *act* of nature.

**Reply to objection 2:** There are two sorts of ends, an *ultimate* end and a *proximate* end (*ultimus et propinquus*).

Now in a deviation in nature (*in peccato naturae*), the act fails with respect to the ultimate end, viz., the perfection of generation, but it is not the case that it fails with respect to every proximate end, since nature works by forming something.

Similarly, in a deviation (or sin) in the will (*in peccato voluntatis*), there is always a failure with respect to the intended ultimate end, since no bad voluntary act can be ordered toward beatitude, which is the ultimate end—even if the act does not fail with respect to some proximate end that the will intends and attains to. Hence, since the very act of intending this proximate end is ordered toward the ultimate end, it is in the very act of intending such an end that one can find the character of being upright or being a deviation (or sin).

**Reply to objection 3:** Each thing is ordered toward an end through its own act, and so the character of being a deviation, which consists in a deviation from this ordering toward the end, properly exists in the *act*. By contrast, as was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 48, aa. 5-6), punishment has to do with the *person* who deviates (or sins) (*poena respicit personam peccantem*).

## Article 2

### Does a human act have the character of being praiseworthy or blameworthy from the fact that it is good or bad?

It seems that a human act does not have the character of being praiseworthy or blameworthy (*laudabilis vel culpabilis*) from the fact that it is good or bad:

**Objection 1:** As *Physics* 2 explains, “Deviations (*peccati*) occur in what is done by nature.” But as *Ethics* 3 says, what is natural is not praiseworthy or blameworthy. Therefore, it is not the case that a human act has the character of blameworthiness (or sinfulness) (*non habet rationem culpae*) from the fact that it is bad or a deviation (*ex hoc quod est malus vel peccatum*); and, consequently, it does not have the character of being praiseworthy from the fact that it is good.

**Objection 2:** Just as deviations occur in moral acts, so too they occur in the acts of a craft; for as *Physics* 2 says, “A grammarian deviates in writing incorrectly, as does a physician in dispensing medicine incorrectly.” But it is not the case that a craftsman is blamed for making something bad, since it part of a craftsman's skill that he is able make both good and bad works when he wants to. Therefore, it seems likewise not to be the case that a moral act has the character of being blameworthy from the fact that it is bad.

**Objection 3:** In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that evil is “weak and powerless.” But weakness and powerlessness either destroy or diminish the character of blameworthiness. Therefore, it is not the case that a human act is blameworthy because it is bad.

**But contrary to this:** The Philosopher says, “The works of the virtues are praiseworthy, whereas the contrary works deserve censure and blame.” But as *Ethics 2* says, the acts of a virtue are good acts, since “virtue is what makes the one who has it good and renders his works good.” Hence, the opposed acts are bad acts. Therefore, a human act has the character of being praiseworthy or blameworthy from the fact that it is good or bad.

**I respond:** Just as *being bad* is more general (*est in plus*) than *being a deviation (peccatum)*, so too *being a deviation* is more general than *being blameworthy (or being sinful) (culpa)*. For an act is said to be blameworthy or praiseworthy from the fact that it is imputed to the agent, since someone’s being praised or blamed is nothing other than his having the goodness or badness of his act imputed to him.

Now an act is imputed to an agent when it lies within his power, with the result that he has dominion over his act. But this is the case with all voluntary acts, since, as is clear from what was said above (q. 1, aa. 1-2), it is through a man’s will that he has dominion over his acts. Hence, it follows that (a) it is only in the case of voluntary acts that goodness or badness brings with it the character of praise or blame, and that (b) *being bad (malum)*, *being a deviation (or sin) (peccatum)*, and *being blameworthy (or a sin) (culpa)* are the same thing in the case of voluntary acts.

**Reply to objection 1:** Natural acts are not within the power of their natural agents, since nature is determined to one effect. And so even if there is deviation (*peccatum*) in natural acts, there is nonetheless no such thing as blame (or sin) (*culpa*) in them.

**Reply to objection 2:** Reason has one role in the case of artifacts and a different role in the case of morals (*ratio aliter se habet in artificialibus et aliter in moralibus*). In the case of artifacts, reason is ordered toward a particular end, which is something thought up by reason. By contrast, in the case of morals, reason is ordered toward the general end of the entirety of a human life (*ad finem communem totius humanae vitae*).

Now a particular end is ordered toward the general end. Therefore, since, as has been explained (a. 1), a deviation occurs because of a departure from the ordering toward the end, there are two possible ways in which a deviation can occur in the act of a craft:

(a) as a deviation from the *particular end* intended by the craftsman, and this sort of deviation is proper to the craft—as, for instance, when a craftsman who intends to make a good work instead makes a bad one, or when a craftsman who intends to make a bad work instead makes a good one;

(b) as a deviation from *the general end of human life*, and in this sense the craftsman will be said to deviate if he intends to make, and does make, a bad work through which someone else is defrauded. However, this sort of deviation is proper to the craftsman insofar as he is a man and not insofar as he is a craftsman.

Hence, the craftsman is blamed as a craftsman for the first sort of deviation, whereas a man is blamed as a man for the second sort of deviation

By contrast, in the case of morals, where reason is ordered toward the general end of a human life, deviation and badness always involve a departure from reason’s ordering toward the general end of human life. And a man is blamed for such a deviation both insofar as he is a man and insofar as he is a moral being. Hence, in *Ethics 6* the Philosopher says, “In the case of a craft, someone who deviates willingly is preferable, whereas someone who deviates is not preferable in the case of prudence or of the moral virtues directed by prudence.”

**Reply to objection 3:** The sort of weakness that exists in bad voluntary acts is subject to a man’s power. And so it neither removes nor diminishes blame.

### Article 3

#### Does a human act have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious because of its goodness or badness?

It seems that a human act does not have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious because of its goodness or badness:

**Objection 1:** ‘Merit’ and ‘demerit’ are said in relation to recompense (*in ordine ad retributionem*), which has a place only in matters that have to do with others (*in his quae ad alterum sunt*). But not every good or bad human act is directed toward someone else; instead, some are directed toward oneself. Therefore, not every good or bad human act has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious.

**Objection 2:** No one merits a punishment or a reward by the fact that he does what he wants to with what he has dominion over; for instance, a man is not punished if he destroys his own property, as he would be punished if he destroyed someone else’s property. But a man has dominion over his own acts. Therefore, he does not merit punishment or reward by reason of the fact that he does well or badly with his own acts.

**Objection 3:** No one merits being treated well by another by reason of the fact that he acquires a good for himself; and the same line of reasoning holds for evils as well. But a good act is itself a certain good and perfection of the agent, whereas a disordered act is a certain evil for him. Therefore, a man does not merit or demerit by reason of the fact that he does a bad act or a good act.

**But contrary to this:** Isaiah 3:10-11 says, “Say to the just man that it is well; for he shall eat the fruit of his doings. Woe to the wicked unto evil; for the reward of his hands shall be given him.”

**I respond:** ‘Merit’ and ‘demerit’ are said in connection with the recompense that is made in accord with justice (*in ordine ad retributionem quae fit secundum iustitiam*). But recompense in accord with justice is made to someone because he acts for the benefit or harm of someone else (*ex eo quod agit in profectum vel nocumentum alterius*).

Now notice that each individual who lives in a society is in some sense a part of, and member of, the whole society. Therefore, if an individual does something that is good or bad for someone who lives in that society, then this redounds upon the whole society—just as someone who inflicts injury on a hand inflicts injury on the man as a result.

Thus, when someone does something that is good or bad for some other individual person, there are two ways in which the character of merit or demerit applies: (a) insofar as recompense is owed to him by the individual person whom he helps or offends, and (b) insofar as recompense is owed to him by the whole community (*a toto collegio*).

On the other hand, when someone orders his act directly toward what is good or bad for the whole community, recompense is owed to him first and mainly by the whole community and secondarily by all the parts of the community.

And when someone does something that is good or bad for himself, then he is likewise owed recompense to the extent that this also has an effect on the community, given that he himself is part of the community—even if he is not owed recompense insofar it is good or bad for the individual person who is the same as the agent (unless perhaps he is owed recompense by himself according to a sort of analogy, insofar as there is such a thing as a man’s being just to himself).

So, then, it is clear that a good or bad act has the character of being praiseworthy or blameworthy insofar as it lies within the will’s power, whereas it has the character of being upright or a deviation insofar as it is ordered toward an end, and it has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in accord with the recompense of justice with respect to someone else.

**Reply to objection 1:** Even if in some cases the acts of a good or bad man are not ordered toward what is good or bad for some other individual person, they are nonetheless ordered toward what is good

or bad for that other which is the community itself.

**Reply to objection 2:** Insofar as he does well or badly with his own acts, a man, having dominion over his own acts, merits or demerits because he also belongs to another, viz., the community of which he is a part—just as if he were doing well or badly with other things of his own concerning which he owes service to the community.

**Reply to objection 3:** As has been explained, the very good or evil which someone does to himself through his own act redounds upon the community.

#### Article 4

##### Does a good or bad human act have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in relation to God?

It seems that a good or bad human act does not have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in relation to God (*non habeat rationem meriti vel demeriti per comparationem ad Deum*):

**Objection 1:** As has been explained (a. 3), ‘merit’ and ‘demerit’ imply an ordering toward compensation for benefits or harms done to someone else (*importat ordinem ad recompensationem profectus vel damni ad alterum illati*). But a man’s good or bad act does not result in any benefit or harm to God Himself; for Job 35:6-7 says, “If you sin, what harm will you do to Him? And if you act justly, what good will you do Him?” Therefore, a man’s good or bad act does not have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in the sight of God (*apud Deum*).

**Objection 2:** No instrument has merit or demerit in the sight of the one who uses the instrument, since the instrument’s entire action belongs to the user himself. But when a man acts, he is an instrument of God’s power, which moves him as a principal cause (*principaliter*); hence, Isaiah 10:15 says, “Shall the ax boast against him that cuts with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him by whom it is drawn”—a passage that clearly compares an acting man to an instrument. Therefore, in acting well or badly, a man neither merits nor demerits anything in the sight of God.

**Objection 3:** A human act has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious insofar as it is ordered toward someone else. But not every human act is ordered toward God. Therefore, not every good or bad act has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in the sight of God.

**But contrary to this:** Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, “God will bring into judgment all things that are done, whether good or bad.” But judgment implies recompense, and it is with respect to recompense that ‘merit’ and ‘demerit’ are predicated. Therefore, every good or bad human act has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in the sight of God.

**I respond:** As has been explained (a. 3), a man’s act has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious insofar as it is ordered toward someone else, either by reason of that individual or by reason of the community. Now it is in both ways that our good and bad acts have the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in the sight of God:

(a) *by reason of the individual Himself*, insofar as He is man’s ultimate end. For it is fitting, as was explained above (q. 19, a. 10), for all our acts to be referred to the ultimate end. Hence, if one does an act that cannot be referred to God, then he does not preserve God’s honor, which is owed to the ultimate end.

(b) *by reason of the entire universal community*. For in every community the one who governs the community takes care mainly of the common good, and so it is his role to give recompense for what is done well or badly in the community. But as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 103, a. 5), God is the governor and ruler of the whole universe and especially of rational creatures.

Hence, it is clear that human acts have the character of being meritorious and demeritorious in

relation to God. Otherwise, it would follow that He does not care about human acts.

**Reply to objection 1:** Nothing can accrue to God or be lost to Him in His own right through man's action. And yet a man, from his own side (*quantum in se est*), takes something away from God, or gives Him something, when he observes or fails to observe the order that God has instituted.

**Reply to objection 2:** A man is moved as an instrument by God in such a way that, as was explained above (q. 9, a. 6), it does not exclude his moving himself through free choice. And so it is through his own act that he merits or demerits in the sight of God.

**Reply to objection 3:** It is not the case that a man is ordered toward the political community in his entire self or in all that is his (*secundum se totum et secundum omnia sua*), and so it is unnecessary for each of his acts to be meritorious or demeritorious in light of his ordering toward the political community. By contrast, the entirety of what a man is and of what he has and can do must be ordered toward God, and so every one of a man's good or bad acts, as far as the very nature of the act is concerned, has the character of being meritorious or demeritorious in the sight of God.