

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 73](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

OF BACKBITING [*Or detraction] (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider backbiting, under which head there are four points of inquiry:

- [\(1\)](#) What is backbiting?
 - [\(2\)](#) Whether it is a mortal sin?
 - [\(3\)](#) Of its comparison with other sins;
 - [\(4\)](#) Whether it is a sin to listen to backbiting?
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[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 73](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 1](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether backbiting is suitably defined as the blackening of another's character by secret words?

Objection 1: It would seem that backbiting is not as defined by some [*Albert the Great, Sum. Theol. II, cxvii.], "the blackening of another's good name by words uttered in secret." For "secretly" and "openly" are circumstances that do not constitute the species of a sin, because it is accidental to a sin that it be known by many or by few. Now that which does not constitute the species of a sin, does not belong to its essence, and should not be included in its definition. Therefore it does not belong to the essence of backbiting that it should be done by secret words.

Objection 2: Further, the notion of a good name implies something known to the public. If, therefore, a person's good name is blackened by backbiting, this cannot be done by secret

Objection 3: Further, to detract is to subtract, or to diminish something already existing. But sometimes a man's good name is blackened, even without subtracting from the truth: for instance, when one reveals the crimes which a man has in truth committed. Therefore not every blackening of a good name is backbiting.

On the contrary, It is written ([Eccles. 10:11](#)): "If a serpent bite in silence, he is nothing better than backbiteth."

I answer that, Just as one man injures another by deed in two ways---openly, as by robbery or by doing him any kind of violence---and secretly, as by theft, or by a crafty blow, so again one man injures another by words in two ways---in one way, openly, and this is done by reviling him, as stated above ([Question \[72\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#))---and in another way secretly, and this is done by backbiting. Now from the fact that one man openly utters words against another man, he would appear to think little of him, so that for this reason he dishonors him, so that reviling is detrimental to the honor of the person reviled. On the other hand, he that speaks against another secretly, seems to respect rather than slight him, so that he injures directly, not his honor but his good name, in so far as by uttering such words secretly, he, for his own part, causes his hearers to have a bad opinion of the person against whom he speaks. For the backbiter apparently intends and aims at being believed. It is therefore evident that backbiting differs from reviling in two points: first, in the way in which the words are uttered, the reviler speaking openly against someone, and the backbiter secretly; secondly, as to the end in view, i.e. as regards the injury inflicted, the reviler injuring a man's honor, the backbiter injuring his good name.

Reply to Objection 1: In involuntary commutations, to which are reduced all injuries inflicted on our neighbor, whether by word or by deed, the kind of sin is differentiated by the circumstances "secretly" and "openly," because involuntariness itself is diversified by violence and by ignorance, as stated above ([Question \[65\]](#), [Article \[4\]](#); [FS, Question \[6\]](#), [Articles \[5\]](#),8).

Reply to Objection 2: The words of a backbiter are said to be secret, not altogether, but in relation to the person of whom they are said, because they are uttered in his absence and without his knowledge. On the other hand, the reviler speaks against a man to his face. Wherefore if a man speaks ill of another in the presence of several, it is a case of backbiting if he be absent, but of reviling if he alone be present: although if a man speak ill of an absent person to one man alone, he destroys his good name not altogether but partly.

Reply to Objection 3: A man is said to backbite [detrehere] another, not because he detracts from the truth, but because he lessens his good name. This is done sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Directly, in four ways: first, by saying that which is false about him; secondly, by stating his sin to be greater than it is; thirdly, by revealing something unknown about him; fourthly, by ascribing his good deeds to a bad intention. Indirectly, this is done either by gainsaying his good, or by maliciously concealing it, or by diminishing it.

Objection 1: It would seem that backbiting is not a mortal sin. For no act of virtue is a mortal sin. Now, to reveal an unknown sin, which pertains to backbiting, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#), ad 3), is an act of the virtue of charity, whereby a man denounces his brother's sin in order that he may amend: or else it is an act of justice, whereby a man accuses his brother. Therefore backbiting is not a mortal sin.

Objection 2: Further, a gloss on Prov. 24:21, "Have nothing to do with detractors," says: "The whole human race is in peril from this vice." But no mortal sin is to be found in the whole of mankind, since many refrain from mortal sin: whereas they are venial sins that are found in all. Therefore backbiting is a venial sin.

Objection 3: Further, Augustine in a homily On the Fire of Purgatory [*Serm. civ in the appendix to St. Augustine's work] reckons it a slight sin "to speak ill without hesitation or forethought." But this pertains to backbiting. Therefore backbiting is a venial sin.

On the contrary, It is written ([Rm. 1:30](#)): "Backbiters, hateful to God," which epithet, according to a gloss, is inserted, "lest it be deemed a slight sin because it consists in words."

I answer that, As stated above ([Question \[72\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)), sins of word should be judged chiefly from the intention of the speaker. Now backbiting by its very nature aims at blackening a man's good name. Wherefore, properly speaking, to backbite is to speak ill of an absent person in order to blacken his good name. Now it is a very grave matter to blacken a man's good name, because of all temporal things a man's good name seems the most precious, since for lack of it he is hindered from doing many things well. For this reason it is written (Ecclus. 41:15): "Take care of a good name, for this shall continue with thee, more than a thousand treasures precious and great." Therefore backbiting, properly speaking, is a mortal sin. Nevertheless it happens sometimes that a man utters words, whereby someone's good name is tarnished, and yet he does not intend this, but something else. This is not backbiting strictly and formally speaking, but only materially and accidentally as it were. And if such defamatory words be uttered for the sake of some necessary good, and with attention to the due circumstances, it is not a sin and cannot be called backbiting. But if they be uttered out of lightness of heart or for some unnecessary motive, it is not a mortal sin, unless perchance the spoken word be of such a grave nature, as to cause a notable injury to a man's good name, especially in matters pertaining to his moral character, because from the very nature of the words this would be a mortal sin. And one is bound to restore a man his good name, no less than any other thing one has taken from him, in the manner stated above ([Question \[62\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)) when we were treating of restitution.

Reply to Objection 1: As stated above, it is not backbiting to reveal a man's hidden sin in order that he may mend, whether one denounce it, or accuse him for the good of public justice.

Reply to Objection 2: This gloss does not assert that backbiting is to be found throughout the whole of mankind, but "almost," both because "the number of fools is infinite," [*Eccles. 1:15] and few are they that walk in the way of salvation, [*Cf. Mt. 7:14] and because there are few or none at all who do not at times speak from lightness of heart, so as to injure someone's good name at least slightly, for it is written ([James 3:2](#)): "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man."

Whether backbiting is the gravest of all sins committed against one's neighbor?

Objection 1: It would seem that backbiting is the gravest of all sins committed against one's neighbor. Because a gloss on Ps. 108:4, "Instead of making me a return of love they detracted me," a gloss says: "Those who detract Christ in His members and slay the souls of future believers are more guilty than those who killed the flesh that was soon to rise again." From this it seems to follow that backbiting is by so much a graver sin than murder, as it is a graver matter to kill the soul than to kill the body. Now murder is the gravest of the other sins that are committed against one's neighbor. Therefore backbiting is absolutely the gravest of all.

Objection 2: Further, backbiting is apparently a graver sin than reviling, because a man can withstand reviling, but not a secret backbiting. Now backbiting is seemingly a graver sin than adultery, because adultery unites two persons in one flesh, whereas reviling severs utterly those who were united. Therefore backbiting is more grievous than adultery: and yet of all other sins a man commits against his neighbor, adultery is most grave.

Objection 3: Further, reviling arises from anger, while backbiting arises from envy, according to Gregory (Moral. xxxi, 45). But envy is a graver sin than anger. Therefore backbiting is a graver sin than reviling; and so the same conclusion follows as before.

Objection 4: Further, the gravity of a sin is measured by the gravity of the defect that it causes. Now backbiting causes a most grievous defect, viz. blindness of mind. For Gregory says (Regist. xi, Ep. 2): "What else do backbiters but blow on the dust and stir up the dirt into their eyes, so that the more they breathe of detraction, the less they see of the truth?" Therefore backbiting is the most grievous sin committed against one's neighbor.

On the contrary, It is more grievous to sin by deed than by word. But backbiting is a sin of word, while adultery, murder, and theft are sins of deed. Therefore backbiting is not graver than the other sins committed against one's neighbor.

I answer that, The essential gravity of sins committed against one's neighbor must be weighed by the injury they inflict on him, since it is thence that they derive their sinful nature. Now the greater the good taken away, the greater the injury. And while man's good is threefold, namely the good of his soul, the good of his body, and the good of external things; the good of the soul, which is the greatest of all, cannot be taken from him by another save as an occasional cause, for instance by an evil persuasion, which does not induce necessity. On the other hand the two latter goods, viz. of the body and of external things, can be taken away by violence. Since, however, the goods of the body excel the goods of external things, those sins which injure a man's body are more grievous than those which injure his external things.

grievous, since it deprives man of the life which he already possesses: after this comes adultery, which is contrary to the right order of human generation, whereby man enters upon life. In the last place come external goods, among which a man's good name takes precedence of wealth because it is more akin to spiritual goods, wherefore it is written ([Prov. 22:1](#)): "A good name is better than great riches." Therefore backbiting according to its genus is a more grievous sin than theft, but is less grievous than murder or adultery. Nevertheless the order may differ by reason of aggravating or extenuating circumstances.

The accidental gravity of a sin is to be considered in relation to the sinner, who sins more grievously, if he sins deliberately than if he sins through weakness or carelessness. In this respect sins of word have a certain levity, in so far as they are apt to occur through a slip of the tongue, and without much forethought.

Reply to Objection 1: Those who detract Christ by hindering the faith of His members, disparage His Godhead, which is the foundation of our faith. Wherefore this is not simple backbiting but blasphemy.

Reply to Objection 2: Reviling is a more grievous sin than backbiting, in as much as it implies greater contempt of one's neighbor: even as robbery is a graver sin than theft, as stated above ([Question \[66\]](#), [Article \[9\]](#)). Yet reviling is not a more grievous sin than adultery. For the gravity of adultery is measured, not from its being a union of bodies, but from being a disorder in human generation. Moreover the reviler is not the sufficient cause of unfriendliness in another man, but is only the occasional cause of division among those who were united, in so far, to wit, as by declaring the evils of another, he for his own part severs that man from the friendship of other men, though they are not forced by his words to do so. Accordingly a backbiter is a murderer "occasionally," since by his words he gives another man an occasion for hating or despising his neighbor. For this reason it is stated in the Epistle of Clement [*Ad Jacob. Ep. i], that "backbiters are murderers," i.e. occasionally; because "he that hateth his brother is a murderer" ([1 Jn. 3:15](#)).

Reply to Objection 3: Anger seeks openly to be avenged, as the Philosopher states (Rhet. ii, 2): wherefore backbiting which takes place in secret, is not the daughter of anger, as reviling is, but rather of envy, which strives by any means to lessen one's neighbor's glory. Nor does it follow from this that backbiting is more grievous than reviling: since a lesser vice can give rise to a greater sin, just as anger gives birth to murder and blasphemy. For the origin of a sin depends on its inclination to an end, i.e. on the thing to which the sin turns, whereas the gravity of a sin depends on what it turns away from.

Reply to Objection 4: Since "a man rejoiceth in the sentence of his mouth" ([Prov. 15:23](#)), it follows that a backbiter more and more loves and believes what he says, and consequently more and more hates his neighbor, and thus his knowledge of the truth becomes less and less. This effect however may also result from other sins pertaining to hate of one's neighbor.

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 73](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 4 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Whether it is a grave sin for the listener to suffer the backbiter?

Objection 1: It would seem that the listener who suffers a backbiter does not sin grievously. For a man is not under greater obligations to others than to himself. But it is praiseworthy for a man to suffer his own backbiters: for Gregory says (Hom. ix, super Ezech): "Just as we ought not to incite the tongue of backbiters, lest they perish, so ought we to suffer them with equanimity when they have been incited by their own wickedness, in order that our merit may be the greater." Therefore a man does not sin if he does not withstand those who backbite others.

Objection 2: Further, it is written (Ecclus. 4:30): "In no wise speak against the truth." Now sometimes a person tells the truth while backbiting, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#), ad 3). Therefore it seems that one is not always bound to withstand a backbiter.

Objection 3: Further, no man should hinder what is profitable to others. Now backbiting is often profitable to those who are backbitten: for Pope Pius [*St. Pius I] says [*Append. Grat. ad can. Oves, caus. vi, qu. 1]: "Not unfrequently backbiting is directed against good persons, with the result that those who have been unduly exalted through the flattery of their kindred, or the favor of others, are humbled by backbiting." Therefore one ought not to withstand backbiters.

On the contrary, Jerome says (Ep. ad Nepot. lii): "Take care not to have an itching tongue, nor tingling ears, that is, neither detract others nor listen to backbiters."

I answer that, According to the Apostle ([Rm. 1:32](#)), they "are worthy of death... not only they that" commit sins, "but they also that consent to them that do them." Now this happens in two ways. First, directly, when, to wit, one man induces another to sin, or when the sin is pleasing to him: secondly, indirectly, that is, if he does not withstand him when he might do so, and this happens sometimes, not because the sin is pleasing to him, but on account of some human fear.

Accordingly we must say that if a man listens to backbiting without resisting it, he seems to consent to the backbiter, so that he becomes a participator in his sin. And if he induces him to backbite, or at least if the detraction be pleasing to him on account of his hatred of the person detracted, he sins no less than the detractor, and sometimes more. Wherefore Bernard says (De Consid. ii, 13): "It is difficult to say which is the more to be condemned the backbiter or he that listens to backbiting." If however the sin is not pleasing to him, and he fails to withstand the backbiter, through fear negligence, or even shame, he sins indeed, but much less than the backbiter, and, as a rule venially. Sometimes too this may be a mortal sin, either because it is his official duty to correct the backbiter, or by reason of some consequent danger; or on account of the radical reason for which human fear may sometimes be a mortal sin, as stated above ([Question \[19\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)).

Reply to Objection 1: No man hears himself backbitten, because when a man is spoken evil of in his hearing, it is not backbiting, properly speaking, but reviling, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#), ad 2). Yet it is possible for the detractions uttered against a person to come to his knowledge through others telling him, and then it is left to his discretion whether he will suffer their detriment to his good name, unless this endanger the good of others, as stated above ([Question \[72\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)). Wherefore his patience may deserve commendation for as much as he suffers patiently being detracted himself. But it is not left to his discretion to permit an injury to be done to another's good name, hence he is accounted guilty if he fails to resist when he can, for the same reason whereby a man is bound to raise another man's ass lying "underneath his burden," as commanded in Dt. 21:4 [*Ex. 23:5].

convince him of falsehood, especially if one knows that he is speaking the truth: rather ought one to reprove him with words, for that he sins in backbiting his brother, or at least by our pained demeanor show him that we are displeased with his backbiting, because according to Prov. 25:23, "the north wind driveth away rain, as doth a sad countenance a backbiting tongue."

Reply to Objection 3: The profit one derives from being backbitten is due, not to the intention of the backbiter, but to the ordinance of God Who produces good out of every evil. Hence we should none the less withstand backbiters, just as those who rob or oppress others, even though the oppressed and the robbed may gain merit by patience.