

QUESTION 75

The Causes of Sin in General

Next we have to consider the causes of sin: first, in general (question 75) and, second, in particular (questions 76-84).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Does sin have a cause? (2) Does sin have an interior cause? (3) Does sin have an exterior cause? (4) Is sin a cause of sin?

Article 1

Does sin have a cause?

It seems that sin does not have cause:

Objection 1: As has been explained (q. 71, a. 6), sin has the character of an evil. But as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, “Evil does not have a cause.” Therefore, sin does not have a cause.

Objection 2: A cause is “that which something else follows upon by necessity.” But what occurs by necessity does not seem to be a sin, since every sin is voluntary. Therefore, sin does not have a cause.

Objection 3: If sin has a cause, then it has for its cause either something good or something bad. But not something good, since as Matthew 7:18 says, “A good tree cannot bring forth bad fruit.” Similarly, neither can something bad be a cause of sin, since the evil of punishment (*malum poenae*) follows upon sin, whereas the evil of fault (*malum culpae*) is identical with sin. Therefore, sin does not have a cause.

But contrary to this: Everything that comes to exist has a cause, since, as Job 5:6 says, “Nothing on earth occurs without a cause.” But sin occurs, since sin is “a word or deed or thought that is contrary to God’s law.” Therefore, sin has a cause.

I respond: A sin is a disordered act (*actus inordinatus*). Therefore, as regards the *act*, it can have a *per se* cause, just like any other act. On the other hand, as regards the *disorderedness*, it has a cause in the manner in which a negation or privation can have a cause.

Now there are two sorts of causes that can be designated for a negation:

First of all, the lack of a cause (*defectus causae*), i.e., the negation of a cause itself, is in its own right a cause of a negation. For the negation of an effect follows upon the negation of its cause; for instance, the sun’s absence is a cause of darkness.

Second, the cause of the affirmation upon which a negation follows is a *per accidens* cause of the consequent negation. For instance, fire, in causing heat by its principal tendency, causes a privation of coldness as a consequence.

The first of these can suffice for a simple negation. But since the disorderedness of a sin, or of any evil, is not a simple negation but the privation of what a thing is apt to have and ought to have, this sort of disorderedness must have a *per accidens* agent cause. For what is apt to inhere in a thing and ought to inhere in it is never missing except because of some impeding cause. Accordingly, it has been customary to say that evil, which consists in a privation, has a ‘deficient cause’ (*causa deficient*), i.e. a *per accidens* agent cause.

Now every *per accidens* cause is traced back to a *per se* cause. Therefore, since, as regards its *disorderedness*, a sin has a *per accidens* agent cause and, as regards its *act*, it has a *per se* agent cause, it follows that a sin’s *disorderedness* follows from the very cause of the *act*. So, then, a will which lacks the measure or rule of reason and of divine law (*caret directionem regulae rationis et legis divinae*) and which intends some changeable good is a *per se* cause of the sinful act, whereas it is a cause *per accidens*, and outside that intention, of the act’s disorderedness. For the act’s lack of orderedness stems from the lack of measure in the will (*ex defectu directionis in voluntate*).

Reply to objection 1: ‘Sin’ signifies not only the privation of some good, i.e., the disorderedness, but also the act which underlies this sort of privation and which has the character of something bad. This, as has been explained, is the sense in which sin has a cause.

Reply to objection 2: If the definition of a cause given here is to be true in all cases (*universaliter deberet verificari*), then it must mean something that is both sufficient for causing and unimpeded (*intelligatur de causa sufficienti et non impedita*). For it is possible for something to be sufficient for causing another (*causam sufficientem alterius*) and yet for the effect not to follow of necessity—and this because of some supervening impediment. Otherwise, as is clear from *Metaphysics* 6, it would follow that everything happens by necessity. So, then, even if a sin has a cause, it nonetheless does not follow that the cause is necessary; for the effect can be impeded.

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained, the cause of a sin is the will without the use of the rule of reason or of God’s law (*voluntas sine adhibitione regulae rationis vel legis divinae*). However, not using the rule of reason or of God’s law does not in its own right have the character of something evil—either an evil of punishment or an evil of fault—before its application to an act. Hence, in this sense the cause of the first sin is not something bad, but rather something good along with the absence of another good.

Article 2

Does sin have an interior cause?

It seems that sin does not have an interior cause:

Objection 1: What is interior to a thing is always present to it. Therefore, if sin has an interior cause, a man will always be sinning; for when the cause is posited, the effect is posited.

Objection 2: One and the same thing is not a cause of itself. But a man’s interior movements just are the sin. Therefore, they are not a cause of the sin.

Objection 3: Whatever is within a man is either natural or voluntary. But what is natural cannot be a cause of sin, since, as Damascene says, sin is “contrary to nature.” On the other hand, if what is voluntary is disordered, then it is already a sin. Therefore, it is not the case that anything intrinsic can be a cause of the first sin.

But contrary to this: Augustine says, “The cause of sin is the will” (*voluntas est causa peccati*).

I respond: As has already been explained (a. 1), one must take the *per se* cause of a sin from the side of the act itself. Now an interior cause of a human act can be either *mediate* or *immediate*. The *immediate* cause of a human act is reason and will, in accord with which a man has free choice (*secundum quam homo est liber arbitrio*). On the other hand, the *remote* cause is the sentient part’s apprehension, along with the sentient appetite. For just as by reason’s judgment the will is moved toward something in accord with reason, so too by the sensory power’s apprehension the sentient appetite is inclined toward something. As will become clear below (q. 77, a. 1), this inclination sometimes draws the will and reason along with it. So, then, two sorts of interior causes of sin can be designated, one *proximate*, on the part of reason and the will, and the other *remote*, on the part of the imagination or sentient appetite.

But since it was explained above (a. 1) that the cause of a sin is (a) some motivating apparent good (*aliquod bonum apparens motivum*), along with (b) the absence of an appropriate motive (*cum defectu debiti motivi*)—more specifically, the absence of the rule of reason or the rule of God’s law, it follows that the motivating good itself, i.e., the apparent good, belongs to sentient apprehension and appetite, whereas the absence of an appropriate rule belongs to reason, which is supposed to take a rule of this sort into consideration. Still, the *final completion* (*perfectio*) of a sinful voluntary act belongs to the will, in

the sense that, given the things previously mentioned, the act of willing is now a sin.

Reply to objection 1: What is intrinsic as a natural *power* is always present, but what is intrinsic as an interior *act* of the appetitive or apprehensive power is not always present. However, the very power of willing is a cause of sin in potentiality, and this potentiality is brought to actuality by the previous movements, first of all, of the sentient part and then of reason. For given that something is proposed as desirable by the sensory power and that the sentient appetite is inclined toward it, reason sometimes stops taking the appropriate rule into consideration, and so the will produces a sinful act. Therefore, since the preliminary movements are not always being actualized, neither is sin always being actualized (*quia motus praecedentes non semper sunt in actu, neque peccatum semper est in actu*).

Reply to objection 2: Not all the interior movements belong to the substance of a sin, which consists principally in the will's act; instead, some of the interior movements precede the sin itself and some of them follow upon it.

Reply to objection 3: What causes a sin as a *power* producing the act is natural. Likewise, the sentient part's movement, which the sin follows upon, is sometimes natural, as when someone sins because of his desire for food. On the other hand, a sin is made 'unnatural' by the very fact that what is lacking is the natural *rule* that a man, in keeping with his nature, ought to pay attention to.

Article 3

Does sin have an exterior cause?

It seems that sin does not have an exterior cause:

Objection 1: A sin is a voluntary act. But what is voluntary exists within, and so it does not have an exterior cause. Therefore, sin does not have an exterior cause.

Objection 2: Just as nature is an interior principle, so too is the will. But a sin or mistake (*peccatum*) never occurs among natural things except because of some interior cause—in the way, for instance, that monstrosities occur because of the corruption of an interior principle. Therefore, neither can a sin or mistake occur in moral matters except because of an interior cause. Therefore, sin does not have an exterior cause.

Objection 3: When a cause is multiplied, its effects are multiplied. But to the extent that the exterior inducements to sin are more numerous and greater, what someone does in a disordered way is less imputed to him as a sin. Therefore, nothing exterior is a cause of sin.

But contrary to this: Numbers 31:16 says, "Are not these the ones who deceived the children of Israel and made you transgress against the Lord by the sin of Phogor?" Therefore, something exterior can be a cause that effects a sin.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 2), the interior cause of sin is (a) the *will* insofar as it brings the sinful act to completion, (b) *reason*, as regards the absence of an appropriate rule, and (c) the *sentient appetite*, which provides the inclination. So, then, there are three ways in which something extrinsic could be a cause of sin: (a) it might immediately move the will itself, or (b) it might move reason, or (c) it might move the sentient appetite.

Now as was explained above (q. 9, a. 6), only God can move the will interiorly, but, as will be shown below (q. 79, a. 1), He cannot be a cause of sin. Hence, it follows that nothing exterior can be a cause of sin except either (a) insofar as it moves reason, in the way that a man or a demon persuades someone to sin or (b) insofar as it moves the sentient appetite, in the way that certain exterior sensible things move the sentient appetite. However, exterior persuasion in matters of action does not move reason with necessity. Nor do things proposed exteriorly move the sentient appetite with necessity, unless perhaps it is disposed in a certain way; and yet the sentient appetite likewise does not move reason

or the will with necessity.

Hence, something exterior can be a cause that moves one in the direction of sinning, and yet it is not a cause that is sufficient to induce one to sin (*non sufficienter ad peccatum inducens*). Rather, the will alone is a cause that is sufficient to bring a sin to completion (*causa sufficienter complens peccatum est sola voluntas*).

Reply to objection 1: From the fact that exterior moving causes do not induce us to sin with sufficiency and by necessity, it follows that it remains within our power to sin or not to sin.

Reply to objection 2: An exterior cause of sin is not excluded by the fact that an interior cause of sin is posited. For as has been explained, what is exterior is a cause of sin only by the mediation of an interior cause.

Reply to objection 3: When the exterior causes that incline one toward sin are multiplied, the sinful acts are multiplied, because more individuals are inclined toward acts of sin by those causes, and more often as well. And yet the character of a fault is diminished, since this consists in something's being voluntary and within our power.

Article 4

Is sin a cause of sin?

It seems that sin is not a cause of sin:

Objection 1: There are four sorts of causes, none of which fits in with sin's being a cause of sin. For the *end* has the character of something good, but this does not belong to sin, which is bad by its definition (*de sua ratione malum*). And for the same reason sin cannot be an *efficient cause*, either; for evil cannot be an agent cause, but is instead "weak and powerless," as Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4. On the other hand, the *material cause* and *formal cause* seem to have a place only in the case of natural bodies that are composed of matter and form. Therefore, sin cannot have a material cause or a formal cause.

Objection 2: As *Meteorologia* 4 says, "To effect what is similar to itself belongs to a thing that is perfect." But sin is by its definition imperfect. Therefore, sin cannot be a cause of sin.

Objection 3: If some other sin is a cause of *this* sin, then for the same reason yet another sin will be a cause of *that* sin, and so there will be an infinite regress—which is absurd. Therefore, sin is not a cause of sin.

But contrary to this: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, "A sin that is not erased quickly through repentance is both a sin and a cause of sin."

I respond: Since sin has a cause as regards its act, one sin can be a cause of another sin in the way that one human act can be a cause of another. Therefore, it is possible for one sin to be a cause of another sin in accord with the four kinds of causes:

First, in the mode of an *efficient* or *moving* cause, both *per se* and *per accidens*: (a) *per accidens*, in the sense that what removes an obstacle (*removens prohibens*) is called a *per accidens* mover, since when through one sinful act a man loses grace or charity or shame or anything else that restrains him from sin, he falls into another sin because of this, and so the first sin is a *per accidens* cause of the second sin; (b) *per se*, as when a man is disposed by one sinful act toward committing another similar act more easily, since acts are causes of dispositions and habits that incline one toward similar acts.

As regards the genus of a *material cause*, one sin is a cause of another insofar as it prepares the matter for it, in the way that avarice (*avaritia*) prepares the matter for strife (*litigium*), which often concerns riches that have been amassed.

And as regards the genus of a *final cause*, one sin is a cause of another insofar as, because someone

has one sin as a goal, he commits another sin—as when some commits simony (*simonia*) because he has ambitious advancement (*ambitio*) as a goal, or as when some commits fornication in order to commit theft (*committit fornicationem propter furtum*).

And since, as was established above (q. 18, a. 6), the end confers the form in moral matters, from this it also follows that one sin is a *formal cause* of another. For in an act of fornicating that is committed for the sake of theft, the act of fornicating is like the matter, whereas the act of stealing is like the form.

Reply to objection 1: Insofar as a sin is disordered, it has the character of something bad, but insofar as it is a certain act, it has some good—at least some *apparent* good—as its end. And so as regards its act—though not as regards its disorderedness—one sin can be a final cause or efficient cause of another sin. Moreover, a sin has a matter with-respect-to-which (*materia circa quam*), though not a matter out-of-which (*materia ex qua*). And it has form from its end. And so, as has been explained, sin can be called a cause of sin in accord with the four kinds of cause.

Reply to objection 2: A sin is imperfect with moral imperfection as regards its disorderedness, but it has a perfection of nature as regards its act. And it is because of the latter that it can be a cause of sin.

Reply to objection 3: Not every cause of sin is a sin. Hence, there is no necessity for an infinite regress; instead, one can arrive at some first sin whose cause is not another sin.