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On the Privation Theory of Evil: A Reflection on Pain and the Goodness of God's Creation

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Abstract: Augustine's privation theory of evil maintains that something is evil in virtue of a privation, a lack of something which ought to be present in a particular nature. While it is not evil for a human to lack wings, it is indeed evil for a human to lack rationality according to the end of a rational nature. Much of the literature on the privation theory focuses on whether it can successfully defend against counterexamples of positive evils, such as pain. This focus of the discussion is not surprising, given that the privation theory is a theory about the nature of evil. But it is also a theory that protects venerable theological concerns, namely, that God is the good creator of everything, and that everything is good. It is the purpose of this article to further this discussion on both fronts. I argue that the counterexample of pain still defeats the privation theory despite the most recent defense. What is more, I suggest, this is not theologically disastrous. The individual who rejects the privation theory is not obligated to reject the theological theses which motivate it. To show how a rejection of the privation theory is a live option, I offer an alternative view of evil that also maintains these theological theses and encompasses both privative and positive evils.

Keywords: Positive Evil, Good, Privation, Pain, Creation, Being, Opposition

1. Introduction

Augustine's privation theory of evil holds sway as the orthodox account of the nature of evil in Christian theology (Cf. Augustine 2019, book 7). According to this theory, something is evil in virtue of a privation, a lack of something which ought to be present in a particular nature. While it is not evil for a human to lack wings, it is indeed evil for a human to lack rationality according to the end of a rational nature.

Much of the literature on the privation theory focuses on whether it can successfully defend against counterexamples of positive evils, such as pain (e.g., Calder 2007; Lee 2007; Samet 2012). Pain seems to be evil, though it does not seem to be a privation of something. This focus of the discussion is not surprising, given that the privation theory is a theory about the nature of evil. But it is also a theory that protects venerable theological concerns. Not much of the literature discusses whether the privation theory is required by these certain theological concerns, namely, that God is the good creator of everything, and that everything which exists is good. Indeed, adherents normally assume that these theological theses entail the privation theory of evil.

It is the purpose of this article to further this discussion on both fronts. I argue that the counterexample of pain still defeats the privation theory despite the most recent defense. What is more, I suggest, this is not theologically disastrous. Rather, the individual who rejects the privation theory is not obligated to reject the theological theses which motivate it; these two theological theses do not entail the privation theory of evil. To show how a rejection of the privation theory is a live option, I offer an alternative view of evil that also maintains these theological theses and encompasses both privative and positive evils.

I shall proceed by discussing the motivation for and mechanics of the privation theory. I shall then argue that the most prominent and recent defense of the privation theory does not successfully defend against the counterexample of pain. I shall then suggest this conclusion is not theologically disastrous, for the two theological theses do not entail the privation theory. I then close by briefly offering an alternative view of evil that encompasses both privative and positive evils.

2. The Privation Theory of Evil: Its Conditions & Motivations

For present purposes, I use 'evil' interchangeably with 'bad.' Evil will denote something necessarily evil for a relevant object. It is necessarily evil in that it is evil across all possible worlds for an object, not occasionally or in some possible worlds. It is evil as a kind of phenomenon, regardless of the degree it manifests—I do not limit myself to the discussion of horror or trauma but include the whole gamut of evils, including minor injuries and pains. The privation theory of evil addresses the evils which are necessarily bad for the object in whatever degree they manifest. As will become clear below, the privation theorist's main concern is limited to intrinsically evil things.

There are two main reasons to believe that evil is a privation. The first involves a generally Aristotelian metaphysic of human nature which involves natures and

ends. The second involves explicitly theological reasons about God's being the good creator of everything which exists (Cf. Oderberg 2019; MacDonald 1990). While these two overlap to a degree, I will mainly address the latter theological concerns.

The theological motivation splits into two distinct theses. The first thesis is that God is the creator of everything aside from Godself, or *Deus Creator Omnium* (henceforth, DCO). The second thesis is that goodness and being are interconvertible in reality—everything which exists is good; and everything good exists (henceforth, BG). Different versions of each thesis are almost universally accepted by Christian theologians, including those from Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic traditions.

Before I detail the mechanics of such claims, consider how thinkers from each of the major Christian traditions subscribe to both theses. Representing an Orthodox position, David Bentley Hart writes that evil is "a privation of the good, a purely parasitic corruption of created reality, possessing no essence or nature of its own . . . [God] is the source of all things, the fountainhead of being, everything that exists partakes in his goodness and is therefore, in its essence, entirely good." Further on in the same text, Hart writes, "This is not to say that evil is then somehow illusory; it is only to say that evil, rather than being a discrete substance, is instead a kind of ontological wasting disease. Born of nothingness, seated in the rational will that unites material and spiritual creation, it breeds a contagion of nothingness throughout the created order" (Hart 2005, 73).

Similarly, Ian McFarland represents a Protestant position. He writes,

> Within the context of creation from nothing, because anything that exists other than God is by definition a product of divine willing and therefore good, it follows that evil, as that which God does *not* will, is a lack (or privation) of being. Evil can therefore be said to "exist" only in an improper sense: it has no genuine being of its own but is instead parasitic upon that which does exist, in the way that the evil of rot is dependent on the goodness of an apple. (McFarland 2014, 114)

McFarland qualifies and nuances this claim: evil arises out of the "inexplicable creaturely rejection of God and thus lacks any ontological ground" (McFarland 2014, 120). Moreover, "it can only be described as a failure of being: the creature (whether human or angelic) failing to be what it properly is" (McFarland 2014, 200). While McFarland is overtly Augustinian in his emphasis that the choice of evil is 'inexplicable', McFarland and Hart are in essential agreement with respect to DCO and BG.

Regarding the Catholic position, the Catechism and Aquinas each maintain that God is the Creator of everything which exists, and everything is good (Catechism

1993, 299, 386). Aquinas explicitly draws the conclusion that evil as such is a privation (Aquinas 2003, 58). A contemporary Catholic Philosopher, Patrick Lee, succinctly writes the following:

> The position that evil as such is privation is entailed by the theistic position that all positive reality is God and what he creates. According to theism, God is immediately operative in every effect, and is thereby omnipresent, since a creature, not having existence as part of its nature, cannot cause new existence by itself. If evil were something positive, then one would have to say either that this evil is immediately caused by God, in which case God is in some way evil (since the effect reflects to some degree the nature of the cause), or that there is some being in the universe which is not immediately caused by God, in which case there is some creator other than the one God. If evil is not privation, then theism is incoherent. (Lee 2007, 470)

Despite minor discrepancies, there is profound agreement among adherents across traditions over the two theses DCO and BG. These theses in turn support the claim that evil is nothing but a privation of the good. Indeed, the above thinkers maintain that these theses *entail* the thesis that evil is a privation.[1] If this is the case, a denial of the privation theory would require a denial of DCO or BG (more below).

Let us turn to analyze the mechanics of these claims. Consider the first (DCO), that God is the Creator of everything aside from Godself. This thesis maintains that nothing can exist without God's creative activity, and only God exists absolutely and independently. All other things, anything with 'positive ontological status,' is created by God, exists dependently, and participates in His being. God is both radically sovereign over and ontologically independent of His creation, and all which exists is, asymmetrically, radically dependent upon and created by Him.[2]

This thesis comes in different versions, though the strongest maintains that God is the proximate and immediate cause of everything which exists.[3] God is not merely the remote cause of things, such as the builder of a window who causes sunlight to

[1] While many thinkers assume this achieves an entailment relation, Lee provides a generic reason: that 'the effect reflects to some degree the nature of the cause.' However, giving such a reason seems to be the exception rather than the norm.

[2] I must presently set aside the issue of abstract objects and necessary truths such as 2+2=4. Aside from these, it seems relatively uncontroversial for the Christian theologian and philosopher to accept the dependency of creation and objects aside from God.

[3] Notice that here and in the forthcoming, 'cause' is not necessarily limited to efficient causation in the traditional sense of the term; it is equally applicable to cause as determination or ground of being, in which there are different levels of 'causality' (such as the standard Thomistic narrative of primary and secondary causality). For present purposes, I will limit myself to the terminology of remote vs proximate cause, where proximate cause can be understood as efficient or not.

come into the room, but an unmediated and proximate cause of everything. In addition to Patrick Lee's statement that God is "immediately operative in every effect," consider Hugh McCann's position. McCann maintains that God is like the author of a novel who creates characters in their very being and actions, directly causing them to be and act the way that they are. Creatures do not add to the sum of things in the world when they act; they do not act in a way that is existence conferring. Rather, God is sovereign over and acting with and through creatures but not 'upon' them in a way that, so McCann urges, does not violate creaturely freedom (McCann 2012, chaps. 2 & 5).[4] So too for the remainder of creation.

Notice that this position can be understood to mean that God is the necessary cause of all things, the *sine qua non* of everything's existence; it could also be understood to mean that God is the sufficient and unmediated cause of everything, a position which seems to leave no room for undetermined causal input on the side of creation. On either understanding, however, the creative and sustaining activity is proximate and immediate, not remote. Given that most defenders of the privation theory maintain God is the immediate and proximate cause of everything,[5] and given that sustenance and creation are treated as logically equivalent (at least),[6] I will assume this 'thick' version of DCO is the thesis that motivates the privation theory.

The second thesis (BG) is that goodness and being are interconvertible in reality (though not in sense).[7] Everything which exists is good, and everything good exists. BG is motivated most acutely by the concern that God is a *good* creator, so everything which comes from Him must also be good. It would be a categorical error to maintain that God is the creator of evil. For evil (the arguments go) is the opposite of the good. Whatever it might mean for something to be an opposite, it is clear that evil cannot comprise or be comprised by good—it is in some significant sense a negation of, a privation of, or contrary to the good.[8]

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[4] Another instance of this view is that of (Grant 2016, 231). Grant defends an 'extrinsic model' of divine activity in which God's act is not prior to but concurrent with the human act and is importantly *not* logically sufficient for the human act to obtain. Grant's view seems to be similar to that of Brian Leftow, who maintains what he calls an 'Immediate Late Creation' view in (Leftow 2012, 14-22). There, Leftow claims that God's immediate and late creation is sufficient in most cases, but only necessary in some cases. Thus, it does not result in overdetermination.

[5] In addition to the above footnote, see (Grant 2009).

[6] There is a question whether creation and sustaining are in fact different types of activity, or ever separate in practice. McCann thinks they are just the same, while Leftow thinks they different kinds though are never separate.

[7] For an example of the distinction between sense and referent, consider how water and H2O are interconvertible in reality, though not in sense.

[8] The opposite of correlative, such as 'father of' and 'son of', does not adequately describe evil.

Patrick Lee grounds the above intuition, that God can only create good, with the following principle. He maintains, "the effect reflects to some degree the nature of the cause" (Lee 2007, 470). One would do well to strengthen this claim and add, '*necessarily*, the effect reflects to some degree the nature of the cause.' Otherwise, it is not clear to which cases this is applicable and whether it is also applicable to the case of God's creative activity. Call this the principle of like-effect. Given DCO, if evil were something with positive ontological status, then it would be something God creates. Thus, we can conclude either that God is evil in that he has caused something evil (by the principle of like-effect), or evil is ontologically nothing. Notice this argument holds a lot of intuitive force in the thick interpretation of DCO. In contrast, if God were the remote cause of some objects which exist, it is not as clear that these objects must be good because it is not clear that the principle of like-effect applies to remotely caused objects. So, I will understand this principle to address those things which are immediate effects of a cause.[9]

This second thesis, together with DCO, neatly generates two theses to which the privation theorist subscribes:

1. Everything which exists, insofar as it exists, is good;
2. Everything which is good, insofar as it is good, exists.

From this and the general notion of evil being good's opposite, we derive:

3. Nothing which exists, insofar as it exists, is evil;

[9] Some have suggested that, because evil is ontologically nothing, God cannot be responsible for it. For example, Peter Furlong remarks, "Since this omission [viz. privation of following the moral law] is not itself an entity, it is not obviously the case that God is responsible for it." (Furlong 2014, 426) Admittedly, Furlong moves quickly on from this claim and has since updated/ expanded his view in (Furlong 2019, chap. 4) Nonetheless, it is worth noting why the original claim will not do. If God cannot be said to cause evil because of its lack of positive ontological status, it is not for any lack of ability on God's part, the creator who can and has brought something from nothing. Rather, it is because 'nothing' is precisely the total lack of positive ontological status such that it cannot be the proper object or recipient of causation and cannot be an effect of a cause in any sense.

If 'nothing' cannot be the proper recipient or effect of a cause, it follows that neither divine nor human agents can be said to cause evil. While this response may succeed in 'getting God off the hook' of moral and/or causal responsibility, this is so because it gets everyone off the hook. However, this is too high a price to pay. The causal issue is better addressed by the interconvertibility of goodness and being and doctrine of creation—these more obviously require that everything is good because it originates from a good God.

4. Nothing which is good, insofar as it is good, is evil.[10]

For present purposes, notice that these two theses provide powerful motivation to maintain that evil does not exist. More articulately, nothing is evil in virtue of its existence. Notice this claim is exhaustive, meaning, for the domain of existing things, there is no x such that x is evil in virtue of its existence.

What does it specifically mean to claim that nothing is evil (or everything is good) insofar as it exists? It depends on what 'existence' or 'exists' means. There are two relevant ways to understand this: absolute existence and kind-relative existence (and thus, absolute and kind-relative goodness).[11] Absolute existence is an all-or-nothing affair. It is a binary that does not admit of degrees—either x exists, or x does not. Consequently, something is absolutely good in virtue of its absolute existence. Kind-relative existence is not a binary and admits of degrees. Something is good relative to its kind just in case it exemplifies its nature and fulfills the end of its nature. For instance, both a human being and a horse are absolutely good just because they exist and are created by God. But a horse and a human being will be good very differently concerning their kind. To exemplify its kind-nature, a horse will have four legs and eat grass; a human, in contrast, will be rational and morally upright. According to the former, goodness is interconvertible with absolute existence—it is binary and does not admit of degrees. Either the horse exists and is good or not, regardless of it being a horse. According to the latter, goodness is interconvertible with kind-relative existence and *does* admit of degrees. A horse could have three legs and begin to eat rocks. This odd horse does not cease to be a horse, but simply fails to be horse-like and thus exemplifies 'horse nature' to a lesser extent.[12]

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[10] For a very helpful overview of these thesis and additional relevant theses, cf. (Gracia 1990).

[11] While certain Thomists and Aquinas may dispute this distinction, it is not without historical precedence and good reason. For instance, Anselm of Canterbury subscribes to this distinction. Cf *Monologion* 1-3, and *De Casu Diaboli* in his discussion of justice as a kind-relative goodness. Moreover, consider how kind-relative goodness is understood best in terms of an entity having a potency to be a certain thing. Now consider how a lightbulb may have the potency to exist to some degree as a lightbulb; it may shine brightly and be a good lightbulb, or it may shine dimly and be a bad lightbulb. While this may be the case, a lightbulb does not have a potency to exist absolutely. For potencies refer to abilities (whether active or passive) of already existing entities. So, a lightbulb's mere existence is not reducible to a potency, but a modal or metaphysical possibility. And because a kind-relative existence is indeed best understood in terms of potency, it follows that absolute existence is different than kind-relative existence.

[12] While it may be odd to think of existence in terms of degrees, this is something (as will become clear) to which the privation theorist must subscribe. While I do not presently defend this as my own view, the privation theorist could maintain that an intuitive way to understand existence in degrees

So, when it comes to evil, we can interpret claims 1-4 in either of these ways. It seems that the Christian theologian and philosopher will at least maintain that everything is absolutely good insofar as God is the creator of everything; from this, it follows that nothing is evil in virtue of its absolute existence.

Many go further and posit that nothing is evil in virtue of its kind-existence—the fulfillment of all created things is good, and only good, with respect to their kind. Notice that this can be understood in two ways. First, that everything which exists is good only insofar as it fulfills its kind-nature in the sense of reaching its proper end and *telos* (the axiological sense). Second, that all things with positive ontological reality exemplify a kind-nature in the sense of being a defined entity (the metaphysical sense.)

Given my theological focus, I will only presently assume there is a necessary connection between the former view, between absolute goodness and being. Of the two kinds of existence under consideration, absolute existence is more conceptually minimal and follows from DCO and BG since any other type of existence must include absolute existence. In contrast, kind-relative existence requires additional explanation and premises to follow from DCO and BG. Even when an object exemplifies a kind-nature, and even when the object is good to the degree that it exemplifies this nature, it is not merely good because of this (viz., its goodness is not reducible to or exhaustively explained by this). God's creative activity is still the ultimate (if not proximate) explanation for the necessary connection between being and goodness, even when an object exemplifies a kind-nature. That is, while these explanations might not be exclusive or 'competitive', God's creative activity is still required for a full explanation because the privation theorist's original claim is that DCO grounds BG. Moreover, I need not assume that all things with positive ontological status exemplify a kind-nature in the sense of having a proper end and

is that a created object might exemplify its kind-nature, the exemplar of what it is to be that kind of thing, more or less. So, if the exemplar/kind/type horse has four legs, then the token three-legged horse does not 'match' the kind as well as it could, and thus exists a little less with respect to exemplifying the kind. One can also consider this in terms of set theory. Consider the set of 'winners'. Being in the set is a binary: either someone is in or out of the set, and only those who win are in the set. Now consider two individuals who race separate 500-meter foot races. One runner might complete (and win) this in 57 seconds and cheerily congratulate his opponents; another runner might complete (and win) his own race in 60 seconds and taunt his opponents for losing. Both of these runners are in the set of winners, though the first is a *better* winner on two counts: his race-time and sportsmanship.

telos as defined by the nature in question. DCO and BG do not require this, and it takes us too far afield.[13]

Within the above framework, the privation theorist maintains that evil does not exist with any positive ontological status. As should be clear, this claim does not mean evil is equivalent to nothing, an unfortunate and common misunderstanding (Stump 2009). This is rather to say that evil is *ontologically* dependent for its existence. Like a hole in a donut or the rot on the apple, evil does not exist on its own. When the donut goes away, the donut-hole also goes away. In this sense, evil is entirely dependent upon that which exists, and does not have a *subsistent* existence of its own—it is a privation of existence.[14]

What exactly, then, is a privation? According to the Augustinian account, consider the following definition: "There is a privation of x if and only if something y lacks or loses x, and the nature of y is such that it ought to have x" (Swenson 2014, 142).[15] Notice that the end of the nature prescribes what counts as a relevant lack. While I may lack wings as a human being, this is not an evil—my nature does not require me to have wings. My lack of rationality, however, would be an evil according to the end of the nature 'rational animal.' While the donut-hole example is an example of a purely metaphysical lack, a privation is not value-neutral. A privation is both a metaphysical and axiological lack.

Notice that the privation and its opposite of possession must apply to the numerically same object. For example, if person A is blind, it is only a privation for person A's eyes, not person B's eyes. This is required for all evils to be considered *intrinsically* evil with respect to the entity in question, be it a person, action, or state of affairs.[16]

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[13] As is evident, the privation theorist requires a version of kind-existence in order to make sense of privations: absolute existence simply doesn't admit of degrees and does noy dictate which lacks are bad as privations.

[14] In this context, I use the term subsistence to mean what the ontologist would call existence. Where individuals may normally say things such as cracks and holes 'exist', this is not technically correct. To differentiate between the common language and the technical sense, I use subsistence as a way to denote something with positive ontological status.

[15] Swenson cites Aquinas, *ST* I, Q 48, A3 & A5.

[16] The reader may question the notion that actions and states of affairs are entities. This is not to say that actions and such are substantial entities, such as animals. Yet, as W. Matthews Grant notes, actions being entities, or having positive ontological reality, is simply an assumption that the reader must grant from the outset. It is also not one without precedence. Aquinas, for instance, considered actions to be non-substantial entities (*ST* I-II Q 79, A2). Cf. (Grant 2016, 224; Grant 2015, 272). It is important for the privation theorist for actions to be things, for privations pertain to the numerically same object as the thing which is under the obligation to possess a property. If actions are not things, then there are not morally evil (or good) acts on the privation theorists' metaphysic.

Some authors, such as Adam Swenson, have argued that the privation need not inhere in the numerically same object. That is, object A can be evil in virtue of another privation that belongs to object B (and A is not B) (Swenson 2009, 144).[17] While Swenson mainly outlines this as a logical possibility, I do not see any reason to entertain this as a legitimate position. First, the canonical version of the privation theory addresses intrinsic evils. These are evils that are of the numerically same object, and not extrinsically based on another object or a relation that A holds to B. This is what Augustine, Aquinas, and Suárez addressed as the privation theory, and an expansion of this is not what traditional defenders have in mind.

Moreover, I think we have two good reasons to limit ourselves. On the one hand, it would not be a problem for DCO and BG to admit that something is extrinsically evil. BG pertains to the intrinsic value of all objects. On the other hand, to admit that the privation theory encompasses such privations as Swenson outlines would be to say that not all evils are necessarily bad. But this is counterintuitive: when *something* is evil, we do not say it is accidentally or occasionally evil or evil in its effect upon something. Consider how an attempted act of murder is bad even if not effectively carried out. Consider also how states of pain are bad even if they do not cause a lack of happiness or health. Unless there is a necessary connection between the two supposed states, this requires that some things are accidentally bad. But this amounts to arguing that some things are accidentally evil, perhaps based on their context or the relation in which they stand. Rather than focus on things evils that are accidentally evil, the privation theory focuses on evils that are necessarily or intrinsically evil, across all possible worlds. There is good reason, then, to adhere to the view that a privation is evil for an object only if it inheres in the same object.

With this framework, a privation is an evil because it is a lack of something which ought to be present in a nature. A privation does not necessarily subsist and have positive ontological reality but exists dependently upon the good and the existing.[18] Notice again that this is exhaustive: for all evils, there is no x such that x is not a privation. In the above manner, the privation theory is both motivated by and guards the relevant concerns that God is the creator of everything, and that being and goodness are interconvertible in reality.

[17] This could be roughly understood as either T3 or T5 on Swenson's taxonomy, depending on whether object A also has a privation.

[18] Technically, we also need to say that a *diminution* of good is bad in itself to fully say why a privation is bad. On this, cf. (Swenson 2009).

3. Pain is Still a Problem for the Privation Theory of Evil

Thus far I have assumed that the foregoing theological theses hold water. One could certainly question this assumption, but my present aim is more constructive. I will argue that the privation theory of evil has yet to adequately address the counterexample of pain. I will then address the importance of this failure and suggest that, even if some pains are not privative evils, one is not required to reject these above theological theses wholesale.

In laying out this framework, I have intentionally used the language of 'motivation.' The two theological theses *motivate* the privation theory. Yet, as should be clear from the three representatives above, a much stronger claim is normally made. The theological theses are normally understood to *entail* the privation theory. This is a much stronger claim. Thus, by modus tollens, the denial of the privation theory would require the denial of one if not both of the above understandings of the theological theses.

In terms of logical structure, this amounts to the following: let DCO stands for the thick doctrine that God is the proximate and efficient Creator of everything; let BG stand for the interconvertibility of being and goodness; let P stand for the privation theory. Thus:

1. $(DCO \wedge BG) \rightarrow P$
2. $\sim P$
3. So, $\sim(DCO \wedge BG)$ (Modus Tollens)

Pace the above authors, I shall argue that DCO and BG do not entail P. Thus, my argument is that a denial of the privation theory does not require a denial of DCO or BG.

Why is pain a strong counterexample to the privation theory? Pain is an example of a positive evil. Pain seems to be evil, and it is not apparent that pain is always accounted for in terms of a privation of happiness, pleasure, or more generally, well-being. And if it is the case that pain is evil and not a privation, there is a non-privative evil. There are several potentially compelling responses the privation theorist can respond with to this issue, each of which I will address. I will focus on the work of David S. Oderberg, as his work is the latest and most thorough defense of the privation theory of evil. As will become clear through addressing the potentially compelling responses and Oderberg's work, 'painfulness' is still generally problematic for the privation theory, and *useless* pain is the most problematic for the privation theory.

One possible response to the issue of positive evils is to deflate the counterexample. Call this the *deflationary* response; this response deflates the counterexample by denying either that the evil is real or is evil. The first of the two deflationary responses maintains that a positive evil is evil but has no being. In this case, the pain is just a mental state, for example; it is but a perception of something.[19] For example, Irit Samet argues that the brain processes pain in two different ways: somatically and affectively. The somatic processing pertains to the duration, intensity, location, etc., and corresponds to A-*delta* fibers; the affective response of the brain responds to the C-fibers and correlates to the negative evaluation of such a state. This is why, for instance, patients given opioids to reduce the pain can attest to the location, intensity, and qualities of the pain (e.g., prickly, hot, sore) without reporting a negative affective attitude towards it. Accordingly, Samet argues that the pain is a phenomenological response that likely *supervenes* upon the C-fibers firing off in the brain. If this is the case, Samet argues, it is more difficult to conclude that pain is *real* and not merely the affective evaluation of the state in which one finds oneself (Samet 2012, 25-26).[20] If this were the case, pain's lack of being is not problematic for DCO and BG.

This response is illuminating in that it relies upon a standard distinction in the literature between pain and painfulness. Pain is the physical phenomenon that includes the intensity, duration, location, quality (e.g., prickly), and such; painfulness is the affective evaluation of this, that it is indeed bad, negative, and to be avoided (Oderberg 2019, chap. 5; Swenson 2009, 141). This distinction is similar to the standard distinction between pain and suffering. For example, while a fish might experience pain when it bites on the hook, it is not apparent that it suffers (or experiences painfulness). While this first distinction is standard, for simplicity I will generally use 'pain' to denote the negative aspect of pain and assume 'pain' correlates (though does not reduce) to different types of physical phenomena.

Though Samet's response is illuminating in this respect, this response is not successful. While Samet is clear that the affective evaluation is not reducible to the C-fibers, Samet must further deny that the affective and negative evaluation of pain which correspond to the neurons is also not something real. But a mental state or

[19] This approach appears similar to the contemporary criticism that all evil is a function of one's perception. The latter criticism relies upon value relativism, which would maintain that something is merely perceived as bad though not actually bad (for nothing is *actually* bad). On this approach and the different assumptions of contemporary approaches to the problem of evil, cf. (Gavrilyuk 2020, 66).

[20] For more on this general approach, and whether the affective representation of the content can be construed as a privation, Cf. (Oderberg 2019, 131-132).

perception is something and not merely a part or modification of the mind, reducible to something else. So, even if the pain were fictitious and not extra-mental, as in the case of a phantom limb, it does not follow that the pain is not real. The response simply relocates what about the pain is real.

The second route of the deflationary response is more promising. On the second route, the defender of the privation theory might rejoin that, while the pain is real and has being, it is not evil. This can be because the pain is a good of utility or merely a product of the organic function of the organism. Regarding the former, the pain could be a warning. When an individual stubs his toe or burns his hand, there is pain to warn against and deter the individual from such actions. As Oderberg argues, such pain simply *should* accompany such warnings, for otherwise, the warnings would be ineffective (Oderberg 2019, 130, 132).

While helpful in some cases, it is not clear that all cases of pain are goods of utility. For instance, the pain from a phantom limb does not apparently serve the further purpose of warning the individual.

According to the organic function response, however, some pain can be construed as non-instrumental and good. For example, consider a child who experiences growing pains. This is an achievement of the organism's operation and is good as such. This would account for the child's growing pains as well as potentially other cases such as chronic nerve damage. In the case of chronic nerve damage, there is a failure of the nervous system to reach its proper end. This failure could be a privation. Oderberg describes this pain *doing* vs. pain *achieving* (Oderberg 2019, 130). The growing pains are indicative of the organism or body part *achieving* a proper end, while the chronic nerve damage is a result of the nervous system *doing* but not achieving its proper end. The growing pains are good as a natural operation, and the nerve damage is a malfunction and thus accountable in terms of a privation.

While the above response is plausible in some cases, there are still counterexamples of 'useless' pain, such as phantom limb syndrome or inexplicable throbs and aches. Useless pain is not obviously construable as having an appointed end in light of which it is a privation. Useless pains are also not able to be construed as goods of utility, however they might be appropriated to develop one's character.[21] Useless pain may very well correspond to a disorder, such as the case of chronic nerve damage. Yet it is useless either because there is no underlying disorder, or because the alert it generates to the underlying disorder serves no purpose (Oderberg 2019, 133).

[21] So, for instance, though chronic nerve damage might not be a good of utility like the pain of burning one's hand, one could still choose to develop their character from the difficulty. But this does not mean the chronic nerve damage itself is a good of utility.

Oderberg addresses this issue of useless pain and considers it to be the central issue for the privation theory of evil. Regarding the case of the phantom limb, the pain cannot be construed as a disorder. The *painfulness* is not the physical neurons failing to achieve their end (which would be the *pain*), but rather the affective evaluation of the state (Oderberg 2019, 130-133). It follows that the painfulness itself is not construable as a disorder because it correlates but is not reducible to the physical disorder. And the painfulness is that which is bad, not the pain. It is thus 'useless' in that, if there even is an underlying disorder, it cannot effectively compel the agent to respond (an impossibility, one might say), and because it is not reducible to the disorder of the pain. So, while the deflationary issues are illuminating in certain respects, they do not capture and deflate the issue of useless pain.

This above point is applicable to the pains of utility and organic functioning. Even if there are goods of utility and organic functioning, this does not entail the pains which are goods of utility and organic functioning are intrinsically good. An object, in other words, can have a different intrinsic value from its extrinsic value. For example, Calder correctly maintains that even if something is a good of utility, it does not necessarily follow that it is intrinsically good. Consider money: money is a good of utility, though money's intrinsic value is neutral (Calder 2007, 374). So, even where pain may serve a good purpose, there remains the question of its intrinsic value. Since the painfulness is not reducible to the pain, there is a clear way to offer a different valuation. This point, along with the issue of useless pain, is still problematic for the privation theorist.

Let us turn to examine the privation theorist's final response to the issue of useless pain and Oderberg's construal of useless pain in particular. The privation theorists, rather than construe pain as a good of functioning or utility, can take the standard approach and argue that pain is intrinsically evil insofar as it is a lack of something. Rather than deflate the counterexample as above, this modifies why pain is bad. We can consequently call this the *modification* approach.

This is the classic *privatio boni,* where something is evil in itself just in case it lacks a perfection that it ought to have as prescribed by its nature. One might argue according to this line that pain is evil yet is not a total lack of being. Rather, one might simply say that pain is a degreed lack of something, such as pleasure, internal equilibrium, or happiness. On this approach, pain is something in virtue of its existence through pleasure, yet evil with respect to the lack of pleasure.

The problem is that pain is not always a lack of pleasure or internal equilibrium. While an individual might be in mental anguish over the loss (the painfulness) of a child (the pleasure), people can also experience pain without this being construed as a loss of something. Consider again the case of the phantom limb. If the individual

is in pain because of the phantom limb, the pain itself is not obviously a loss of pleasure, though the pain may further cause a loss of pleasure.

Oderberg instead argues that useless pain does not merely cause a lack of pleasure but causes a lack of ability to function well as a human being. Oderberg is careful to note a lack of mental equilibrium is bad because of useless pain, but it is not equivalent or reducible to useless pain. Rather, useless pain is bad because it prohibits functioning well as a human being. In making this point, Oderberg does not, unfortunately, use an example of useless pain but the example of the pain which accompanies a sprained ankle (pain of an organic function or utility, perhaps). In the case of the sprained ankle,

> There will be the same functionality as we find in the standard case – direction to damage – where the loss of equilibrium is still no privation. But there will also be other things happening, for instance when the pain of a sprained ankle causes me to ignore a red light at a pedestrian crossing, or some such. This specific loss of equilibrium is a privation: good functioning requires me not to ignore dangers to my well-being. So there is both privation and mere non-privative absence in such cases. (Oderberg 2019, 135)

Thus, the ankle-sprain is painful in terms of organic functioning and is a direction of one's attention to pain (a good of utility). It is therefore good. Yet the sprained ankle is also a 'proper' privation in that it causes failure to function well as a human being.

According to Oderberg, it would be problematic for two reasons if the useless pain and pains of organic functioning/ goods of utility were the same thing. First, useless pain is that pain which is not construable as a malfunction or pain of utility. And Oderberg, like any privation theorist, cannot say that the pain *just is* the privation of mental equilibrium; this proposition would entail that organic function and pain as a good of utility are just the same thing. So too for useless pain. If useless pain just is the privation of mental equilibrium, it is equivalent to these other types of pain, causing a total collapse between all types of painfulness. Thus, Oderberg posits that useless pain is pain that further causes a failure to function well.

Second, if the sprained ankle were only one phenomenon of pain, this would entail opposite predicates of the one phenomenon in the same respect. The pain would be good in that it alerts, and bad in that it causes failure of well-being. But, to ascribe contradictory predicates of a single phenomenon is a theoretically unacceptable conclusion. Yet the absences of the equilibrium are different in some respects. Oderberg writes:

> Does this mean that one and the same absence is both privative and non-privative? . . . The part of the overall feeling of pain that makes you look for damage is not the same as the part which causes you to ignore a red light. There are two disturbances, two reactions, and it is of little concern whether we say these are two parts of one overall reaction or not. Note that if you ignore the red light at the very same time as you are directed to look for damage, this still does not mean that there is a single disturbance that is both privative and non-privative. In such a case you ignore the red light because you are looking for damage, not because of the very same disequilibrium in virtue of which you are looking for damage. Such is the situation when you turn your attention from the light as you reach for your ankle. (Oderberg 2019, 135)

In one sense, pain is an absence of mental equilibrium and is not bad because the absence is due to the organic functioning of the body or a good of utility. In another sense, pain is bad insofar as it causes a privation of one's functioning well as a human being, such as the ability to be alert when crossing the street. If the latter disequilibrium accompanies the sprained ankle and thus the organic functioning pain, then it is two different aspects of the same state of affairs. And because it is two different aspects, it is not contradictory to predicate this of the disequilibrium.

I have detailed this last part because it is crucial to Oderberg's argument, and any argument, that is to avoid a collapse of types of pain into each other. Useless pain cannot merely be a lack of equilibrium as this would make it indistinguishable from the pain of utility or organic functioning. And by the law of identity of indiscernibles, these would just be the same.[22]

There must be a relevant distinction to avoid the collapse of useless pain into pain from organic functioning. To avoid this collapse, Oderberg posits this *causal* relation and maintains that the painfulness of useless pain is not merely the lack of equilibrium but causes a failure to function well.

Consequently, this means that the useless pain is bad because it *causes* a state of not functioning well. That is, Oderberg is consequently committed to saying that this is extrinsically bad, not intrinsically bad.[23] Thus, Oderberg is also committed to saying (as he does in the example) that useless pain is bad insofar as it causes failure to function well as a human being.

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[22] The law of identity of indiscernibles is that, if two things share the exact same properties, then they are in fact identical (i.e., not two numerically different objects).

[23] If the disequilibrium does *not* accompany an organic function or pain of utility, then Oderberg is still reticent that one cannot say this disequilibrium *just is* pain. For there are certainly other different types of pains of disequilibrium that are not captured by useless pain.

This is highly problematic for several reasons. Oderberg has prohibited this move before—he clearly maintained the canonical version of the privation theory of intrinsic evils and took other authors to task for conflating intrinsic privation and extrinsic privations (Oderberg 2019, 131, 134). On Oderberg's own terms, this move is impermissible.

Aside from the authorial inconsistency, the available options are not promising. The defender of the privation theory such as Oderberg could bite the bullet and insist that an extrinsic privation is as much a privation as is an intrinsic privation. In other words, it is acceptable for something A to be bad insofar as it is bad in virtue of a privation of another object B, a lack which A does not exhibit. But as already noted, this fails to be a canonical form of the privation theory.

Even if Oderberg pursued this route, useless pain does not always cause a failure to function well. For instance, the soldier's pain from the phantom limb does not necessarily cause him to fail to look at the stoplight (inasmuch as the sprained ankle doesn't necessarily cause someone to do the same). Indeed, the pain of the phantom limb might cause the soldier to be *more* cautious when crossing the street and thus causally contribute to his functioning well as a human being. It is not clear that Oderberg's account details why useless pain is bad even when it does not cause a failure of functioning well. On his account, if the useless pain were to not cause a privation of functioning well in some instances, then it would not be bad in those instances.

But the problem of useless pain is that it is always bad for the individual it affects, not merely when it exhibits this causal relation. The soldier who experiences phantom limb pain is in pain regardless of the causal relation. To see this point, consider, for example, two individuals Sylvia and Tyron. Sylvia and Tyron have experienced a car accident and are both paralyzed from the waist down. Both, we might say, are inhibited from using their legs and thus functioning well. Imagine further that Sylvia experiences pain in her legs, whereas Tyron does not. Does the pain in Sylvia's legs inhibit her from functioning well? Not obviously. Rather, this pain seems to be both bad and useless without respect to the causal contribution it has on Sylvia. Indeed, as Calder argues about money's two values, it seems that useless pain is intrinsically bad, in addition to (or regardless of) frequently exhibiting this causal relation (Calder 2007, 374). Thus, the problem of useless pain (in addition to painfulness more generally) is still a problem for the privation theorist.

4. The Theological Upshot

Given my arguments about useless pain and painfulness more generally, it follows that there is a positive evil. The privation theory of evil is not exhaustive, then, even if many evils are still privative. If the above theological theses *entail* the privation theory, the conclusion requires the denial of one if not both of the antecedents. Rather than deny one of the antecedents, however, I would like to question whether it is an entailment relation.

To see how it is not an entailment relation, it will behoove us to consider some of the argumentative methods available at this point.[24] When an interlocuter claims an entailment relation, *necessarily*, *if p then q*, the interlocuter is claiming the antecedent of an entailment relation is, necessarily, a sufficient condition for the consequent. There is no case in which the antecedent obtains and the consequent does not obtain. So, how do I go about showing that this is not the case? First, one could show that *p* and not-*q* are compatible in some fashion (i.e., possibly, (*p and not-q*)). For example, I could show that the denial of the privation theory is logically compatible with the DCO and BG. Second, one could show that it is not obvious that *q* follows from *p*. Rather than demonstrate that *q* does not follow from *p*, this would be equivalent to saying my interlocutors have not yet shown decisively that the privation theory follows from the antecedent theses; the burden of proof has not yet been met.

Regarding the first sort of argument, the negation of the privation theory is compatible with the thick version of the doctrine that God is the creator of everything and the interconvertibility of being and goodness. To see this, simply consider that DCO and BG are compatible with the claim that no evils exist. If no evils exist, then no evils are privative evils. This claim is logically consistent with and DCO and BG (i.e., possibly (*p and not-q*)). Strictly speaking, DCO and BG only entail that evil does not exist, or more precisely, that nothing is evil in virtue of its existence.

Regarding the second sort of argument, the above authors have not provided evidence to even suppose the privation theory follows is the case. Recall from Section 2 that BG entails 'nothing which exists, insofar as it exists, is evil.' Because a lack of ontological status is not equivalent to a privation, it is a further jump in one's argument to say that evil is a privation of a proper good. Indeed, the only argument given from the above authors is the one from Lee, who invokes the principle of life-

[24] The following sketch is my own, though the thought to provide such a sketch was inspired by (Williams 2005, 581).

effect. Yet this principle only provides grounds for the interconvertibility of being and goodness. It does not ground the claim that evil is a privation.

The above is enough to show that the entailment claim does not hold. It might be objected here that such a claim does not disprove the privation theory. For the privation theory might be construed to claim that, necessarily, for any x, if x is evil, then x is a privation of a proper good. Thus, to claim that evil does *not* exist is not an issue for the privation theorist—the privation theory makes no such existential claim! While this may be the case, the objection misses the point. The present claim under consideration is not whether there are any evils, but whether DCO and BG entail the privation theory. And this they do not.

While DCO and BG do not entail the privation theory, I imagine that the reader is dissatisfied with the response that it is logically compatible with the claim that evil is nothing. Not many readers, I suppose, will deny the existence of evil as a live option. But I must press the point—even if DCO and BG are compatible with the denial of the privation theory, it is a very different question whether this compatibility is a *live* option. The one who subscribes to DCO and BG and also denies the privation theory may well have to deny that evils exist if there are no other options. Of course, if denying the existence of evils is not a live option, it may simply bring the theist back to the privation theory as the only obviously live option. This issue is particularly pressing because useless pain is an example of a positive evil. And since there is a positive evil, we have a case of something which exists and is evil. So, one might worry that DCO and BG must still be denied unless one can account for the positive evil in a way that is compatible with these theses.

So here is an alternative (very brief) understanding of non-privative evil that is compatible with the two theological theses. Call it the *Opposition View of Evil*. In addition to privative evils, some evils stand in opposition to the good. Anselm of Canterbury and Francisco Suárez maintain versions of this view.[25] While the evil effect or event (say, useless pain) might be good in virtue of its absolute existence, it need not be good in virtue of its kind-existence or even be something with a kind-existence in the sense of having a proper end and *telos*. Recall that only absolute goodness is required to explain BG, and thus, I am not presently assuming that all entities are good in virtue of their kind existence. Hence, nothing prohibits us from

[25] For example, cf. (Anselm 2007, *On the Fall of the Devil*, 26; Anselm 2007, *On the Harmony*, I.7; Suárez 1989, XI.8). My view is also similar to the view of (Pruss 2022). While Pruss also maintains that positive evils are only 'evil' in relation to other objects, he further argues that the complex entity made up of the evil (e.g., pain, act of murder) and the relation and other object does not exist. Mine is different from Pruss's view because I additionally maintain that a positive evil is intrinsically or necessarily evil while absolutely good.

maintaining that useless pain and painfulness are entities that are opposite to well-being. The pain is a positive phenomenon that might very well cause a lack of well-being, though is simply bad to experience for sentient creatures that can suffer. Pain would be a kind of phenomenon yet need not have a proper end and telos that is good for it to achieve.[26] More generally, positive evils would be described as those things standing in opposition to the good. There is something about these positive evils that, when in relation to another object, they are bad in relation to this object and in opposition to a good. On this understanding, something is necessarily evil in that it is evil in relation to another object (and thus, evil *for* sentient creatures) across all possible worlds in which that later object exists, though good in virtue of its absolute existence. We can thus say some entities are either intrinsically or necessarily evil while maintaining that things are good in terms of absolute existence.[27]

Apply this more fully to the above example of painfulness and useless pain. Recall the thought experiment involving Sylvia and Tyron who are paralyzed from the waist down. While Sylvia experiences useless pain in her leg, this pain is bad regardless of whether it causes a failure to function well. It is bad in relation to the person, Sylvia, and bad in that it is opposed to well-being. Pain is bad only in relation to sentient creatures that can suffer, for example, and not in relation to rocks. Thus, pain is bad only in the possible worlds in which sentient creatures that can suffer exist; pain is not bad in some possible world in which the only created entities are rocks. Now, the reader will notice that one can explain this pain in context of well-being. But the fact that well-being could be (or even needs to be) involved in the explanation of pain does not require that pain causes a privation of well-being. For example, the hedonist does not need to maintain that a certain pain is a privation of happiness in order to explain that pain is opposed to happiness (Cf. Calder 2007, 378-9). Likewise, pain is a positive and quality on its own that can be explained as opposite to well-being.

The merits to the opposition view of evil are thus: the opposition view of evil maintains DCO and BG; it accounts for both privative and non-privative evils; it

[26] The idea that pain has no end at all is similar to Marilyn McCord Adams' view of horrors, which are *dys*teleological. This is compatible with the view that God can redeem these evils, even if they have no natural or good end.

[27] One might object: pain is an extrinsic evil, not an intrinsic evil. For pain's badness depend upon a relation. This objection is interesting but does not go through. Health is intrinsically good, though it likewise depends upon a relation for it to be good. Health is a good in relation to sentient creatures that can have well-being. Thus, pain is extrinsically bad only if health is extrinsically good. We avoid pain for its own sake inasmuch as we seek health for its own sake.

accounts for the phenomenon that there is still something intrinsic about the positive evils that only obtains in relation to certain objects and stands in opposition to the good.

I cannot develop presently how this view works with other positive evils, such as the classic examples of murder or error in belief (e.g., the belief that 2+2=5). This takes us too far afield, and in any case, is not required for the argument to go through. The above view is compatible with the presently assumed understandings of DCO and BG. It follows that the negation of the privation theory is logically consistent with DCO and BG and is prima facie a *live* option.

One might object that the opposition view of evil, while it maintains a larger explanatory scope than the privation theory of evil, ascribes to God to creation of objects which are intrinsically and necessarily evil. This is a concern of moral justification—why would a morally good God create such positive evils? While interesting, this is the topic of theodicy and not a question the present article must address. Even so, nothing about the opposition view of evil changes what standard answers are available to the question of moral justification.[28]

This suffices to conclude my main argument. There is still a strong counterexample of pain to the privation theory. But the thick version of DCO and BG do not entail the privation theory of evil. So, the denial of the privation theory does not require the denial of DCO and BG. Because I claimed there is a positive evil, I provided an additional way to construe positive evils that subscribes to DCO and BG. On the assumption that the specific construal of these doctrines are theologically important, nothing theologically disastrous follows.[29]

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[28] E.g., free-will, soul-making, etc. It is a merit of the opposition view that intrinsically/ necessarily evil things exist. On the privation only view, a privation is not able to be the proper object of a cause. Thus, God cannot be said to be the direct cause of evil, though he can directly permit or indirectly orchestrate the evil through causing other events. The opposition view includes this but further holds that God can be the direct cause of an evil (i.e., of painfulness).

[29] It is another issue whether God is indeed the proximate and immediate cause of everything like the thick version of DCO maintains. Indeed, this assumption seems more problematic than assuming that God is the remote cause of being. For example, occasionalism, theological determination, and overdetermination are issues. Hugh McCann is acutely aware of these concerns in (McCann 2012, chaps 2 and 5); Leftow address the issue of overdetermination (Leftow 2012). The assumption is usually maintained for views of sovereignty and providence, but it is not clear to me that maintaining God remotely causes and grounds many (not all) things is any less capable of addressing the concerns of God's sovereignty and providence over creation. While some (e.g., McCann 2012; Lee 2000, sec. 2) argue that God must be the proximate primary cause of everything, I do not see any reason to deny the position that God is the creator of everything fundamental to created reality, and how God is not the cause of non-fundamental things, like Adam (fundamental) and the act of the primal sin (non-fundamental). But this is for another time.

It is another question whether a thinner version of DCO (and BG) would entail the privation theory. But as I intimated above, it is even less clearly the case that, if God's remotely creates something, the remotely created object is good. I focused on and assumed the thick version precisely because this is what prominent adherents maintain, and because these would most likely require the privation theory of evil.

5. Conclusion

The privation theory of evil partially serves to protect venerable theological concerns. This is the case with historic and contemporary thinkers across the three major Christian traditions. I discussed the mechanics of the privation theory and argued that the privation theory still has not met the classic counterexample of pain. Even so, I suggest that this is not entirely problematic, for it is not apparent that the theological theses which motivate the privation thesis entail the thesis. Instead, DCO and BG are logically compatible with the denial of the privation theory. Moreover, I briefly provided a different way to account for the positive evil of pain. In offering this argument, I placed the privation theory in the context of important theological concerns and examined exactly how dependent it is upon them.

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