

The *peccatum naturae* and the moral condition of the will. A convergence between Aquinas and Rosmini

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Abstract. My purpose in this paper is to illustrate that what the Christian tradition calls the *peccatum naturae* consists neither in the mere privation of the gift of original justice and of grace, nor in the total corruption of nature. I try to dig into the conceptual conditions under which we can coherently understand that our present condition is characterized by a twisted inclination of the will, which without totally corrupting human nature, still runs contrary to its proper good and cannot be considered as belonging or being inherent to it. I first present Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the *peccatum naturae* as a moral defect and not simply as privation. Then, I take recourse mostly to Rosmini's work in order to better understand how we can have a moral weakness, which could be rightly called corruption, without our moral condition being completely irrecoverable. In other words, how can the will be in a sinful condition if no actual fault can be imputed to the person, for that is the notion of a sin of nature.

Keywords: original sin; *peccatum naturae*; theological anthropology; Thomas Aquinas; Antonio Rosmini; freedom of the will.

Introduction

There is a somewhat widespread understanding that for Catholics the sin of nature (*peccatum naturae*) consists in the privation of original justice, which theologians understand as the complete order of the natural tendencies and their subjection to reason as a result of the elevation of our first parents to a state of grace (“the rectitude of the primitive state”, ST I, 95, 1c). Instead, Protestant denominations would in general understand that after the fall human nature suffered a complete corruption. The two stances are sometimes seen as an either-or dichotomy. Now, on the one hand it is difficult to see what would be sinful in a nature that simply does not have a gift that is not an essential part of its constitution; and, on the other hand, there is a difference between a totally corrupted and a morally weakened nature.

My purpose in this paper is to illustrate how we can understand that what the Christian tradition calls the *peccatum naturae* consists neither in a mere privation nor in the total corruption of nature. I will do so by recurring to the work of Thomas Aquinas and Antonio Rosmini. My intention is to dig into the conceptual conditions under which we can coherently understand that our present condition is characterized by a twisted inclination of the will that runs contrary to its proper good. I will first present Aquinas’ understanding of the *peccatum naturae* as a moral defect. Then, I will take recourse mostly to Rosmini’s work in order to better understand how we could have a moral weakness, without our moral condition being completely irrecoverable. Rosmini’s considerations are an expansion of Thomas’ thesis that the human will can adhere more or less strongly to its end or term, which is universal good. It goes without saying that for both Catholic authors only supernatural grace can restore human nature. Unless otherwise specified all translations are mine.

1. The *peccatum naturae* is not a privation

There is a tendency in post-Tridentine Catholic theology to prefer a sort of Thomistic «optimism» to Augustinian «pessimism» (Dubois 1983), in the sense that our moral condition is not totally spoiled, even if damaged

or weakened. One should beware, however, to attribute that position to Thomas himself, or to Trent, since both were more intent in countenancing the opposite error, namely Pelagianism.

Some interpreters attribute indeed to Thomas the idea that after the fall human nature is just as it would have been without any gratuitous gift received from God. Following Matthias Scheeben (Scheeben 2008, §§ 38–49), Martin Rhonheimer maintains that philosophy considers the state of pure nature, which is identical to that of fallen nature when looked at theologically, in the light of the history of salvation. Aristotle’s philosophical anthropology would thus describe “human nature as it really is, but it cannot explain why it is so” (Rhonheimer 2000, 326). «Fallen» would mean relative to man’s original condition in paradise, not relative to human nature in its own elements. This is also Ladaria’s interpretation (Ladaria 2001, 95, see ST I–II, 87, 7c). Others refuse to see our present condition, marked by a disorder, as one of pure nature, but still understand its condition mainly in privative terms (Otto 2009, Te Velde 2005). This situation has probably prompted the recent statement that for Catholics “original sin is described as the privation of a state of original justice or righteousness, or as the loss of some morally exalted state” (Crisp 2015, 264–265).

Now, the mere-privation view leaves the question about the moral condition of the will unanswered. Surprisingly, a study from 1930 attributes the disorder to pure nature itself: “if there is a disorder in fallen nature, the reason must lie in nature herself and, consequently, it must be attributed to pure nature” (Kors 1930, 162), where pure nature means human nature without any supernatural gift: “the ignorance of the intellect, malice and weakness of will, the concupiscence of the flesh, would have been inherent to pure nature” (Kors 1930, 163). Now, such standpoint is far from any «optimism» and risks making the Creator responsible for the moral disarray that besets human nature. This perplexing situation recommends taking a closer look at how Aquinas deals with the matter (Franck 2019).

Some texts certainly suggest that for Aquinas the *peccatum naturae* consists in the lack or privation of original justice, with nature thus abandoned to herself and deprived of God’s special gifts. The expression *sibi*

relicta appears several times: “due to our first father’s sin ... nature was abandoned to herself, after the subtraction of the supernatural gift that had been granted by God” (*per peccatum primi parentis ... natura est sibi relicta, subtracto supernaturali dono quod homo divinitus erat collatum*. ST I–II, 19, 9 ad 3); “the main penalty of original sin is that human nature is abandoned to herself, due to the removal of original justice” (*principaliter quidem poena originalis peccati est quod natura humana sibi relinquitur, destituta auxilio originalis iustitiae*. ST I–II, 87, 7c. See also ST I–II, 85, 5 ad 1). The defects we see in human nature result from the fact that it is composed of different contrasting and conflicting elements, in particular sensitive tendencies and reason. Such composition would be the cause why God had granted Adam special gifts, since sensitive tendencies make contemplative life more difficult (*De malo* 5, 1c). The loss of original justice entailed the removal of what impeded disordered movements in man (ST I–II, 82, 1 ad 3), and also prevented passions from overriding reason (ST I–II, 87, 2c), with the consequence that “because the harmony of original justice was dissolved, the different human powers are driven to different things” (*soluta harmonia originalis iustitiae, diversae animae potentiae in diversa feruntur*. ST I–II, 82, 2 ad 2).

After the fall man’s tendencies are not subject to reason any more, and they go after an inferior good, following their own impulse. Now, although each power is naturally driven towards its own object, due to their appurtenance to human nature, those powers must be under the rule of reason. So, an unrestrained appetite is contrary to human nature: “tending towards its object without restraint is not natural, insofar it is human; it is rather against its nature as human” (*quod in suum objectum tendat irrefrenate, hoc non est naturale sibi in quantum est humana, sed magis contra naturam ejus in quantum hujusmodi*. In *II Sent.* 30, 1, 1 ad 4). Similarly, Aquinas reminds that “the concupiscence that goes beyond rational limits is contrary to human nature” (*concupiscentia autem quae transcendit limites rationis, est homini contra naturam*. ST I–II, 82, 1 ad 3) and can therefore not be called simply a natural element.

Moreover, when Aquinas says that nature is abandoned to herself, he does not have a moral defect in mind, but natural limitations such as pain, death

and ignorance. These defects have penal character in our present condition because they were not in God's plan for us and are now a consequence of the fall. Nonetheless, since they follow from our composite nature –corporeal and spiritual– they can also be seen as natural (*De malo* 5, 4 ad 1). That explains why reason cannot discover that they are a penalty, although Aquinas also ponders that corporal defects and the difficulty in knowing the truth are signs that make their punitive character quite probable: “it can quite probably be proved that these defects are of penal nature” (*satis probabiliter probari potest huiusmodi defectus esse poenales. Summa contra gentiles* 4, 52, 4).

In a far greater number of texts, however, Aquinas clearly describes the *peccatum naturae* as more than privative. Certainly, not in the sense that it would be a natural faculty or positive tendency to perform evil acts, but as something irregular and disordered, which would be the actual reason why God's grace is missing. In this sense, Vijgen remarks that we should see it as a kind of entitative habit (Vijgen 2018).

The *peccatum naturae* is compared to an intrinsic principle (*quasi a principio intrinseco. De malo* 4, 1 ad 5), something contrary to the gift of original justice and supernatural grace (*contrarium prohibens. De malo* 4, 1 ad 11). It would be proper of pure nature in any condition not to enjoy the vision of God of her own right, but in our present condition there is something in us according to which it is fair that we lack that vision (*aliquid ex quo debeatur ei quod careat visione divina. De malo* 4, 1 ad 14). It is therefore not simply a divine decision that we lack the vision of God, but the consequence of a bad disposition in nature.

It may also be puzzling to read in the same series of answers that “when somebody is punished for the sin committed by our first parent, he is not punished for somebody else's sin, but for his own” (*cum aliquis punitur pro peccato primi parentis, non punitur pro peccato alterius, sed pro peccato suo. De malo* 4, 1 ad 19). If not duly explained, this would be perplexing and even scandalizing. In any case, it certainly excludes that for Aquinas our present condition is one of pure nature and that its fallen character must be understood relatively to a more perfect condition in paradise.

Many other affirmations strengthen this reading. For example, when losing original justice, man contracts a kind of malice that produces an inclination towards evil deeds (*malitia contracta ... inde incurrit omnem pronitatem ad mala eligendum. De malo 4, 2 ad 10*). Original sin is accidental and against nature (*accidens innaturale. De malo 4, 2 ad 12*), “it does not belong to human nature absolutely speaking” (*non pertinet ad naturam humanam absolute. De malo 4, 7 ad 3*). Absolutely speaking also, to be deprived of the divine vision should not be considered a penalty, because it does not belong to man *in naturalibus constitutus*. Nonetheless, “it is one thing to say that man is not supposed to have divine vision ... and another one to say that he is supposed not to have it” (*aliud est enim non debere habere ... et aliud debere non habere. De malo 5, 1 ad 15*).

In the *Summa Theologica* it is clear not only that grace is an unmerited gift, but also that there is an obstacle in human nature that prevents the reception of grace (ST I–II, 79, 3c), “an opposed disorder” (*inordinatio opposita. ST I–II, 81, 2c*). One question later Thomas finishes an article with a sentence that leaves no doubts: “hence [original sin, sin of nature] is not a pure privation, but is some kind of corrupt habit” (*Unde non est privatio pura, sed est quidam habitus corruptus. ST I–II, 82, 1 ad 1*).

The question where the main effect of original sin is discussed is of fundamental importance (ST I–II, 85) and it serves as a link to the next section. Aquinas explains how we should understand Bede’s famous sentence *expiatus gratuitis, vulneratus in naturalibus*. The «good of nature» can mean three different things. First, the principles that constitute nature, such as powers and essential properties. In this sense, sin neither removes that good nor decreases it. Second, the inclination to virtue, and third, the gift of original justice, which Adam was supposed to transmit to his posterity, had he not sinned. In the post-lapsarian condition this last good was completely lost. But the inclination to virtue neither was destroyed nor remained intact, but decreased: “the natural inclination towards virtue is diminished by sin” (*ipsa naturalis inclinatio ad virtutem diminuitur per peccatum. ST I–II, 85, 1c*). In the first part of the *Summa Theologica* we read that “the subjection of the body to the soul and of the lower powers to reason [i.e. original

justice] did not belong to nature, otherwise it would have remained after sin” (*illa subiectio corporis ad animam, et inferiorum virium ad rationem, non erat naturalis: alioquin post peccatum mansisset*. ST I, 95, 1c). But from this claim we cannot infer anything about the state of our inclination to virtue after the first sin, so it cannot be taken as implying that the loss of original justice would have left the natural inclination unmodified.

Those who support the idea that original sin did not alter human nature as such are justly concerned about the possible error of saying that original sin corrupted nature, taken in the first meaning. But Aquinas states very clearly which of the three meanings he refers to. He calls upon Dionysius Areopagite to claim that the good of nature remained intact, just as in the angels who sinned: “Dionysius is speaking about the first good of nature, that is being, life and intellect, as is obvious to whoever pays attention to his words” (ST I–II, 85, 1 ad 1). So, the passages that may support the thesis that nature did not suffer any diminution after sin actually refer to non-moral goods of nature, which could not be altered without modifying man’s essence.

Two more texts expand on how to understand the diminution of the natural good. One objection says that the variation of an accident such as the disposition of the will does not modify the substance, because nature is prior to the voluntary action. However, Aquinas answers, the inclination to some voluntary action also belongs to nature, and “the inclination varies according to the term it is ordered to” (*ipsa inclinatio variatur ex illa parte qua ordinatur ad terminum*. ST I–II, 85, 1 ad 2). In the following article he says that the good in which the inclination to virtue consists cannot diminish as to its root –rational nature– because in that case we would not even be able to sin any more (*iam non esset capax peccati*. ST I–II, 85, 2c). It decreases as to its term or end, because sin is a hindrance to attaining that good, the more so the greater sin is.

Nature’s essential elements can be intact, but its good can be diminished, because one of those elements, the will, can possess a stronger or weaker inclination to its term. Thus, since the good of nature can vary, nature has different moral states: 1) elevated in paradise; 2) in a post-lapsarian

condition; or 3) just without the gift of original justice. The moral disorder does not affect human nature in its substance, since that would tantamount to transforming it into another nature, but in its disposition with respect to the good and, consequently, in its degree of integrity or corruption.

In a hypothetical pure human nature –lacking original justice, but not as a consequence of sin– acting according to reason could cost some struggle, due to a natural opposition or contrariness, but such motions would not incline to sin. In the state of original justice even those motions were prevented, making it easier to act virtuously. When grace and original justice were lost because of sin, those motions were no longer prevented and also acquired greater strength to bend the will towards evil acts. When speaking about the *fomes peccati*, Aquinas says that contrary to the law that ruled in man’s first condition, after sin man is dragged by the rush of sensuality, somehow resembling beasts (*ut sic quodammodo bestiis assimiletur*. ST I–II, 91, 6c). That impulse, the *fomes peccati*, is a kind of law in virtue of the punishment imposed by divine justice, which has as a consequence that man is deprived of his dignity (*hominem destituente propria dignitate*. ST I–II, 91, 6c). Now, this dignity must be the one that befits human nature as such, not the one possessed in paradise, because it is unthinkable that the mere loss or privation of grace and original justice would assimilate man to beasts.

In numerous texts Aquinas clearly does not assimilate the post-lapsarian state of nature with one of mere privation of original justice, without any further moral wound. It is without question that the will suffered the most from the removal of supernatural grace after Adam’s fall and the consequent loss of original justice. Now, Aquinas does not endorse the idea that human nature is totally corrupted and incapable of anything good for that reason. But he certainly thinks that it has been weakened, and that in our present state we are not able to do all the good we eventually could: “in the state of a corrupted nature man is deficient even in what his nature extends to, so that he cannot accomplish all that good with his natural powers” (*in statu naturae corruptae etiam deficit homo ab hoc quod secundum suam naturam potest, ut non possit totum huiusmodi bonum implere per sua naturalia*. ST I–II, 109, 2). Concerning the moral condition of the will, its weakness consists in a sinful

disposition, but one that precedes the use of freedom and therefore excludes the imputation of original sin as a fault to each individual human being.

2. The moral condition of the will

One of the strongest obstacles for admitting the idea that every human being is born tainted with a sin by nature is that this would imply declaring him guilty of an act that in no case he could have committed freely. It does not seem fair to impute a sin to an individual who has not yet reached the age of reason and therefore cannot exercise freedom. We do not reproach a person who was born blind for that condition; on the contrary, we are inclined to pity that person (*Nicomachean Ethics* III, 5, 1114a 21–31. Aristotle 1999, 39). A biologically inherited defect cannot be considered one's own fault and we would not blame the bearer for it. The notion of inheriting somebody else's moral fault appears totally unreasonable and a kind of category mistake, an extrapolation of juridical and biological concepts to morality.

Concurring with this, Kant emphatically rejects any moral disposition in the person not resulting from a free act on his part. Morality begins for Kant with freedom. Even though his concept of autonomy does not imply that we can arbitrarily adopt any moral principles or that we can change them for no reason, it certainly excludes that we can be in a moral condition that does not result from our freedom. Autonomy is the hallmark of morality and, rather than being immoral, heteronomy remains outside of its field: something is moral if it can be imputed (*zugerechnet*) to the free will. No tendency, physical or otherwise, has moral relevance unless freely adopted as a maxim –or general principle– for action.

However, in Kant's understanding of the mystery of original sin two seemingly incompatible instances coexist: on the one hand, evil must be originated in freedom but, on the other hand, every human being without exception is inclined to evil (see Hoping 1990; Ferretti 2009). Since morality is the exclusive domain of freedom, a sin belonging to nature could only be explained if no individual of the species is excepted from a free option for moral evil, however counterintuitive that may sound. The evil propensity

(*Hang zum Bösen*) with which every man is born would have to consist in the freely chosen wrong order of tendencies, subordinating the moral law to the love of oneself (*Selbstliebe*).

The *peccatum originarium* is the evil tendency thus understood, but it cannot be an act, whose origin in time could be pointed out. Kant had stated in his third antinomy, that it is contradictory to look for the free beginning of an act in time, since what occurs in time obeys to necessary laws (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* B 471–479/A 443–455. Kant 1974, 426–433). Besides, an evil disposition cannot be contracted with an act of our empirical use of freedom in time, because in that case some men will contract it and others will not. Therefore, its origin must be a pre-temporal act of freedom, which lies beyond our experience but is nonetheless rooted in transcendental/noumenal freedom. The disordered acts that can be observed in man constitute the objects, the matter of evil acts, but their formal foundation (*der formale Grund*) cannot be observed, because it has an intelligible, not a temporal quality.

So, the evil propensity can be imputed to man as his own guilt and is called radical evil (*radikales Böse*). Kant thinks he thus overcomes the difficulty of imputing guilt to someone due to someone else's fault. For him, the worst possible way to understand this radical evil is to represent it as inherited, since that would make its moral quality disappear altogether. Kant is so uncompromising in the requirement of freedom that he says: "when one looks for the rational origin of every evil act, one must consider it as if man committed it coming immediately from the state of innocence" (*Die Religion* B 42/A 38. Kant 1977, 690).

Now, the Christian theological doctrine of original sin –that the present state of mankind is characterized by a moral weakness– does not have the obvious sense that sin is overabundant, nor that the good is hard. The doctrine is not empirical in nature but claims that each human being is born with a moral defect, which did not originate in his own freedom, but still conditions his behavior, external and internal. This is reflected in Aquinas' statement that to be punished for our first parent's sin is also to be punished for our own sin (*pro peccato suo*). Moreover, the Council of Trent

teaches that original sin is *unicuique proprium* (Council of Trent, Session V: *De peccato originali*, canon III), i.e. it cannot be referred to as a general condition of mankind, but it pertains to each individual person. It also teaches that it is transmitted by way of generation; thus, it is inescapable and comes together with belonging to the human species. In other words, original sin is a moral condition of every individual human being prior to any use of freedom on his part. Now, how should we understand that? How is a transmission of a moral fault possible at all? Does that not precisely exclude its moral character, as Kant thought?

By taking recourse to Rosmini's writings, I will try to show that looking closer at the nature of the will may help explain the existence of a moral disorder prior to the exercise of freedom. Accordingly, even though absolutely speaking sin would not exist without there also being guilt at some point –otherwise, the moral disorder would belong to nature as such– the notions are not convertible, since guilt adds to sin the reference to free choice. Not all interpreters of Rosmini have given this distinction its due (Sciamannini 1957, Sanna 1997). To distinguish between sin and guilt does not tantamount to removing guilt completely from the doctrine of original sin but calls for an explanation of its place in the doctrine and of how original sin may be contracted, since it admittedly looks immoral to ascribe to one individual the guilt of another.

Rosmini attributed an enormous importance to the doctrine of original sin, which he understood to unravel many obscurities in our understanding of human nature and of our present condition. He called our first parent's original fault "the solemn fact of mankind" (AS I, 478), a fact determining the entire course of history, salvific and profane. A comprehensive account of Rosmini's treatment of original sin would merit a specific study (see Gomasca 2009). Drawing from several of his works, I will only sketch what his answer would be to the question that motivates this section, which Rosmini expresses thus: "can *sin* exist in a person without it's being the *fault* of that person?" (TC 76).

In his treatise on conscience Rosmini discusses whether there is a dimension of morality present before the judgment of conscience, and he describes

what he calls the “*willed, practical acknowledgement of beings*” (TC 26). This acknowledgement is an affirmation of the value or worth of each being, at a practical, non-speculative level. It is a kind of reflective knowledge, resulting from the attribution of a certain amount or degree of value to the things we know. It is not the mere theoretical judgment that something is good or bad for a given purpose either, but a practical esteem, which can be just or unjust, according to whether we value something for what it is really worth, or above or below that measure. The practical character of such esteem derives from its being produced by the will as an internal word that generates affections and actions. We can therefore already recognize in it a moral quality; it is an internal act of voluntary approval, as if saying to oneself: “I love this thing to such and such degree”. The judgment of conscience presupposes this practical esteem, which is its proper object; it is a further reflection, performed upon the practical judgment. But the judgment of conscience is not a kind of esteem and has no practical character, moving the subject to act in a particular way; the judgment is rather on the moral quality of that esteem. Rosmini defines it as “a speculative judgment on the morality of our practical judgment” (TC 30).

An important consequence is not only that absolutely speaking morality is prior to conscience, since conscience judges about the morality of actions, but also that there can be moral acts performed without an explicit awareness of their moral quality. Of course, moral acts can, and usually do follow from explicit judgments of conscience, but these judgments are *about* morality, they do not create it in the first place. A judgment saying that an action is morally right states that one can will (or perform) that action because it conforms to the order of being, and, conversely, judging an action morally wrong is to affirm that one cannot will (or perform) that action because it implies distorting the right order of things. However, both good and evil can be done without the agent realizing their moral character. We associate conscience with a judgment that condemns or forbids an action because it is more consonant to an upright rational being to do what is morally good without effort, without even noticing it. On the contrary, doing evil puts the rational nature in opposition with the law, thus breaking the harmony

that should exist between our actions and the order of being, expressed by the moral law. Therefore, conscience makes itself known first of all when it condemns, calling the subject's attention to his wrongful state. A person doing always what is morally right would seldom reflect upon his actions, if at all. The overwhelming experience of mankind shows, on the contrary, that we are torn by conflicting tendencies more often than not, and that we frequently find ourselves in conflict with the moral law. Therefore, acting righteously usually requires some kind of explicit assertion of the goodness of the act.

Sin consists precisely in the opposition between the will and the law, i.e. in the tendency to approve of something against the natural order, and to act accordingly. In Rosmini's conception, the law, as a rule, consists in the essence and nature of things, as they are known by us. In other words, the knowledge of something contains the law that guides our actions and also serves as a rule to judge them. The practical acknowledgment of things we just discussed receives its moral qualification from the law thus conceived. It is righteous when in agreement with the law, and corrupt when against it. The truth of things becomes the measure of the will and, consequently, of actions. An ill disposed will is inclined to value or esteem things higher or lower than their nature allows.

Now, the will can be opposed to the law in two different ways: as a result of a free choice or determined by a force it is unable to resist. So, morality can assume one of two forms: it can be either free or necessary (RT 21, 74). In the former case, we speak of fault, and in the latter, there is sin, because the opposition is real, but it cannot be called a personal fault, since it is not originated by the person's free choice. It is obviously this kind that concerns the problem of original sin. But how can a voluntary act be forced?

The natural object of the will is universal good (*bonum in communi*); it thus belongs to its nature to love things according to their degree of goodness. Rosmini describes the will as "a continuous volition of the known being" (AS I, 386) and speaks of a law, according to which it "is inclined towards all goods man knows (...) acquiescing preferably to the greater one of them, if it cannot adhere to all" (RT 295). But the will also naturally loves some objects (*voluntas, in quantum est natura quaedam, aliquid naturaliter*

vult; ST I, 41, 2 ad 3), one of them being the very subject of that first volition. We have a natural love towards ourselves, as well as to everything that concerns our conservation, such as life, health and vigor (*consistentiam naturalem*; ST I–II, 10, 1c), and clearly also happiness (*naturaliter tendit ad beatitudinem*; ST I, 41, 2 ad 3).

This is key to understanding how and why there could be a first disordered act of the will in every human being that is born, since there is “a difference between what man wills by nature in the state of innocence and what man wants by nature in the fallen condition” (RT 66). If our natural constitution were perfectly ordered, so would our natural will be, but a disordered nature would incline the will accordingly. And if man “is defective or spoiled, and subject to perverse suggestions” (AS I, 387), it is also easy to understand that a disordered use of the will ensues from that condition. The practical esteem we naturally give to things as we know them falls spontaneously upon our own nature as we receive it. Therefore, a crooked nature prompts the will to a disordered affection or love.

In order to hold that esteem in check we would need a reason, but there has been no time yet to acquire any reasons and deliberate (TC 66–71; RT 235). In his *Anthropology as an Aid to Moral Science*, Rosmini dedicates many pages to developing a rich and complex phenomenology of the will and freedom (AMS 521–763). He distinguishes between subjective and objective inclinations in the will. Subjective inclinations are those that “incline the will to satisfying the tendencies of its own nature as subject”, and objective inclinations are “the moral *necessity* ... by which the noblest part of man desires to conform with the known truth, to the order of beings. It is a need to acknowledge all beings for what they are, and give each its due” (AMS 604). The latter is a true inclination but requires the development of the power of abstraction. Subjective inclinations, however, produce spontaneous affective volitions, their strength depending on the liveliness and vigor with which things act on the subject. Only after exercising abstraction can the person make judgments on the nature of things and therefore act freely (AMS 538–548).

Therefore, if in our present condition we inherited a disordered nature, the will would adhere to it with an act that is not freely chosen, but rather

compelled or necessitated. Just as when passions are too strong or sudden that they hinder any free resistance, the subjective inclination happens spontaneously and cannot be inhibited. The power of freedom is not abolished but cannot act: “Freedom has the remote power to inhibit the passion, but not always the proximate power... there is the *potency*, but not the *possibility to act*” (RT 304; RT 236). It follows that freedom can exist, but the exercise of freedom be hindered by accidental obstacles (AMS 711). The distinction also explains for Rosmini why Trent teaches that free will has not totally perished as a consequence of Adam’s fall, while at the same time we need God’s grace to merit salvation (Council of Trent, Session VI: *De iustificatione*, canon V).

Because it opposes the law, the right order of things, such inclination is a proper sin. It can be attributed to each individual human being because it is rooted in every single personal will. Aquinas says that original sin refers primarily to the will –*per prius respicit voluntatem*–, where the first inclination to act is rooted, but it belongs to the essence of the soul, “to which the first movement prompting to sin pertains in the first place” (*ad quod primo pertinet causa motiva illius peccati*) (ST I–II, 83, 3c). Despite its personal character, that movement is not a result of a deliberately willed act, so it cannot be imputed as guilt (AMS 871; AS, I, 400–401). Consent actually exists –a practical esteem, an affection has been formed– but it is spontaneous and necessitated; it can only be considered free “in the free cause that induced it [the will] to such a wretched necessity”, that is in Adam (RT 240; ST I–II, 81, 1c).

There is therefore an ambiguity in the common use of the term «voluntary». It is sometimes a synonym for «free» and sometimes just means «pertaining to the will». This ambiguity appears in Aquinas’ discussion of human acts. In one text he says that “voluntary acts are evil when they recede from the order of reason and of the eternal law” (*omnis actus voluntarius est malus per quod recedit ab ordine rationis et legis aeternae*. ST I–II, 21, 1c), and this act may or may not follow a rational deliberation. And very soon afterwards, when speaking about the imputation of the fault, he seems to say that the dominion of the act is proper to all voluntary acts: “The act

is imputed to the agent when it is in the agent's power, so that he has the dominion over that act. This happens in all voluntary acts" (*Tunc autem actus imputatur agenti, quando est in potestate ipsius, ita quod habeat dominium sui actus. Hoc autem est in omnibus actibus voluntariis.* ST I–II, 21, 2c). But it is clear that he is specifically referring there to acts following deliberation, not to all voluntary acts. After all, in the same article he says that "just as evil is broader than sin, sin is broader than guilt" (*sicut malum est in plus quam peccatum, ita peccatum est in plus quam culpa*). So, both Aquinas and Rosmini teach that the will of each individual human being can be inclined to sin, without implying the existence of a personal fault.

Conclusion

These pages offer a mere outline of an answer to the question how can the will be in a sinful condition if no personal fault can be imputed to the person, for that is the notion of a sin of nature. The expression *peccatum naturae* cannot just mean a privation, for the lack of supernatural grace and of a gratuitous gift from God does not imply of itself a moral disorder. The reverse is true: the moral disorder expels God's grace. But if we admit that we are born with a morally disordered nature, we will have to explain how that can be the case without any free act on our part. I have tried to provide a possible explanation relying mostly on Aquinas and Rosmini. My contribution has been guided by the conviction that there is a deep rationality underlying the mystery of original sin, just as in all other mysteries of the Christian revelation, and that philosophy can have an important role in removing concerns about their obscurity.

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