

QUESTION 20

Despair

We next have to consider the vices opposed to hope: first, despair (*desperatio*) (question 20) and, second, presumption (*praesumptio*) (question 21).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is despair a sin? (2) Can despair exist without unbelief? (3) Is despair the greatest of sins? (4) Does despair arise from listlessness (*acedia*)?

Article 1

Is despair a sin?

It seems that despair is not a sin (*desperatio not sit peccatum*):

Objection 1: As is clear from Augustine in *De Libero Arbitrio*, every sin involves turning toward some changeable good, combined with turning away from the unchangeable good. But despair does not involve turning toward any changeable good. Therefore, it is not a sin.

Objection 2: What arises from a good root does not seem to be a sin, since, as Matthew 7:18 says, “A good tree cannot bring produce bad fruits.” But despair seems to proceed from a good root, viz., fear of God, or horror at the magnitude of one’s sins. Therefore, despair is not a sin.

Objection 3: If despair were a sin, then, in the case of the damned, their despairing would be a sin. But this is not imputed to them as a sin (*non imputatur eis ad culpam*); instead, it is imputed to their being damned. Therefore, it is not imputed as a sin to those who are in this life, either (*neque viatoribus imputatur ad culpam*). And so despair is not a sin.

But contrary to this: That through which men are induced to sin seems to be not only a sin, but a principle of sins. But despair is like this; for in Ephesians 4:19 the Apostle says of certain men, “Despairing, they have given themselves up to lasciviousness, unto the working of all uncleanness and covetousness.” Therefore, despair is not only a sin, but a principle of other sins.

I respond: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 6, what affirmation and negation are to the intellect, pursuit and withdrawal are to the appetite, and what true and false are to the intellect, good and bad are to the appetite. And so every appetitive movement that conforms itself to a true understanding (*conformiter se habens intellectui vero*) is good in its own right, whereas every appetitive movement that conforms itself to a false understanding is bad in its own right.

Now as regards God, it is a true intellectual estimate that the salvation of men comes from Him and that forgiveness is granted by Him to sinners—this according to Ezechiel 18:23 (“I desire not the death of the sinner, but that he should be converted and live”). On the other hand, it is a false opinion that He denies forgiveness to a repentant sinner, or that He does not turn sinners toward Himself through justifying grace.

And so just as the movement of hope, which conforms itself to the true estimate, is laudable and virtuous, so the opposite movement of despair, which conforms itself to a false estimate about God, is vicious and sinful.

Reply to objection 1: All mortal sins involve turning away from the unchangeable good and turning toward a changeable good, but in different ways.

For sins that are opposed to the theological virtues—e.g., hatred of God, despair, and unbelief—consist principally in turning away from the unchangeable good, whereas they involve turning toward a changeable good as a consequence of that (*ex consequenti*), insofar as a soul that deserts God must turn toward other things as a consequence.

By contrast, other sins consist principally in turning toward a changeable good, and they involve turning away from the unchangeable good as a consequence of that. For instance, it is not the case that someone who fornicates intends to withdraw from God; instead, he intends to enjoy carnal pleasure, from which it follows as a consequence that he withdraws from God.

Reply to objection 2: There are two ways in which something can proceed from a root of virtue:

In one way, *directly* on the part of the virtue itself, in the way that an act proceeds from a habit, and in this sense it is impossible for a sin to proceed from a virtuous root. This is the sense in which Augustine says in *De Libero Arbitrio*, “No one makes bad use of a virtue.”

In the second way, something proceeds from a virtue *indirectly* or *as an occasion* (*occasionaliter*). And in this sense there is nothing to prevent a sin from proceeding from some virtue, in the way that some individuals are sometimes proud of their virtues—this according to Augustine (“Pride lies in wait for virtuous works, that they might perish”). And this is the way in which despair can arise from the fear of God or from horror at one’s own sins, viz., insofar as one uses these good things badly and takes them as an occasion for despairing.

Reply to objection 3: It is because of the impossibility of turning back toward beatitude that the damned are not in a state of having hope. And so the fact that they do not have hope is not imputed to them as a sin but is instead part of their damnation. Likewise, even in the state of the present life, if someone despairs with respect to something that he is not apt to acquire or that he is not supposed to acquire, then this would not be a sin—for instance, if a physician were to despair of curing some sick man, or if someone despaired of ever becoming rich.

Article 2

Can despair exist without unbelief?

It seems that despair cannot exist without unbelief:

Objection 1: The certitude of hope is derived from faith. But as long as the cause remains, the effect is not removed. Therefore, if faith has not been taken away, then one cannot lose the certitude of hope by despairing.

Objection 2: To prefer one’s own sin to God’s goodness or mercy is to deny the unlimitedness of God’s mercy or goodness—which amounts to unbelief. But one who despairs prefers his own sin to God’s mercy or goodness—this according to Genesis 4:13 (“My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon”). Therefore, anyone who despairs is a non-believer.

Objection 3: Anyone who falls into a condemned heresy is a non-believer. But one who despairs seems to fall into a condemned heresy, viz., the heresy of the Novatians, who claim that sins are not forgiven after Baptism. Therefore, it seems that anyone who despairs is a non-believer.

But contrary to this: What is prior is not removed when what is posterior is removed. But as was explained above (q. 17, a. 7), hope is posterior to faith. Therefore, faith can remain when hope is removed. Therefore, it is not the case that anyone who despairs is a non-believer.

I respond: Unbelief belongs to the intellect, whereas despair belongs to the appetitive power. But the intellect has to do with universals (*intellectus universalium est*), whereas the appetitive power is moved toward particulars, since an appetitive movement is from the soul toward the things, which are in themselves particular.

Now it is possible for someone who has a correct *general* judgment (*habentem rectam existimationem in generali*) not to be correctly related to the appetitive movement because his *particular* judgment has been corrupted (*corrupta eius aestimatione in particulari*). For as *De Anima* 3 explains, from a general judgment one arrives at the desire for a particular thing by the mediation of a particular judgment—just as from a universal proposition one infers a particular conclusion only by assuming a particular proposition. And so it is that someone who has correct faith in general falls short in an appetitive movement toward a particular because his particular judgment has been corrupted by a habit or a passion. For instance, someone who fornicates, in choosing fornication as good for himself right now,

has a corrupt particular judgment, even though he might retain the true general judgment that belongs to the Faith, viz., that fornication is a mortal sin.

Similarly, while retaining a true general judgment regarding the Faith, viz., that there is forgiveness of sins in the Church, someone can undergo a movement of despair, as if he should not hope for forgiveness for himself in the state that he exists in, because his assessment of this particular has been corrupted. And in this way there can be despair without unbelief, just as other mortal sins can exist without unbelief.

Reply to objection 1: An effect is removed not only when its first cause has been removed, but also when a secondary cause has been removed. Hence, the movement of hope can be removed not only when a general judgment about the Faith, which is the first cause of the certitude of hope, has been removed, but also when a particular judgment, which is like a secondary cause, has been removed.

Reply to objection 2: If anyone thought in general that God's mercy is not unlimited, then he would be a non-believer. However, someone who despairs does not think this; instead, he thinks that in *this* state, because of some particular disposition, he should not hope for God's mercy.

Reply to objection 3: Similarly, one should reply to the third objection that the Novatians denied in general that the forgiveness of sins is effected in the Church.

Article 3

Is despair the greatest of sins?

It seems that despair is not the greatest of sins:

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 2), despair can exist without unbelief. But unbelief is the greatest of sins, since it undermines the foundation of the spiritual edifice. Therefore, despair is not the greatest of sins.

Objection 2: As is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 8, a greater evil is opposed to a greater good. But as 1 Corinthians 13:13 says, charity is greater than hope. Therefore, hatred is a greater sin than despair.

Objection 3: The sin of despair involves only a disordered turning away from God. But in other sins there is not only a disordered turning away, but also a disordered turning toward. Therefore, the sin of despair is less grave than the others and not more grave.

But contrary to this: An incurable sin seems to be the most grave—this according to Jeremiah 30:12 (“Your bruise is incurable, your wound is very grievous”). But the sin of despair is incurable—this according to Jeremiah 15:18 (“My hopeless wound refuses to be cured”). Therefore, despair is the most grievous of sins.

I respond: The sins that are opposed to the theological virtues are more grave in their genus than other sins. For since the theological virtues have God as their object, the sins opposed to them involve turning away from God directly and principally. Now each mortal sin is such that its graveness and the principal reason for its badness comes from the fact that one turns away from God. For if there could be a turning toward some changeable good without a turning away from God, then even if the turning toward were disordered, there would not be a mortal sin. And so that which primarily and *per se* involves turning away from God is the most grave among the mortal sins.

Now unbelief, despair, and hatred of God are opposed to the theological virtues. If, among these three sins, hatred and unbelief are compared with despair, they will be found to be more grave in their own right, i.e., with respect to the character of their proper species. For unbelief stems from a man's not believing God's truth itself (*ipsam Dei veritatem non credit*), and hatred of God stems from a man's will opposing God's goodness itself, whereas despair stems from a man's not hoping that he himself will

participate in God's goodness. From this it is clear that unbelief and hatred of God are contrary to God as He is in Himself, whereas despair is contrary to God insofar as His goodness is participated in by us. Hence, it is a greater sin in its own right (*secundum se loquendo*) not to believe God's truth or to hate God than not to hope to acquire glory from Him.

On the other hand, if despair is compared with those other two sins from our perspective (*ex parte nostra*), then despair is more dangerous, since it is through hope that we are called back from evils and brought to pursue goods. And so, when hope is removed, unrestrained men fall into vices and withdraw from good works. Hence, a Gloss on Proverbs 24:10 ("If, being weary, you lose hope on the day of distress, your fortitude will be diminished") says, "Nothing is more execrable than despair, since he who has it loses his constancy both in the general works of this life and, what is worse, in the certitude of faith." And in *De Summo Bono* Isidore says, "To commit a crime is the death of the soul, but to despair is to descend into hell."

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: From this the replies to the objections are clear.

Article 4

Does despair arise from listlessness?

It seems that despair does not arise from listlessness (*desperatio ex acedia non oriatur*):

Objection 1: It is not the case that the same thing comes from diverse causes. But as Gregory says in *Moralia* 31, despair about the future age comes from lust. Therefore, despair does not come from listlessness (*acedia*).

Objection 2: Just as despair is opposed to hope, so listlessness is opposed to spiritual joy. But spiritual joy proceeds from hope—this according to Romans 12:12 ("... rejoicing in hope"). Therefore, listlessness proceeds from despair and not vice versa.

Objection 3: Contraries are causes of contraries. But hope, which despair is opposed to, seems to proceed from considering God's benefits and especially from considering the Incarnation. For in *De Trinitate* 12 Augustine says, "Nothing was so necessary to raise our hope than that we should be shown how much God loves us. Now what greater indication of this is there than that the Son of God should have deigned to enter into a participation in our nature?" Therefore, despair seems to proceed more from neglecting this sort of consideration than from listlessness.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 31 Gregory enumerates despair among the things that proceed from listlessness.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 17, a. 1 and *ST* 1-2, q. 40, a. 1), the object of hope is an arduous good that is possible either through oneself or through someone else (*vel per se vel per alium*). Therefore, there are two possible ways in which the hope for attaining beatitude can fail in someone: (a) because he does not think of it as an *arduous good*, or (b) because he does not consider it as something it is *possible* to obtain either through himself or through someone else.

Now we are led to the point that spiritual goods do not strike us as goods, or do not seem like great goods to us, mainly by having our affections infected by the love of corporeal pleasures, among which the main ones are the pleasures of sex. For because of an affection for these pleasures it happens that a man is disdainful of spiritual goods and does not hope for them as certain *arduous goods*. And on this score despair is caused by *lust* (*luxuria*).

On the other hand, it is by excessive dejection (*nimia deiectione*) that one is led to the point of not regarding some arduous good as *possible* for him to attain, either through himself or through someone else. When this excessive dejection dominates a man's affections, it seems to him that it will never be

possible for him to be raised up to any good. And since listlessness is a certain sort of sadness which makes the spirit dejected, it follows that on this score despair is generated from *listlessness (acedia)*. But this is the *proper* object of hope, viz., that the good be *possible*, since what is good and what is arduous belong to other passions as well. Hence, despair arises especially from listlessness—even though it can arise from lust, as has already been explained.

Reply to objection 1: From this the reply to the first objection is clear.

Reply to objection 2: As the Philosopher says in *Rhetoric* 2, just as hope effects delight, so, too, men who are delighted are made more hopeful. And in the same way, men who are sad more easily fall into despair—this according to 2 Corinthians 2:7 (“... lest anyone of this sort be swallowed up by greater sorrow”).

Still, since the object of hope is a good and since the appetite naturally tends toward what is good, whereas it does not naturally withdraw from what is good, but withdraws from it only because of some supervening obstacle, it follows that joy more directly arises from hope, whereas, conversely, despair more directly arises from sadness.

Reply to objection 3: The very fact that someone neglects to consider God’s benefits arises from listlessness. For a man who is affected by a passion mainly thinks about things that pertain to that passion. Hence, a man who is saddened does not easily think about great and pleasant things; instead, he thinks only about sad things, unless by a great effort he turns away from sad things.