**A Thomistic Alternative to G.E. Moore’s Meta-Ethical Trilemma *[draft]***

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**0. Introduction**

This paper considers whether Aquinas’ arguments to the conclusion that “goodness and being are the same really” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Iª q. 5 a. 1) offers a fourth option to GE Moore’s trilemma regarding the meaning of ‘good.’ First, I offer a brief overview of GE Moore’s trilemma. Second, I will consider a fourth option to Moore’s trilemma by arguing that not only is Moore’s view of good false under its own weight, but also that the truth of Aquinas’ view of good entails that Moore’s view is false. Third, I briefly present one recent objection to Aquinas’ identification of being and good from Dietrich von Hildebrand states, “The first decisive fact we have to state is this: *The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical.*” (Hildebrand, *Ethics*, p. 152 (italics in original)). I conclude with some reflections on the possible compatibility of Hildebrand’s and Aquinas’ meta-ethics and how this compatibility can provide a basis for the reappearance of moral knowledge in the 21st century.

**1. Moore’s Trilemma**

G.E. Moore offers a trilemma about what ‘good’ denotes. According to Moore, “In fact, [a] if it is not the case that ‘good’ denotes something simple and indefinable, only two alternatives are possible: either [b] it is a complex, a given whole, about the correct analysis of which there may be disagreement; or else [c] it means nothing at all, and there is no such subject as Ethics” (Moore, *Principia Ethica* 2nd Ed., p. 66). He states that ‘good’ can only denote one of the following:

*p*: ‘Good’ denotes something simple and indefinable.

*q*: ‘Good’ denotes a complex, given whole (about which there may disagreement).

*r*: ‘Good’ denotes nothing at all (no subject of ethics)

*s*: ‘Good’ denotes *being understood as the completion of essential actualization* (the identity of being and good).

His tri-lemma looks something like this:

{~p -> (q v r) **::** (material implication) ~~p v (q v r) **::** (double negation) p v (q v r)}.

Moore’s argument involving this tri-lemma (Argument M) seems to be something along these lines:

1. ~p -> (q v r) premise

2. ~r (premise, proof in *PE*)

3. ~q (premise, proof in *PE*)

4. ~q & ~r (2, 3 conjunction)

5. ~(q v r) (4, De Morgan’s)

6. ~~p (5, 1 modus tollens)

7. :. p (6, double negation)

Moore’s strategy is to argue for the falsity of *q* and *r* and then conclude that *p* must therefore be the case. Although Moore seems to deduce *p* from the negation of *q* and *r*, he seems to simply assert *p* elsewhere. For instance, towards the beginning of the *Principia Ethica* he states, “If I am asked ‘What Is good’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.” A few pages later, he states, “’Good,’ then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of the word” (p. 61). So, while Moore deduces *p* from Argument M, the truth of *p* is already presumed by Moore from the outset. Further, assuming that Moore’s arguments for the negation of *q* (the ‘open question’ argument) and *r* (“one knows that each state of mind [when it considers ‘good’] has an object and that it is not about ‘nothing at all’” (Willard, p. 125)) are themselves, sound, we might now ask the following. Is there a fourth option to Moore’s trilemma?

**3. A Thomistic Alternative to Moore’s Trilemma: The Identity of Being and Goodness**

I believe that a Thomistic account of the identity of being and goodness can provide a fourth alternative to Moore’s tri-lemma. Consider the fourth option:

*s*: ‘Good’ denotes *being understood as the completion of essential actualization* (the identity of being and good). So, our new quadrilemma looks like this: {*s* v [*q* v (*q* v *r*)]}.

Let us assume that Moore has successfully shown that *q* and *r* both fail, and thus we really need to decide which is true: *s* or *q*. One way to do this would be to give some reasons to show that *q* is false. Let’s call this the *via negativa* for *s*. A second way would be by showing arguments that indicate that the truth of *s* implies that q is false, let’s call this the *via positiva* for *s*. I would like to try both of these strategies.

**2.1 The *Via Negativa* from Dallas Willard’s Commentary on GE Moore’s Vision of Good**

One way to show that *p* (*p*: ‘Good’ denotes something simple and indefinable) is false is to show that *p* leads to a view of good which is so contrary to ordinary experience of good, that it would be absurd to accept *p*, given what we actually to do experience. Dallas Willard shows this strategy in his *Disappearance of Moral Knowledge*, chapter 3 on GE Moore. This strategy if successful in showing the falsity of *p* will allow the establishment of *s* by way of a simple disjunctive syllogism: (*p* v *s*), ~*p*, :. *s*.

According to Willard, Moore claims that “to get a “complete description” of something that has G [where ‘G’ is the name of the foundational moral property ‘good’ (Willard, p. 132)], you need not mention any predicates of [intrinsic] value it possesses” (Willard p. 138). However, Willard points out that “if you omit any intrinsic property, your description of the thing in question is incomplete” (p. 138). Willard goes on to wonder how “any explication of ‘complete description’ could fail to be question-begging, however. What would “complete” mean if it omitted the intrinsic value of a thing?” (p. 138). Willard explains that Moore doesn’t clarify this idea, but rather “throws up his hands and walks away” (p. 138). Willard claims that, if this is what Moore is doing, then (according to Moore) “G” “is in or of what possesses it in a way radically unlike any other “predicate” … Thus, it does not have that relation to things of intrinsic value that natural (and metaphysical) properties have to what has them” (p. 138).

Willard points out that Moore’s view of goodness has a profound effect on Moore’s view of our knowledge of the rightness and wrongness of human action, and ultimately on our understanding of the nature of good itself. Willard concludes that, “The first point commonly raised against Moore is that the foundational property of his putative science of ethics, ‘goodness itself,’ is a universal abstract entity that is not given to consciousness or cognition through sense perception or through ways constructed from sense perception” (Willard, p. 156). As I will argue below, this is exactly what a Thomistic view of the nature of existence and the nature of the good as natural appetency does. We see it in our ordinary acts of perception.

But, according to Willard, things get even worse for Moore. There is the problem of how Moore’s’ view of “goodness itself” applies to the “relationship of the quality of goodness to the things it qualifies and to their qualities in virtue of which it belongs to them. In his effort to detach ethics from the sciences and “metaphysics,” he locates good at some quite problematic distance from its instances” (Willard, p. 156).” According to Willard, the main issue for Moore is, “The problem with ‘goodness itself,’ in Moore’s presentation, is not just that it is ontologically and epistemologically “strange,” but that there is no intelligible account of how it (strange or not) relates to its instances, nor of how that (supposedly necessary) relationship is known—self-evidently known!” (Willard, p. 158).

Given these problems, according to Willard, the main question of ethics, which begins with “What is goodness itself? “clearly cannot be answered at the level of knowledge, or it is simply unclear what the answers mean . . . The picture he [Moore] paints of moral knowledge makes it clear that we cannot have moral knowledge in most areas of moral concern, at least, and the idea of ethics becoming a science simply blows up in his face” (p. 160).

Thus, Moore’s analysis of goodness itself, our proposition *p* (*p*: ‘Good’ denotes something simple and indefinable), “pushed moral values out of human reach: out of the world human beings have to live in. So far as what might be understood as natural and normal human events are concerned, those values might as well be nothing (nihil)” (p. 160). Thus, Moore’s conclusion of his trilemma, that good is simple and indefinable removes good from the way things are, from things that exist, from being. According to Willard, Moore succeeds in a “total shift in subject matter” from “moral distinctions in a corresponding moral reality” to “moral language and its ‘meanings’” (p. 161). This is a way of removing good from being, from reality and making it a function of our words and behavior.

Willard argues that Moore’s trilemma leads to the annihilation of good from reality itself. If Willard’s analysis is correct, then *p* (*p*: ‘Good’ denotes something simple and indefinable) entails its own falsification. Thus, Willard’s argument contributes to the demonstration of the truth of our second premise in our simple disjunctive syllogism, (*p* v *s*), ~*p*, :. *s*. But we need one more step to demonstrate the soundness of the entire syllogism by arguing for the truth of the first premise. Namely, we need an argument that *s* (*s*: ‘Good’ denotes *being understood as the completion of essential actualization* (the identity of being and good)) is true.

**2.2 Aquinas’ Four Ways to Good**

**2.2.1 1st Way: The Argument from Desire/Appetunt/ἐφίεται**

Aquinas writes in *ST I 5 1*:

The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. i): "Goodness is what all desire." Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual, as is clear from the foregoing (3, 4; 4, 1). Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness, which being does not present.

Stump and Kretzmann interpret this as:

“Goodness is what all desire, says Aquinas quoting Aristotle, and what is desired is … desirable. Desirability is an essential aspect of goodness. Now, if a thing is desirable as a thing of a certain kind … [then] it is desirable to the extent to which it is perfect of that kind … [A] thing is perfect of its kind to the extent to which it is fully realized or developed, to the extent to which the potentialities definitive of its kind … have been actualized. And so, Aquinas says, a thing is perfect and hence desirable to the extent to which it is in being. That’s one way of seeing how it is true to say that a things goodness is its being” (Stump and Kretzmann, p 99-100).

The conclusion of Aquinas’ argument here appears to be a strong identity claim: “goodness and being are the same really.” In order to get this strong claim, two separate arguments are needed. So, this first way has two parts. Let us look at each in turn.

**2.2.1.1 The First way Part 1: All G are E.**

This argument is really three arguments combined. In order to make the arguments clearer, I use the following key to stand for the categories referred to in Aquinas’ argument.

Key:

G= Good

D= Desirable

P= Perfect

A= Actual

E= Existence (being)

Here is the structure of the **three** arguments for Aquinas’ conclusion with the four premises introduced in turn followed by the syllogisms which flow from them:

Premise 1 is:

“The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the

Philosopher says (Ethic. i): "Goodness is what all desire";

P1: All G are D.

Premise 2 is:

“Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection”;

P2: All D are P.

Formalized Argument 1 is:

P1: All D are P

P2: All G are D

C1 :. All G are P.

Premise 3 is:

“But everything is perfect so far as it is actual”;

P3: All P are A.

Formalized Argument 2 is:

P3: All P are A.

C1: All G are P

C2: :. All G are A

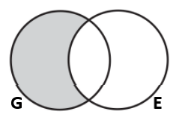
Premise 4 is:

“it is existence that makes all things actual”;

P4: All A are E.

Formalized argument 3 is:

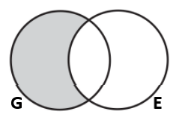
P4: All A are E

C2: All G are A

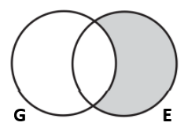
C3: :. All G are E.

This is the Venn diagram for “C3: All G are E”:

“C3: All G are E” is the conclusion of Aquinas’ argument in the text from the Summa quoted above, and seems to be the conclusion of Stump and Kretzmann’s argument as well, if the premises are interpreted in the way that I have laid out.

 So far, Aquinas has demonstrated that Good is Existence. The Venn diagram for C3 illustrates that all things in the category of Good are in the category of Existence. But, Aquinas’ conclusion of the argument seems much stronger than C3. Aquinas states: **“Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really.”** This seems to be a much stronger claim of identity than the conclusion described by Stump and Kretzmann. Although Stump and Kretzmann do claim that for Aquinas “’being’ and ‘goodness’ are the same in reference differing only in sense” (Stump and Kretzmann p. 99) .The actual conclusion from Aquinas asserts that not only

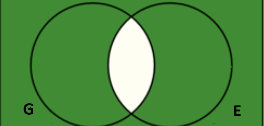
C3: All G are E

but also the converse of C3 as well, namely:

C3\*: All E are G.

It is obvious that Aquinas cannot logically derive C3\* from C3 without committing the fallacy of illicit conversion for an A type universal affirmative categorical proposition. So, since the conclusion of Aquinas’ argument seems to be a conjunction of C3 and C3\*, Aquinas needs a second argument to establish C3\* independently from the argument for C3. The passage above from ST I, I Q5 A1 does not seem to have such an argument explicitly spelled out. However, the conclusion to Aquinas’ argument: “Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really” seems to be a claim of identity, at least in the sense that All G are E ***and*** All E are G.

If these two categorical propositions were combined into one Venn diagram, they would look



like this:

This diagram illustrates that All G are E and All E are G. (It also asserts that there are no non-Es and no non-Gs. Strictly speaking, this is not logically entailed by the conjunction of All G are E and All E are G, but because non-E simply means “that which does not exist”, it seems to be a necessary truth that there is nothing (represented by the shading on the diagram) outside the category of E (existence)). So, how are we to get C3\* from this passage of the *Summa*?

One way to get C3\* from this passage is to assume the following. Since the conclusion is a strong identity statement, then it seems to be the case that the four premises (P1-P4) that Aquinas introduces in Argument 1 must also be taken as strong identity claims as well. Or, they could be interpreted as asserting not only the A type propositions that they are, but also their converse.

Please note that I am not claiming that the converse can be deduced from the four premises that Aquinas introduces. What I am claiming is that when Aquinas asserts P1-P4 in the argument, he intends to assert these (or at least they need to be interpreted as) as having claims to identity (i.e. that they should be understood as *both* an A claim *and* its converse). By understanding P1-P4 in this way, we are able to get to C3\*, which when combined with C3 gives Aquinas the conclusion that goodness and being are in the same category.

**2.2.1.2 The 1st way Part 2: All G are E**

Now let us elaborate the second half of the identity claim in the conclusion of the first way: All G are E. This argument will have the same three part argument form as the first half. In order to make the argument clearer the same Key will be used for Argument 1 above:

Premise 1 is:

“The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the

Philosopher says (Ethic. i): "Goodness is what all desire,” and should be interpreted as:

P1\*: All D are G.

Premise 2 is:

“Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection” and should be interpreted as:

P2\*: All P are D.

Formalized Argument 1\* is:

P 2\*: All D are G

P1\*: All P are D

C1\* :. All P are G

Premise 3 is:

“But everything is perfect so far as it is actual,” and should be interpreted as:

Premise 3\*: All A are P.

Formalized Argument 2\* is:

C1\*: All P are G

P3\*: All A are P

C2\*: :. All A are G.

Premise 4 is: “it is existence that makes all things actual” and should be interpreted as:

P4\*: All E are A.

C2\*: All A are G

P4\*: All E are A

C3\*:. All G are E.

So, for Argument 2, C3\*: “All G are E” is the conclusion when the P1-P4 are interpreted as strong identity claims giving us P1\*-P4\* as the converse of P1-P4. Thus, If C3 and C3\* can both be established on this interpretation of the text, then Aquinas’ demonstration that being and good are really the same has been made explicit.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**2.2.2 2nd Way: The Argument from Corruption Resistance**

Aquinas writes in *SCG I 37 4*:

[4] Furthermore, “the good is that which all things desire.” The Philosopher introduces this remark as a “felicitous saying” in Ethics I [1]. But all things, each according to its mode, desire to be in act; this is clear from the fact that **each thing according to its nature resists corruption**. **To be in act, therefore, constitutes the nature of the good.** Hence it is that evil, which is opposed to the good, follows when potency is deprived of act, as is clear from the Philosopher in Metaphysics IX [9]. But, as we have shown, God is being in act without potency. Therefore, He is truly good.

[5] Moreover, the communication of being and goodness arises from goodness. This is evident from the very nature and definition of the good. **By nature, the good of each thing is its act and perfection.** Now, each thing acts in so far as it is in act, and in acting it diffuses being and goodness to other things. Hence, it is a sign of a being’s perfection that it “can produce its like,” as may be seen from the Philosopher in Meteorologica IV [3]. Now, the nature of the good comes from its being something appetible. This is the end, which also moves the agent to act. That is why it is said that the good is diffusive of itself and of being. But this diffusion befits God because, as we have shown above, being through Himself the necessary being, God is the cause of being for other things. God is, therefore, truly good.

Stump and Kretzmann’s interpretation is:

“Everything resists its own corruption in accordance with its nature, a tendency he interprets as its aiming (naturally) at being fully actual, not merely partially or defectively in being. Thus, since goodness is what all things aim at or desire, each things goodness is it full actuality” (p. 100)

This argument seems fairly straightforward, but it seems to only prove a relation between goodness and full actuality. To make this clearer, a second argument seems to be needed to explicitly show that goodness and being are related. Here are how the two arguments seem to connect:

P1 All things that resist their own corruption are full actuality.

P2 All Goodness are things that resist their own corruption.

C1 :. All Goodness are full actuality.

P3 All full actuality are being.

C1 All Goodness are full actuality.

C2 :. All Goodness are being.

The second conclusion in the second way to good here is the same as C3\* in the argument from the first way. So, perhaps if this argumentation is correct, the 2nd way to good can serve as an alternate (or complementary) route to C3\* which focuses on something slightly different in terms of “corruption resistance” instead of mere appetency (or aim-at-edness).

One of the key notions in this quotation/selection from the *Summa* which Stump and Kretzmann use as the basis for the second way are the following statements: “To be in act, therefore, constitutes the nature of the good,” and “By nature, the good of each thing is its act and perfection.” These ideas will become especially important when we look at Aquinas’ understanding of how we *know* the nature of the good, in our justification of the soundness of these arguments.

**2.2.3 3rd Way: An Argument from Essential Teleology/Fulfillment**

Aquinas writes in *ST I-II 1 5*:

First, because, since everything desires its own perfection, a man desires for his ultimate end, that which he desires as his perfect and crowning good. Hence Augustine (De Civ. Dei xix, 1): "In speaking of the end of good we mean now, not that it passes away so as to be no more, but that it is perfected so as to be complete." It is therefore necessary for the last end so to fill man's appetite, that nothing is left besides it for man to desire.

Stump and Kretzmann’s interpretation is:

“What is desired solely for its own sake is what the desirer perceives as the desirer’s final good … that in which the hierarchy of its desire culminates. But what each desirer desires in that way is the fulfillment of its own nature … Each thing aims above all at being as complete, whole, and free from defect as it can be. But the state of its being complete and whole just is that thing’s being fully actual … Therefore, full actualization is equivalent to final goodness, aimed at or desired by every thing.”

Here is one way to formalize this argument:

P1. All culmination of desire is fully actualized being.

P2. All final goods are the culmination of desire.

C. :. All final goods are fully actualized being.

This argument seems fairly straightforward. The major term “fully actualized being” would seem to be equivalent to being itself. This argument then contributes to the conclusions of the first two ways by emphasizing both the very teleological nature of being and goodness as well as the completion of goodness and being as co-extensive reality.

**2.2.4 4th Way: The Argument from Aiming at Being**

Aquinas writes in *SCG III 3.4, 11*:

[4] Besides, every action and movement are seen to be ordered in some way toward being, either that it may be preserved in the species or in the individual, or that it may be newly acquired. Now, the very fact of being is a good, and so all things desire to be. Therefore, every action and movement are for the sake of a good. …

[11] This is the reason why the philosophers, in defining the good, have said: “the good is what all desire. And Dionysius states that “all crave the good and the best [ De div. nom. IV, 4].”

Stump and Kretzmann interpretation is:

“[E]very action is ordered toward being, toward preserving or enhancing being in some respect either in the individual or in its species: in acting all things aim at being. Therefore, again, being is what all desire; and so being is goodness.“ (Stump and Kretzmann p. 101)

The way in which Stump and Kretzmann formulate this argument is puzzling because the predicate term of the conclusion, “Being is goodness” doesn’t show up in the premises of the text. Perhaps it is enthymemic in the following way:

P1 All desires aimed at are good.

P2 All being are desires aimed at.

C :. All being are good.

If this is right, then it seems like this fourth way, like the first way only gets us to “All being are good” but not to “All good are being.” If this stronger conclusion is what Aquinas (and Stump and Kretzmann) are after, then a second argument will be needed, perhaps something like:

P1\* All desires aimed at are being.

P2\* All good are desires aimed at.

C\* :. All good are being.

This the combination of C and C\* here will (as in the first way) give us a stronger identity claim between being and good.

**2.3 What about the Soundness of the Four Ways to Good?**

Aquinas’ “four ways to good” can be interpreted as clearly valid deductions. The four conclusions are nearly all similar: being and goodness are the same in reality, with the third way emphasizing the full actuality of being and goodness understood as identical in reality. The arguments are excellent tools in clarifying the relationship between goodness and being.

However, none of these arguments prove that goodness exists, nor do any of these arguments show us how we know what goodness is. One might respond by saying, yes, but so what? That’s the nature of deduction. The conclusions are about goodness, and since the arguments are deductive, there can’t be anything new in the conclusion that’s not contained in the premises. These arguments don’t prove that goodness exists, they simply assume that goodness exists, as at least one of the premises in each argument must be about goodness. So, what’s the problem?

Perhaps for Aquinas, and every truly common-sensical philosopher, the need for a proof or evidence to prove the truth of a premise containing the predicate term “good” is simply unnecessary. For those of us living well after modern skepticism, and post-modern nihilism about the reality of “good” it seems that evidence for all premises containing the predicate “good” is a must.

Thankfully, Aquinas gives us such a way to “see” that good and being overlap. This “seeing” or direct rational insight comes in the form of a “particularlist” epistemology based on common-sense empirical experience of being (existence itself) and goodness that is identical to it. The hint that Aquinas gives us is found in the text that Stump and Kretzmann base what I am calling “the second way: the argument from corruption resistance.” In that text Aquinas says several times: “To be in act, therefore, constitutes the nature of the good,” and “By nature, the good of each thing is its act and perfection.”

**3.0 Defending the Soundness of the Four Ways**

To give a justification for the truth of the premises that contain the predicate “good” in each of the four ways, one must carefully consider how we know “being qua being” itself through direct experience of ordinary common sense realities. Aquinas’ careful description of how we know being itself has directly built into it the possibility of direct awareness goodness. Aquinas’ views about the ultimate nature of being qua being carry with it the very “desirability” that is referred to in P1 and P1\* in the 1st way above.

Here is a brief description of how this works. When we are aware of any existing thing, we are directly aware through judgement that the existence of a thing is the actualization of its essence (see Klubertanz *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* pp. 45-52 and Maritain *Existence and the Existent*, 26-28 footnote 13.). Since we can directly see through judgment that existence is essential actualization, then necessarily we can directly see that an actualized essence is a perfection of a “desire” (i.e. teleological completion) of an essence, with respect to its own existence. The essence of any possibilia has a “desire,” a “natural appetency,” a real “aim at-edness” in the essence. Further, when that essence is actualized, the “aim-at-edness” of the essence is complete and perfected, just in virtue of its existence (its essential actualization). This is something that we can be aware of when we experience anything that exists. When we are aware of any existing thing, we are aware of an essence that “aim ats” or “aims toward” (desires) its own existence. We are aware of the completion and perfection of an essence. This awareness of the natural fulfillment of “aim-at-edness” (natural appetency or desire) is what Aquinas means by goodness presenting “the aspect of desirableness” which being/existence understood merely as essential actualization does not (see Summa quotation at the end of the first way).

When we focus our minds on this way in which an essence has an “aim-at-edness” we can see the way in which there is a two-fold nature of goodness as completion/perfection of the “aim-at-edness” of any essence. First, there is the goodness that is present in the completeness of every act of being. We can focus on an aspect of the actualization of an essence that simply is the “aiming at” or “aiming toward” the “desirability” present within any actualized essence to be what it fully is as a completed perfection. This is the essence of good. Good is essential actualization viewed as completion of the possible perfection of an essence. Thus, the premises of the four ways that contain the predicate goodness can be established without the need for additional argument. They are established as true by direct experience of the nature of being itself. Therefore, with respect to logical validity *and* soundness the four ways to good are good!

If these arguments are sound, we now have good evidence for the truth of *s* (*s*: ‘Good’ denotes *being understood as the completion of essential actualization* (the identity of being and good)). In section 2.1, I argued that Willard’s argument against *p* (*p*: ‘Good’ denotes something simple and indefinable), entailed that *p* was false. However, if Aquinas’ arguments for *s* are sound, their soundness also implies that *p* is false. For, if being and goodness are identical then, goodness has the same definition as being. And, if being itself is essential actualization, and is not simple, at least for all things which are outside of God, and if goodness is identical to being, then goodness is not simple either. So, not only do Aquinas arguments for *s* show that we can define the good, because we can see through metaphysical judgment that it is identical with being, but his arguments also show that the good is not simple for created beings. Thus, the soundness of the simple syllogism arguing for the Thomistic alternative to Moore’s trilemma is sound in both premises.

**3.0 Hildebrand and the Non-Identity of the Notions of Good and Being**

One major objection to the soundness of the Thomistic alternative to Moore’s trilemma comes from a 20th century thinker who is, like Aquinas, a realist about goodness, and who takes seriously the objectivity of moral knowledge. In this section, I offer an evaluation of Hildebrand’s argument for the conclusion that: “The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical. In his *Ethics*, Hildebrand maintains that, “The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical.” This appears to be a direct contradiction to the conclusion of Aquinas’ “four ways.” Let us briefly exam how Hildebrand comes to this conclusion.

Hildebrand begins his inquiry into the nature of ethics by starting in a particularist fashion with the primary data of concrete cases of ethical experiences. Specifically, Hildebrand makes very clear from the outset that he is restricting his understanding of “bonum” to the personal sphere. Instead of beginning in the broadest way with “bonum est quod omnes desiderant” (the good is what all desire), Hildebrand begins with “desiderare” (desire/motivation) “in the genuine sense, that is, as a relation that essentially presupposes a person … in the sense of a personal act as it is given to us in experience” (*Ethics* p. 30).

Hildebrand claims that there is a danger in taking “impersonal beings, impersonal relations, and impersonal principles” as a pattern for personal ethics, as it may cause us to “grasp the nature” of ethical actions, or reducing them to the impersonal” (p. 31). In addition it may cause us to overlook the “ontologically superior character” of personal actions. But this seems to be an argument not against the real identity of being and good, but rather an argument to the conclusion that the goodness in human personal actions are “ontologically superior” to what Hildebrand calls the “formal goodness” of mere being (or of being qua being).

Perhaps some clarification of what Hildebrand’s claim amounts to when he claims, “The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical.” This statement mean at least two things:

i) It is not the case that being and good are identical. (A rejection of the Thomistic identity claim).

ii) Mere goodness and mere being are not identical apart from a personalist ethics. (A rejection of philosophical non-personalism).

Let us examine each of these two possibilities in turn.

First, could Hildebrand really mean to affirm: i) It is not the case that being and good are identical? This seems to be a clear contradiction of Aquinas’ conjunctive claims discussed above that All Goodness are Being and All Being are Goodness. If Hildebrand does mean to contradict Aquinas, then he simply needs to show that this conjunction is false, and to do this he only needs to show that one of the conjuncts is false. Thus Hildebrand needs only to affirm one of the following claims: 1) Some G are not B or 2) Some B are not G.

The first of these two options seems far less promising than the second. To affirm 1) “Some G are not B” would mean that there is at least one good thing that lacks being (i.e. doesn’t exist). This would require something being good without being. But that seems to be a flat out contradiction. So, 1) needs to be rejected.

This leaves 2) Some B are not G. Affirming this would mean that there are things that exist that aren’t good. Perhaps Hildebrand does maintain this. He does claim that there are innumerable “qualitative disvalues.” The “real presence in the world” of which we must admit “if we want to remain truly in contact with reality” (p. 164). Is it Hildebrand’s strong metaphysical realism that seems to be driving an affirmation of the positive being of disvalues, of things that have being but are outside the category of good? Perhaps.

In his “Introductory Study to *Ethics*” John Crosby recognizes that “Hildebrand broke with the tradition of Western philosophy that takes moral evil as a privation of the moral value that ought to be in a person.” For Hildebrand, moral disvalue “is not just a lack … but the contrary opposite of it (p. xl).” This seems to indicate that Hildebrand maintains 2) “Some B are not G.” There are existing things that are not good. If this is true, then this would be the contradiction of one of the conjunctions of Aquinas’ arguments that good and being are the same in reality.

If i) “It is not the case that being and good are identical” is a correct interpretation of Hildebrand’s claim that “The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical” then the argument between Hildebrand and Aquinas would hinge upon an understanding of the nature of evil as either positive being or as privation of being. Thus, to resolve the issue would require a longer evaluation of the arguments for Hildebrand’s rejection of the traditional Christian approach to personal evil as a privation. This is worth exploring, but is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, that this might simply be a longer intra-mural debate between philosophical realists who maintain the objectivity of moral reality and moral knowledge but simply differ as to the ontological status of evil.

Let us turn now to the second possible interpretation of Hildebrand’s claim that “The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical” which is ii) “Mere goodness and mere being are not identical apart from a personalist ethics.” There seems to be some evidence in the text of the *Ethic*s that Hildebrand maintains Aquinas’ strong claim that being and goodness are identical, especially when Hildebrand discusses the relationship between God and value. Hildebrand states:

We can even understand that the Supreme Being cannot but be Absolute Goodness. This is not a tautological statement declaring *de definitione* that **value is synonymous with being.** On the contrary, it is an overwhelming insight. It is this insight that accounts for the gap separating Christian natural theology from radical metaphysical pessimism. With the datum of value before us, and we mean especially the datum of qualitative value, we can grasp with our intellect that insofar as the Absolute Being is concerned**, a necessary relation exists between value and being.** It is this **essential relation or connection between being and value** that makes it possible for us to grasp in natural theology that the **Absolute Person of God must be absolute goodness and beauty**. This insight concerning **the Absolute Person confirms the message implicitly contained in every qualitative value in a real being** (*Ethics*, p. 167, bold emphases added).

In this passage it appears that Hildebrand affirms the identity of being and goodness, but makes it explicit that in doing so, one ought never to forget the *personal* essential nature of both being and goodness. What is especially salient here is his emphasis that the personal nature of both being and goodness, their synonymy, the necessary and essential relations between the two are knowable as datum of natural theology.

Thus, when Hildebrand states that “The notion of good and the notion of being are not identical” he is reminding us that we cannot understand something like Aquinas’ claim that “goodness and being are the same really” apart from the necessary, essential presence of a Person in both being and good. This is not something that Aquinas rejects. I believe that it is something that he accepts, and in his defense of the identity of being and goodness in the “four ways” discussed above he assumes it. This is to be expected for St. Thomas Aquinas writing in an age when special revelation was widely accepted. For Hildebrand, however, writing in the mid-20th century after 700 years of decline in philosophical reflection away from the necessary and essential relation of a personal God, and His necessary and essential relation between being and goodness, there is a need for this blunt reminder.

Thus, we can only make sense of the relation between goodness and being with reference to a Person, namely Him “in whom we live and move and have our being.” In the early 21st century, that reminder is especially important, as we not only live in a cultural and philosophical zeitgeist that rejects revealed theology, but also natural theology, along with the very notions of real objective truth, being, goodness and value. Hildebrand’s personalism in both metaphysics and ethics may supplement, and advance Aquinas’ recognition of the strong identity between being and good.

By a personalist answer to the “intension question” in Willard’s project (What is goodness?) we will have an important framework by means of which to consider   
“good persons as the central subject of moral theory” (Willard, p. 358), which, following Hildebrand, can give us knowledge from concrete datum of experience, and has the advantage of not proceeding “from theories … nor from attitudes or plans we have adopted, but from the details of the particular case and situation … from the immediate relation to persons in concrete situations” (Willard, p. 366). If the disappearance of moral knowledge began in earnest with Moore’s trilemma, perhaps a robust personalist ontology of goodness relying on Thomistic metaphysics can contribute to the reappearance of moral knowledge.

1. If the text itself does not bear out this interpretation, then the validity puzzle will need a different solution. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)