"Evils, Privations, and the Early Moderns"
Samuel Newlands (University of Notre Dame)
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1. Introduction

This essay focuses on the concept of evil in the works of early modern rationalists, most especially Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz. Whatever else we may think of their work, this motley crew of early modern philosophers has a decidedly mixed reputation when it comes to the problem of evil. On the one hand, the late 17th century is often portrayed as a kind of Golden Age for theodicies, during which speculative metaphysics and post-Scholastic theology were given free reign to produce bold and novel explanations for the existence, kinds, amounts, and distributions of evil in a world created by a perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent God. But, it is also noted, such theodical free-for-alls occurred in a kind of naïve vacuum involving conditions that philosophers of religion today can no longer expect. Ah, the good ole' days of the 1600s, when one could take seriously the notion that ours was the best of all possible worlds, blissfully unaware of the gathering critical storm-clouds on the historical horizon: Voltaire, Hume, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, et al.

It is not my main purpose in this chapter to defend these older theodicies against the charge that their advocates were ignorant either of some real, hard data about evil, or of moral principles that render their explanations utterly inept, if not morally offensive. Nonetheless, it is worth keeping in mind that these theodicists were well aware of scathing challenges to their endeavors – Pierre Bayle made certain of that.[1] Nor is it plausible to think that early modern rationalists were simply ignorant of moral concerns about, say, maximizing the goodness of a world at the cost of the untoward suffering of

[1] See especially Bayle, *Dictionary*, "Manicheans" and "Paulicians."

individual persons. And having just climbed out of the Thirty Years War, they were certainly not ignorant of the horrors of institutionally sponsored, large-scale atrocities, nor of the routine miseries that plagued grim daily life in 17th century Europe.

I would even deny what may have seemed like the most innocuous assertion above about the early modern rationalists, that theirs was a time of great innovation in addressing the problem of evil. As I read the period, early modern theodicies are most novel not in their positive explanations about the relation of evil to God, nearly all of which echo pre-modern theories. Rather, many of their greatest innovations lie in what they *don't* say, what they *leave off* from the tradition they inherited.

In this paper, I will focus on one such early modern eclipse, one that occurred with breath-taking swiftness and has proven prescient for many subsequent discussions of the concept of evil. Prior to the 17th century, there was near unanimous agreement among prominent medieval Christians that evil was a privation of goodness. According to what I'll call "traditional privation theory," evils are absences or lacks of appropriate perfections, perfections that things ought to have. As will be explained more fully below, traditional privation theory involved claims about both the ontological nature of evil *and* its causal source, helping theists answer two fundamental questions about evil: *what is it* and *where does it come from*?[2]

Traditional privation theory provided the backdrop for discussions of evil in the Latin West for over a millennium, from at least Augustine up through the early 17th

[2] Though these questions about evil are familiar to us today, it is worth keeping in mind that, during the medieval and early modern periods, the perceived philosophical challenges posed by evils for religious belief were quite different from the challenges raised by contemporary "arguments from evil." For example, few in the Augustinian tradition took evil to be a potential defeater for belief in God's existence. Instead, evil posed explanatory challenges in the spirit of *fides quaerens intellectum*. For an overview of some of the rather different pre-modern foci on evil, see Bonnie Kent, "Evil in Later Medieval Philosophy."

century. But by the 18th century, privation theory had been mostly abandoned by leading theists. It is now difficult to find a contemporary analytic philosopher of religion who even mentions the concept of evil as privation of the good.[3] In what follows, I will explore the early modern case for challenging this once dominant concept of evil.

I begin by showing why privation theory seemed so promising (section two). I then present some of the pre-modern metaphysics in which privation theory was traditionally embedded (section three). In the fourth section, I discuss a surprising 17th century advocate of privation theory: Descartes. In the fifth section, I canvas a series of early modern objections to the theory. In the concluding coda, I present one reason for doubting that the early modern legacy on this topic has been a wholly salutary one.

2. Familiar and Unfamiliar Questions about Evil

To understand early modern criticisms of privation theory, we first need to understand what the theory claimed and why it seemed so promising. A very familiar and pointed question about evil is contained in the opening line of Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*: "Please tell me: isn't God the cause of evil?"[4] After all, according to standard Christian doctrines, God is a person perfect in power, knowledge and goodness, one who created the world *ex nihilo* and continues to preserve it at every moment of its existence. In medieval Scholastic systems, God's causal contribution to the world included cooperating or *concurring* immediately in every action of creatures, even free actions.[5] But if God exists and is an immediate and primary cause of all that happens, and

[3] There are a few exceptions, especially among contemporary Catholic intellectuals. For one such recent exchange, see John Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?" and Patrick Lee, "Evil as Such Is a Privation: A Reply to John Crosby."
[4] Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 1
[5] The theory of divine concurrence was intended to avoid two unwanted extremes about the interplay between divine and creaturely action: *occasionalism*, according to which creatures have no causal efficacy, and *mere conservationisn*, according to which creatures have causal efficacy apart from God's immediate

evils happen, how is God not thereby a cause of every evil too? The general response was to show how God (a) isn't the cause of some evils after all, despite God's causal contributions to every creaturely action and (b) isn't blameworthy for causing all other evils.

Whether a given evil fell under clause (a) or (b) depended on what kind of evil it was. By the early 1700s, it had become standard practice to distinguish three kinds of evil: (a) evils of imperfection (sometimes called "metaphysical evils"); (b) physical evils (sometimes called "natural evils"); and (c) moral evils (often called "sins"). Here is how William King summarized the categories in 1702, just before he became the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin: "By the evil of imperfection I understand the absence of perfections or advantages that are present elsewhere or in other things. By natural evil: pains, distresses, inconveniences and frustrated appetites […][6]. By moral evil: crooked choices, especially ones that are harmful to ourselves or others."[7]

Moral evil is the familiar category of blameworthy misdeeds and omissions brought about by free agents, i.e., sin. *Physical evils* are pains and sufferings brought about either by natural events (e.g., tsunamis and bear attacks), or by free agents (e.g., as divine punishments for committing moral evils or as the natural consequences of another's free action).[8] *Metaphysical evils*, or evils of imperfection, is the least familiar

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causal involvement. For a very lucid and helpful discussion of concurrence theory as it related to the problem of evil, see Alfred J. Freddoso, "Suarez on God's Causal Involvement in Sinful Acts."

[6] The elided phrase reads: "arising from natural motions" [*a motibus naturalibus orta*]. I omitted it above because it is peculiar to King's theodicy that all natural evils result from matter in motion, a claim that isn't part of the standard understanding of the category.

[7] King, *De Origine Mali*, 37. For nearly identical taxonomies, see Clarke, *Demonstration*, 78-9 and Leibniz, T 21.

[8] I will follow the early moderns and use "physical" to describe this category, since "natural" may too readily connote only natural disasters (which, on this taxonomy, aren't strictly speaking physical evils at all, though they can cause them). It should be kept in mind that mental suffering also falls under the category of "physical evils."

category to us. We can think of them as species-specific limitations: that I can't run 40 miles per hour, that pandas can't solve quadratic equations, and so forth. Not everyone agrees that such limitations are genuine *evils*, so I will often use the more neutral term "creaturely limitations" to describe the category of metaphysical evils.[9]

Using that classification, a prominent answer to Augustine's question in Western philosophical theology ran something like this.[10] In the case of *creaturely limitations*, God is responsible for their existence, but blamelessly so, given the outweighing excellence of creating a diverse, plentiful cosmos, whose free creation necessitated the existence of every actual limitation. *Physical* evils are either natural consequences of metaphysical and moral evils, or else justly administered punishments for moral evils, in which case God's causal role in bringing about physical evils will be as blameless as is God's role in producing moral and metaphysical evils. And, of course, God is in no way blameworthy for the existence of any *moral* evil. As this point is often put, God is not the author of sins. Instead, the moral evil of sins is brought about by free creatures misusing their freedom, without God's immediate causal cooperation.

As we will see in the next section, privation theory handled two aspects of this theodician project. It provided an *ontological* account of evil that preserved the metaphysical priority of God's goodness over evil. That is, privation theory helped preserve the monotheistic conviction that God is both wholly good and metaphysically prior to everything else, including evil. Secondly, the ontology of privation theory helped provide a *causal* account of evil that preserved the blamelessness and justice of God by

[9] Although he employs the category of creaturely limitation or "defect," Aquinas denies that we should call such limitations "evil" (ST I, q48, art. 3). For a defense of extending the term "evil" to these sorts of metaphysical imperfections, see Leibniz, GP III.574.
[10] For a more general overview and discussion, see Newlands, "The Problem of Evil."

showing how, despite God's causal contributions to the world, God is not the author of sin. I will refer to these two roles as the *ontological* and the *causal* roles of privation theory, respectively.

In what follows, I will focus mostly on the case of moral evils, since privation theory seemed especially helpful there, and since explanations of God's role in moral evil provided a litmus test for new proposals in philosophical theology. As Bayle reports, "Since Luther and Calvin appeared on the scene, I do not believe a year has gone by without someone accusing them of making God the author of sins."[11] Leibniz claimed that the toughest theodician challenge was to provide a satisfying account of God's role in sin.[12] So if privation theory can help explain God's blameless role in the existence of moral evil, that will be a strong mark in its favor for theists. And if it can't – as many early moderns protested – then we are left to wonder why it should be retained at all. But before exploring sources of dissatisfaction, we need a bit more background material to understand how privation theory was supposed to work.

3. A Brief Background on Evils and Privations

In this section, I will provide a very brief metaphysical background primer to privation theory that had its roots in neo-Platonism but had become widely embraced by the 17th century. According to a then-standard ontological picture, reality is stratified into a "great chain of being."[13] God, who is the most real, most perfect, most intelligible, and most good, lies at the top of this variegated ontological chain – or perhaps even beyond the highest rung. Humans, somewhere lower down on the scale of being, are less real, less perfect, and less good. Below us lie non-rational animals, trees, rocks and so on. An

[11] Bayle, "Paulicians," rem. F.
[12] Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 107
[13] The classical study on this background is Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.

important measure of a thing's degree of reality was its degree of independence: the stuff lower on the chain is more dependent and therefore less perfect and less real than the stuff higher up.[14]

In addition to agreeing about the existence of this chain, there was a further consensus that the chain of being is *plentiful*. That is, there are no ontological gaps in reality; the chain is smooth in its descent. In its purest form, this idea was applied at the level of species, such that for any pair of created species that differ in their degrees of reality α and β, there exists at least one additional created species with a degree of reality between α and β. I will call this the "plenitude principle."[15]

Furthermore, partly in light of the Biblical doctrine of the goodness of all creation, it seemed that every member of the chain – even the very lowest – must be good to at least some degree.[16] There does not exist anything that is purely evil. Many Scholastics went further and claimed that the degrees of a thing's goodness and reality, both of which are maximal in God, are co-extensive at every level of the ontological chain. This became known in Scholasticism as the *convertibility of goodness and being*: the degree to which something is real is the degree to which it is good.[17] I will call this the "co-extensive principle."

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[14] Thinking of "degrees of reality" at least partly in terms of metaphysical dependence helps avoid connotations, wholly foreign to this picture, of some kind of shadowy, poke-your-finger-through-them ontology of everyday objects like cups and rocks.

[15] One noteworthy difference between pure neo-Platonism and later Christian thought emerges here. In pure neo-Platonism, the source of such prolific emanation was the self-sufficiency (and hence perfection) of the highest Good. Stinginess in the generation of our world would have implied greediness, an unnecessary and unreasonable holding back of goodness and reality that could have otherwise been expressed. Thus, from the perfection and abundance of the highest good itself, there must come the cascading down of goodness and being in all possible degrees. Christians usually revised this story a bit, emphasizing the perfect nature of a loving God as a motivation for freely chosen ontological fullness.

[16] Aquinas, SCG IIIa.vii. This represented another important point of departure for Christian theology from neo-Platonism. Even if matter is on the bottom rung of the great chain, it nevertheless is good.

[17] See Suarez DM X.iii for discussion and citations.

We now have the material to sketch one possible account of the nature and justification of evil in a divinely created world. Let's begin with the ontological story. Given this hierarchy of beings, we might explain the nature of every evil as an *absence of goodness*, which, by the co-extensive principle, is equivalent to an absence of reality and an absence of perfection.[18] To be evil is just to be imperfect or limited, which is extensionally equivalent to lacking some degree of reality. I will call this the "evil as limitation" view. According to it, things are more evil the more limited they are, i.e., the farther down on the chain of being they stand. This account preserves both the inter-definability of goodness and evil and the metaphysical priority of goodness over evil.

Of course, by the plenitude principle, the variegated chain of reality would also be a chain of evils, on the evil as limitation view. It would then seem that the source of the chain itself would also be the source of every evil. After all, to create limited creatures *is eo ipso* to create evils, according to the evil as limitation view. We might wonder about the justification part of the story. Could a perfect being be justified in creating all these evils?

The metaphysical backdrop again suggests a way of answering "yes." For, one might argue, the great good of creating such a rich, plentifully diverse chain outweighs and justifies the creation of a plentitude of limitations or evils. Although Aquinas rejects the evil as limitation view, he provides several arguments for the great good of such diversity and concludes, "The perfection of the universe requires that there should be inequality in things, so that every grade of goodness may be realized."[19] In other words,

[18] Advocates of this understanding of evil include notable Platonists, such as Plotinus (*Enneads* I.8) and Proclus (*The Nature and Origin of Evil*, esp. sec. 51, p. 258-9 in Dillon/Gerson).
[19] Aquinas, ST I q 48, art 2; see also ST I, q 47, art 1 an 2; ST I, q 48, art 2, ad 3; see also Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 79-80, 88, 93.

the great good of cosmic diversity can justify the creation of a range of limited creatures. On the evil as limitation view, the good of cosmic diversity would then also justify the existence of all evils.

In fact, on this account of evil, to insist that a good God would never create evil is to insist that a good God wouldn't create at all, since the existence of evil is entailed by the creation of something less metaphysically perfect than God, namely any creature whatsoever. So if God is morally permitted to create at all, the great good of creating a plentiful chain of more and less perfect types of creatures may provide all the theodicy one needs. Every aspect of creation is to some degree good and the great goodness of cosmic diversity justifies the creation of lesser goods.

However elegant this account may be, most Western Christians rejected the evil as limitation view, the thesis that all evil was merely a lack of goodness.[20] For one, it would turn all evils into metaphysical evils, a collapse of the taxonomy outlined in section 2. But *moral* evils seemed to them to be more than just a lack of being, perfection, or goodness, even if the capacity to produce moral evil presupposed some creaturely limitations. Moral evils also involve a perversion, a twisting, a failure, not simply a limitation.[21] So the *evil as limitation* view was amended: some evils are a *privation* of goodness [*privatio boni*], a lack of goodness that a thing *ought to have*, goodness that it has been de*prive*d from possessing. This is the core ontological claim of privation theory.[22]

One advantage of privation theory is that it allows for more fine-grained accounts of kinds of limitations. Under the "evil as limitation" view, any absence of goodness was

[20] For a helpful summary of the most influential figures, see Suarez, DM XI.i.3.
[21] Aquinas, SCG IIIa.x.11
[22] For examples, see Aquinas, ST I, q48, art 3 and Suarez, DM XI.i.3.

an evil. Advocates of privation theory wanted to distinguish between pure limitations and species-specific evils. There does, after all, seem to be a difference between the deficiency of a tree that cannot see and a dog that cannot see. Privation theory captures this difference. The evil of blindness is not simply the absence of sight, or else it would follow that unsighted trees and dogs suffer the same evil of blindness. Instead, the physical evil of blindness is a *privation* of sight, an absence of sight in something that *naturally ought to see*. As Aquinas summarizes, "therefore, not every defect of the good is an evil, but the defect of the good *which is naturally due*. For the want of sight is not an evil in a stone, but it is an evil in an animal, since it is against the nature of a stone to see" (emphasis mine).[23]

The appeal to privations assumes that, in addition to the chain of being, there are human-independent standards that establish what limited degrees of perfections each individual or species ought to possess. The grounds of such standards can't straightforwardly be God's own perfection, since the metaphysical limitations of finite creatures make it impossible for creatures to be as perfect as God. Lions ought only to be as perfect as a lion could be; humans ought only to be as perfect as creatures with limited understandings and wills could be.[24] Nonetheless, one possible ground for such standards is limited versions of God's own perfections: one ought to imitate God in the ways and to the highest degrees that one's capacities allow.

In the case of physical evils, Aristotelianism provided Scholastics with a more immediate source of natural oughts: the nature of a given thing was the source of its natural ends. Therefore, they reasoned, since it is not part of the nature of trees to see,

[23] Aquinas, ST I, q48, art. 5, ad 1
[24] That is consistent, of course, with moral perfection being among the appropriate perfections for humans.

blindness in trees is not a physical evil. But since lions ought to see by their species-specific telos, blindness is a physical evil for lions. As we will see, this use of teleology in Scholastic accounts of privative physical evils became a stumbling block to those early moderns who rejected final causes in physics.

So far, we've been discussing the *ontological* role of privation theory. How was it used to explain and justify the source of evil, the *causal* role? Consider, *modo confessionis,* an example of a low-level moral evil: I too quickly lose my patience with my daughter and raise my voice in unjustified anger to her.[25] Some of the explanation for the evil of that action will appeal to limitations or mere negations, e.g., that I can't concentrate on two things at once, that I am able to speak without due reflection, that I can become impatient and angry, that my daughter can't always remember where she put things, and even that my daughter is capable of experiencing emotional pain and rejection. (Hm. Pardon for a moment while I go apologize.)

As we have seen, those aspects of creaturely limitation *are* caused by God, but blamelessly so – indeed, it is praiseworthy of God to create creatures with an array of limitations. Aquinas claims that the richness of God's own goodness helps explain why God created such a wide range of creaturely limitations:

> because [God's] goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another…the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatsoever.[26]

[25] Some may object that this fault is too low-level and mundane to count as a genuine *evil*, a category reserved in contemporary parlance for much more serious moral offenses. Maybe so, but for the taxonomy of evil under consideration, all moral failings, be they large or small, count as moral *evils* or sins, and few in the historical Christian communities under consideration would have balked at extending the term to some actions of seemingly all of us. (Thanks to Susan Neiman for a vigorous discussion on this point.)
[26] Aquinas, ST I, q 47, art 1

So although my ability to raise my voice in anger is a necessary condition for my act of moral evil, it is also a mark of my distinctive, God-like excellence – after all, lowly rocks don't have a voice box and can't form intentions.

However, God causally contributes to more than merely the prerequisites for creaturely action. As mentioned in section two, most Scholastics agreed that God also immediately causally contributes to – concurs in – *every* creaturely act. In Scholastic terminology, God doesn't just give being (*esse*) to creatures; God also gives being to their actions. In fact, God causally contributes to every action, including acts of sin.[27] But if God causally contributes to the *act* of sin itself, isn't God at least partly responsible for the moral evil after all?

The standard reply was to distinguish the positive aspects of the sinful action from the sinful aspects in such a way that God contributes to all and only the good aspects of sinning. After all, if every action has some reality or being, then by the co-extensive principle, every action, even a sin, is to some degree *good*. However, while God must causally contribute to *some* aspects of a sinful act, God does not contribute to the *sinful* aspects of the sin. We can think of it as tracing a single effect to two different sources, each of which is responsible for different aspects of the effect. To God we trace only the positive, even praiseworthy aspects of a sinful act. And, of course, to creatures we trace every blameworthy aspect.[28]

Aquinas nicely summarizes this tracing strategy: "Whatever there is of being and action in a bad action is reduced to God as the cause; whereas whatever defect is in it is

[27] Aquinas, *On Evil*, q3, art 2

[28] According to concurrence theory, we can also trace the positive aspects to creatures too, though in such a way that God's causal contribution for the positive aspects remains primary.

not caused by God, but by the deficient secondary cause."[29] God contributes to bringing about the positive and real aspects of sins; creatures alone bring about the defective aspects of sins.[30] But, the argument runs, bringing about the *defective* aspects of a sin is a necessary condition for being blameworthy for causing that sin. Hence God is not blameworthy for any moral evil.

Privation theory plays a pivotal role in this causal account. Since God needs to be causally involved in the production of everything real, everything with being, the only way in which God would not need to be causally involved in the sinful aspect of sin is if the sinfulness somehow lacked being or reality. This is just what privation theory claims: evil is a *lack* of (appropriate) perfection and being, and lacks aren't *things* with being. Hence evils *qua* evils do not need the concurrence of God. Suarez explains this move a little more fully, under the assumption that the core of moral evil is the privative failure to act as one ought:

> But the evil that follows from the lack of perfection or action of a proximate cause does not require *per se* the influence of God…a secondary cause does need God's cooperation insofar as it does not act, but only insofar as it does something; therefore, this evil by itself has no way of being attributed to God.[31]

There are many questions one could raise about this causal strategy and the privative account of evil more generally. To address some of them, I will turn to one of the most prominent early modern advocates of privation theory: Descartes.

4. A Surprising Advocate of Privation Theory: Descartes

Descartes, one of the great innovators of the 17th century, appears to be a staunch advocate of traditional privation theory. Though Descartes claims to have ushered in new

[29] Aquinas, ST I, q49, art. 2, ad 2.
[30] For examples of this move closer to Descartes' own time, see Molina, *Disputation* XXXII and Suarez, DM XI.iii.22. For an early version, see Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 69.
[31] DM XI.iii.22

developments in many other scientific and philosophical domains, he is a self-described traditionalist when it comes to evil. (At the end of this section, I'll suggest a motive for his traditionalism on this topic.) Descartes often tries to steer clear of theological discussions, although he discusses cognitive *error* in the Fourth Meditation and his account generalizes to all forms of fault.[32]

Descartes first notes that he stands at neither the top nor the bottom of the ontological hierarchy: "I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being."[33] He then considers a version of the evil as limitation view, only to join the Christian tradition in rejecting it as inadequate in favor of a privative account. "For error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge *which should be in me*" (emphasis mine).[34]

Continuing to echo tradition, Descartes next acknowledges that God is the source of his limitations, and hence the possibility of his falling into error and sin. However, he reasons that God is not blameworthy for creating him with such limitations. Why not? Once again, Descartes makes an appeal to the good of diversity: "But I cannot therefore deny that there may in some way be more perfection in the universe as a whole because some of its parts are not immune from error, while others are immune, than there would be if all the parts were exactly alike."[35] Descartes continues rehearsing the traditional

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[32] Descartes claims in the Meditations that he explains "the source of my error *and sin*" (CSM II/41, emphasis mine), and elsewhere he claims to avoid talking about good and evil only to avoid becoming embattled in theological controversies (CSMK III/234 and 342). Nonetheless, Descartes added a note in the Synopsis of the Meditations that "I do not deal at all with sin…" (CSM II/11), though he added this note to a later edition of the *Meditations* to appease Arnauld and avoid ecclesial troubles (see CSMK III/175).)

[33] Descartes, CSM II/48

[34] Descartes, CSM II/38.

[35] Descartes, CSM II/42-43. Here is one point of departure from tradition. Whereas tradition asserted an indicative here – there *is* more perfection in the universe because of diversity of limitations – Descartes offers a doubly-qualified possibility claim – he can't deny that there may be greater perfection due to

account and claims that the possibility of committing moral evil presupposes not only limitations, but also perfections that other creatures lack: "my ability to perform [blameworthy errors] means that there is in a sense more perfection in me than would be if I lacked this ability."[36] So although my ability to raise my voice in anger to my daughter is a necessary condition for my act of moral evil, it is also one of my perfections.

Indeed, Descartes' theodicy in the Fourth Meditation is so thoroughly traditional that in a few packed sentences, he repeats what he took to be the most promising conclusions of twelve centuries of Christian reflection on the nature and source of moral evil in a divinely sustained world. He even uses Scholastic terminology to do so:[37]

> In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error. The privation, I say, lies in the operation of the will in so far as it proceeds from me, but not in the faculty of will which I received from God, nor even in its operation, in so far as it depends on him.
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> [Two paragraphs later, he continues:]
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> For insofar as these acts depend on God, they are wholly true and good; and my ability to perform them means that there is in a sense more perfection in me than would be if I lacked this ability. As for the privation involved – which is all that the essential definition of falsity and wrong consists in – this does not in any way require the concurrence of God, since it is not a thing; indeed, when it is referred to God as its cause, it should be called not a privation but simply a negation.[38]

Descartes acknowledges here that by giving me freedom, God also gives me the capacity to sin. When I actually sin, God remains causally involved in my will's "operation, insofar as it depends on him." This just repeats Aquinas' point that God is causally

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diversity. This pull back to mere defense here has worrisome consequences for the rest of Descartes' theodicy; see Newlands, "The Problem of Evil" for discussion.

[36] Descartes, CSM II/41

[37] Descartes explicitly acknowledges his Scholastic framework in a note added to the French edition (CSM II/42n2).

[38] Descartes, CSM II/41-42

involved in both the pre-conditions for sin (which Descartes describes as mere "negations" or limitations for God) and the act of sin itself.

What about the sinfulness of sins? Like the Scholastics, Descartes relies on dividing the sinful aspect of the sin from the non-sinful aspects. The former, which Descartes calls a privation and not a mere negation or limitation, "proceeds from me" without God's concurrence, whereas the latter proceed with God's concurrence. A few paragraphs later, he adds, "I must not complain that the forming of those acts of will or judgments in which I go wrong happens with God's concurrence. For insofar as these acts depend on God, they are wholly true and good."[39] Once again, Descartes says nothing new: God doesn't cause the *privative* aspect of a morally evil act, though God contributes to whatever goodness is involved in such acts.

However, if God must causally contribute to every action, even sins, it isn't yet clear why God doesn't also need to contribute to every *aspect* of actions, including the sinful aspects. According to Descartes, here is where privation theory truly earns its keep. "As for the privation involved – which is all that the essential definition of falsity and wrong consists in – this does not in any way require the concurrence of God, *since it is not a thing*; indeed, when it is referred to God as its cause, it should be called not a privation but simply a negation" (emphasis mine).[40] He is even clearer in the *Principles*: "Moreover, errors are not things, requiring the real concurrence of God for their production."[41] And again: "When I say [God understands, wills, and accomplishes] 'everything' I mean all *things*: for God does not will the evil of sin, which is not a thing"

[39] Descartes, CSM II/42
[40] Descartes, CSM II/42
[41] Descartes, *Principles* I.31 (CSM I/203-4)

(emphasis original).[42] According to Descartes, God doesn't causally contribute to the sinful aspect of sins, since, strictly speaking, there isn't anything there for God to cause! The morally evil aspect of a sin is a *privation* of goodness and being. And, Descartes reasons, such lacks require no divine contribution.

It is natural to read Descartes and the Scholastics as reasoning from the privative nature of evil to the conclusion that God does not concur in the sinfulness of sin and so is not the author of sin.[43] But one could weaken the role of privation theory from *demonstrating* that God is not the author of sin to merely providing a model of how God *need not* be the author of sin, in spite of the fact that God must causally contribute to every creaturely action. [44] On this weaker, more defensive account, the privative nature of evil does not show *that* God is not the cause of sin. So theists would need other reasons to believe that God is not the author of sin, perhaps due to an analysis of the concept of a perfect being or, as Suarez suggests, "since *according to the faith* God is not the author of sin" (emphasis mine).[45] As we will see (section 5.3), Leibniz returns to the issue of whether the causal role of privation theory demonstrates or presupposes that God is not the author of sin.

For all the traditionalism in Descartes' account of evil, there is one very significant but easily missed point on which Descartes parts ways with the Scholastics on

[42] Descartes, *Principles* I.23 (CSM I/201).
[43] For example, consider Suarez's remark that, "On the other hand, a secondary cause does not need God's concurrence insofar as it does not act…*therefore* this evil by itself has no way of being attributed to God either mediately or immediately. *For this reason* the evil of fault is not founded in God…" (Suarez, DM XI.iii.22, emphases mine).
[44] This still assumes that God is blameless for creating creatures *capable* of bringing about moral evil, but the value of free creatures, or the value of the overall diversity to which they contribute, is thought to outweigh the corresponding cost of creating creatures capable of moral evil. For more on the role of creaturely freedom in Descartes' theodicy (and 17th century challenges to it), see Newlands, "The Problem of Evil".
[45] See Suarez, DM XI.iii.22

privation theory. I've claimed that Descartes is self-consciously echoing the standard answers with respect to the nature, source, and justification of moral evils. But when Descartes turns to certain *physical* evils, he refuses to follow the Scholastic tradition in embracing privation theory. Recall that in order to account for some privative physical evils, privation theorists needed a non-conventional standard for how things ought to be, a standard traditionally provided by Aristotelian teleology. Descartes famously rejects the use of teleology in physics. So when it comes to explaining some non-moral, physical evils, Descartes cannot use traditional privation theory.

In fact, Descartes outright *rejects* natural privations for bodily substances in the Sixth Meditation. He compares a diseased body to an inaccurate clock, and first echoes what someone (namely an Aristotelian) might have said about this case:

> Admittedly, when I consider the purpose of the clock, I may say that it is departing from its nature when it does not tell the right time; and similarly, when I consider the mechanism of the human body [suffering from dropsy], I may think that, in relation to the motions that normally occur in it, it too is deviating from its nature.[46]

But if there are no natural ends in bodies on which to hang intrinsic "oughts," this won't be the correct account of such physical evils, even if there are bodily "natures" in other senses of the term. This is exactly what Descartes concludes, now speaking for his own view:

> But I am well aware that 'nature' as I have just used it has a very different significance from 'nature' in the other [Cartesian-friendly] sense. As I have just used it [in the clock analogy], 'nature' is simply a label which depends on my thought; it is quite extrinsic to the things to which it is applied, and depends simply on my comparison between the idea of a sick man and a badly-made clock, and the idea of a healthy man and a well-made clock. But by 'nature' in the other sense I understand something that is really found in the things themselves…[47]

[46] CSM II/58
[47] CSM II/59

We will see Spinoza pick up and elaborate Descartes' claim that natures, as the essences of things that have natural ends and oughts, are merely extrinsic denominations of bodies, properties of a mind that compares bodies together. The important point here is how sharply Descartes distances himself from the Scholastics on this matter. He doesn't reject natures, oughts, and privations in the mental/moral realm, and even in mental-physical composites. But in the purely bodily realm, Descartes thinks the traditional Scholastic Aristotelian accounts of privative physical evils must be abandoned.

Seeing where Descartes embraces and rejects the Scholastic tradition on the topic of evil may also explain a puzzling aspect of Meditation Four. As is now well-appreciated, the *Meditations* was written partly as a subversive text, according to Descartes himself in an oft-cited letter to Mersenne:

> I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations for my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.[48]

One of Descartes' most threatening challenges to Aristotelianism was his rejection of appeals to teleology in physics. But in the *Meditations,* this momentous rejection occurs curiously in the middle of Descartes' discussion of the error and sin in the Fourth Meditation, seemingly out of the blue and with no follow-up.[49] Why?

I think Descartes is ultimately doing to the problem of evil exactly what he told Mersenne he was doing throughout the *Meditations*. He gives his readers back all the traditional account of evil, *except that portion that depended on Scholastic Aristotelianism*, namely privative physical evils. And what better place for Descartes to

[48] CSMK III/173
[49] CSM II/39

quietly pull out the rug from Aristotelian teleology than when he otherwise being the most traditional, the most conservative, the most non-threatening, namely in his discussion of evil. I think this is why it is in the Fourth Meditation that Descartes, fully clothed in the comforting language and moves of Scholasticism, mentions in passing the uselessness of final causes in physics. But no need to fret, he reassures his readers. Look at how much of tradition we can still salvage. Privations, freedom, concurrence, theodicy – all these elements are preserved once readers purge themselves of their Scholastic hangovers. I suspect Descartes' mostly traditional account of evil is intended to show just how much of that tradition is separable from the Scholastic Aristotelian setting in which it had come to be embedded.

As they did with so many other aspects of Cartesianism, many of Descartes' early modern critics objected that he did not go far enough in his challenge of traditional privation theory. Descartes had tried to preserve both the ontological and causal roles of privation theory for moral error and sin, while jettisoning them in the bodily realm for the sake of a mechanistic physics. Critics objected that in trying to preserve even a limited role for privation theory, Descartes highlighted just how problematic privation theory itself is, regardless of the domain in which it is applied. It is to these early modern criticisms of privation theory that we now turn.

5.0 Early Modern Challenges to Privation Theory

However compelling privation theory was to centuries of philosophers, it met swift and steadfast resistance among many of the early moderns. Descartes published his *Meditations* in 1641; within a generation, appeals to privation theory began to disappear

among leading intellectuals in Western Europe and remain absent from most contemporary discussions. What prompted this early modern bucking of tradition?

5.1 Guilt by Association

A significant motive for abandoning privation theory lies in a somewhat unfortunate historical fact: the leading advocates of the privation theory of evil at the start of the 17th century were latter-day medieval Scholastics. This was not a coincidence. One of the great virtues of privation theory, apart from its theoretical utility, was how elegantly it fit into leading pre-modern scientific accounts. This can seem a bit surprising. Read in isolation as the claim that evil is the lack of an appropriate perfection, privation theory might seem like an ad hoc account introduced to ward off theological concerns.

However, the general concept of a privation was imbedded in a comprehensive metaphysical and scientific account of the natural world, a broadly Aristotelian account that remained vibrant into even the 18th century. For example, the state of rest in some bodies was considered a *privation of motion*.[50] Heat in water was understood as a privation of water's natural state. Indeed, so integrated were the scientific, metaphysical, and theological theories that the term "evil" could be used in scientific examples as just another example of a privation. Notice how Aquinas appeals to the scientifically-sanctioned way heat deprives water of its naturally cool state in order to illustrate a point about evil: "For example, fire is deprived of the form of water, which is required for the perfection of water, not of a form that is required for the perfection of fire. And so fire is evil for water, not evil as such."[51] One of the great virtues of Scholasticism was its

[50] This idea has a rich pedigree: see Aristotle, *Physics* V.6
[51] *De Malo* I, art. 1, ad 1; Suarez, DM XI.iii.12

uniform explanatory framework that applied to natural *and* moral, metaphysical *and* theological domains, a framework that included a robust role for privations.

Unfortunately, this elegant integration also proved damning once the new mechanistic philosophers jettisoned privations from scientific explanations. The growing belief in the triumph of 17th century mechanism, according to which the motion and impact of bodies suffice to explain all physical events, cast a dark shadow over attempts to explain the natural world via absences and privations of appropriate forms. We saw that even Descartes restricted privation theory to the mental/moral domain; in his physics, the rejection of privations was already well underway.[52] Perhaps it was only a matter of time before the dissatisfaction spread from the physical to the moral realm. After all, if appeals to privations were scientifically deficient, why expect better from privative accounts of evil?

The charge of guilt by association is clearest in Hobbes, who describes Scholastic writings as "insignificant trains of strange and barbarous words."[53] He asks, "When men write whole volumes of such stuff, are they not mad, or intend to make others so?"[54] This caustic attitude spills over into traditional privation theory, about which he concludes, "So, where the scholastics wanted to seem most subtle, they showed most their stupidity."[55] In fact, according to Hobbes, the Scholastics failed to understand Aristotle

[52] For example, see Descartes, CSMK III/79

[53] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 467. In Hobbes' defense, late medieval discussions of privation theory can certainly *sound* like more of the same dense scholastic hand-wringing, as a representative passage from Suarez shows: "Finally, a lack of perfection agreeable to the subject is denoted in the very thing that is said to be evil for another…And, with respect to the form, the lack of perfection can be called a privation not without qualification, but on a certain hypothesis, that is, in relation to the effect. The reason for this is that, although absolutely perfection is not due to the form, yet the form needs it in order that it might agreeably inform the subject" (Suarez, DM XI.i.14).

[54] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46.

[55] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 476. See section 5.3 below for a similar version of Hobbes' more philosophical objection.

himself in their privation theory of evil – fighting words to philosophers who had devoted hundreds of years to poring carefully over Aristotle's texts. Hobbes may be an extreme case, but even the great synthesizer Leibniz, who would later nominally support privation theory, reaches a similar diagnosis:

> For to say that God is not the author of sin, because he is not the author of a privation, although he can be called the author of everything that is real and positive in the sin – that is a manifest illusion. It is a leftover from the visionary philosophy of the past; it is a subterfuge with which a reasonable person will never be satisfied.[56]

It wasn't only philosophers who made such sweeping criticisms. For example, the Protestant theologian Isaac Papin, in his 1687 *Essais de Theologie*, describes the distinctions in traditional privation theory as "chimerical", "absolutely useless", "illusory" – "nothing but dust from the Schools that they wanted to throw in our eyes to keep us from seeing the absurd consequences of the Scholastics".[57]

At the very least, the sweeping changes in 17th century scientific explanations invited closer scrutiny of the use of privation theory in philosophical theology. But rejecting the theory simply because Aristotelian Scholastics used it invites the charge of tossing out the baby with the bathwater. In the following sections, we will look at more direct philosophical reasons for rejecting privative explanations of evil.

5.2 Extensional Inadequacy

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[56] Leibniz, CP 111

[57] Papin, *Essais de Theologie*, 62-64. Bayle cites Papin's critique with apparent approval in "Paulicians," rem I, and pushes privation theory aside in "Manichees," rem. D, n53. For an overview of Bayle's own rejection of privation theory, see Gianluca Mori, *Bayle Philosophe*, 325-26 and Todd Ryan, *Pierre Bayle's Cartesian Metaphysics*, 91-93. (I am grateful to Michael Hickson and Todd Ryan for drawing my attention to Bayle's discussions of privation theory in these and other passages cited below.) The Anglican bishop Gilbert Burnet also expressed skepticism, though in a less caustic manner (cf. Burnet, *A Commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, ¶56) Of course, traditional privation theory also had its defenders among 17th century theologians. For example, see Alexis Gaudin, *La distinction et la nature du bien et du mal*, esp. ch. 5.

Malebranche was one of the more sympathetic early modern critics of privation theory, which is not surprising, given his esteem for Augustine and Descartes. Malebranche even used privations in his scientific explanations of motion, though the underlying principles are thoroughly mechanistic.[58] But Malebranche too departs from the Augustinian tradition and denies that all evil is a privation of an appropriate perfection. He thinks there are clear cases of evil that are not privative, in which case privation theory is extensionally inadequate and at least in need of supplementation.

Malebranche focuses on one of the toughest cases for privation theory: pain.[59] Malebranche argues that the experience of pain is not just the deprivation of an appropriate good such as pleasure.[60] Rather, "pain is a real and true evil…thus not every evil is an evil just because it deprives us of good," adding later that pain "is always a real evil to those who suffer it, as long as they suffer it."[61] Malebranche implies that at least some physical evils like pain and suffering are not merely absences of an appropriate good. The evil of pain is sometimes quite positive and real, suggesting that the evil of pains has a positive nature that is opposed to the good, *pace* privation theory. According to Malebranche, some pains are intrinsically evil.

Of course, privation theorists affirmed the existence of *something* real in all evil, namely the subject of the privation.[62] This absolved them from having to make the absurd

[58] Malebranche, *Search After Truth*, 514-518
[59] Malebranche would have a much harder time objecting to the privative account of moral evil, given his view that moral evil stems from a failure to turn away from lesser goods towards the one true good. For early modern criticisms of the claim that moral evil is always a failure to act appropriately, see Bayle, "Paulicians," rem. F and Papin, *Essais de Theologie*, 73.
[60] Leibniz agrees, writing in correspondence with Arnold Eckhard, "pain can no more be called a privation of pleasure, than pleasure a privation of pain. But pleasure as well as pain is something positive. And pain is related to pleasure quite otherwise than darkness to light" (Ak 2.1.488; translated in Robert Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, 120). See also Bayle, "Paulicians," rem. E.
[61] Malebranche, *Search After Truth*, 348 and 392, respectively.
[62] Aquinas, *On Evil* I, art. 1; Suarez DM XI.iii.6

claim that there is nothing real to the evils of our world (though they are sometimes caricatured as saying just this[63]). There *is* something positive, real, and hence good in both the subject and source of every evil, according to privation theory. Even so, pains are especially difficult for privation theorists to handle, since some pains seem to be both real and evil in themselves. And this is just what Malebranche points out in his objection.

A privation theorist could concede in reply that some experiences of pain are evil, but only by also admitting that the painful *qualia* of those experiences are privative and hence unreal in themselves (to put it awkwardly). But this reply would run deeply contrary to experience: the *qualia* of pain sure seem real! A better reply from privation theorists is to admit the reality of painful *qualia*, but deny that the *qualia* themselves are ever intrinsically evil. This sounds shocking at first: our very real experiences of pain and suffering are never evil in themselves? (Notice that this isn't a question about whether pains are *justified*. It is about whether they are physical evils in the first place.)

Consider the case of someone suffering from dystonia, a chronic neurological disorder that causes uncontrollable and sometimes quite painful muscle spasms. According to one version of privation theory, the pain caused by this condition is not itself a physical evil. The pain is caused by the patient's malfunctioning nervous system, and it is this malfunctioning that is the physical evil. That is, the lack of an appropriately functioning nervous system is the physical evil in cases of dystonia. The privation results in a very real experience of pain, but the painful sensation itself is not a physical evil. Indeed, according to privation theory, pain *qualia*, even when caused by a malfunctioning system, are actually appropriate perfections for sentient creatures. After all, the experience of pain in a properly functioning organism serves as a vital warning system

[63] For an early modern version of this caricature, see Bayle, "Euclid," rem. B.

for danger. The hope for privation theory is that every pain can be similarly traced back to an appropriate response – and hence a good – to an inappropriate condition – a privative physical evil.

Malebranche objects that this strategy is unconvincing, though he casts his net too wide in insisting that *all* pain *qualia* are *always* evil. Privation theorists are surely right to deny this stronger version. A mild and brief pang in my stomach can helpfully remind me to eat when I'm distracted and low on energy. But what about extremely intense pains, what Malebranche calls "violent pains,"[64] pains whose intensity goes well beyond the warning function and serve only to prolong suffering? Or pains whose after-effect lingers long beyond what proper function requires, such as the ceaseless agony of the cancer patient or, to use a favorite early modern case, phantom limb pains? A stouthearted privation theorist could insist, of course, that in such cases, the pain-generating mechanism is functioning improperly and *that* is the physical evil, not the pain itself. But Malebranche's point isn't that privation theorists can't re-describe the cases. It is that the proposed re-descriptions by privation theorists are unconvincing. Some pains far outstrip functional utility and their status as evils is not plausibly traced back to a broken pain-generator. Some pains are intrinsically real and evil in themselves, *pace* privation theory.[65]

Whether or not one agrees with Malebranche, his verdict on the intrinsic evil of some pains is now the dominant and mostly unquestioned view in contemporary discussions of evil. If Malebranche is right, then even if privation theory works for some

[64] Malebranche, *Search After Truth,* 592
[65] For a Scholastic reply, see Suarez, DM XI.i.9. For more recent discussions of pain and privation theory, see Adam Swenson, "Privation Theories of Pain" and Irit Samit, "On Pain and the Privation Theory of Evil."

cases of physical and moral evil, it doesn't apply to them all, a restriction that undermines its systematic allure. If privation theory can't correctly diagnose the physical evils of suffering, why think it fares any better in other cases? Still, nothing in Malebranche's objection *rules out* a restricted use of privation theory, and Malebranche himself never explained how far he thought his rejection should extend. Indeed, as I noted above, Malebranche appeals to privations in other contexts. We'll now turn to early modern objections that go further and deny that there is even a limited use for privation theory in accounts of evil.

5.3 Explanatory Inadequacy

Of the leading early moderns, Leibniz worked the hardest to preserve pre-modern ideas. He didn't do so uncritically, of course – he himself raised the objections to privation theory that were discussed in the previous two sections. But later in his career, Leibniz began to think there was an element of truth to privation theory, acknowledging that privation theory "is more solid than it seems at first."[66] By the time he wrote the *Theodicy* near the end of his life, Leibniz had even begun defending part of the theory. "So the Platonists, Saint Augustine, and the Scholastics were correct in saying that God is the cause of the material aspect of evil, which consists in positive [reality], and not in the formal aspect, which consists in privation."[67] But preserving the truth of a traditional theory is not the same as endorsing the traditional theory itself, and Leibniz was masterful at extracting a fragment of someone else's view and putting it to his own use. We should probably view Leibniz's later embrace of privation theory as another instance

[66] Leibniz, Ak 6.4.1605
[67] Leibniz, T 30

of this strategy. In Leibniz's deft hands, privation theory ultimately becomes a version of the "evil as limitation" view.[68]

Before he tried to co-opt traditional privation theory to his own theodician projects, Leibniz was as fierce a critic of the theory as they come. After describing its causal role in an early essay, he notes, "Of course, one says things in order to excuse God that are so lame that a defense attorney with similar arguments before a reasonable judge would be ashamed."[69] In addition to bursts of rhetoric, Leibniz also raises pointed objections to the theory that are worth considering.

> Indeed, I do not see why [on privation theory] one holds the sinner himself to be a cause of sin; he does the deed (just as God does the deed from which everything follows), and who can do anything about the fact that this deed is not in harmony with the love of God? Such an imperfection or dissonance is a nonbeing, a negative thing in which no concurrence or influx, as they call it, takes place. Now these are the lovely lawyers of divine justice, who will at the same time make all sinners unpunishable. And it surprises me that the profound Descartes stumbled here too.[70]

In this passage, Leibniz raises two objections to the causal aspect of privation theory, the claim that God is casually involved in the positive and real aspects of sins but not in the deficient aspects of sin.

First, Leibniz objects that whoever is responsible for the non-sinful aspects of sin is also responsible for the sinful aspects of sin, since the sinful aspects necessarily follow from the existence of the non-sinful aspects. As he put it, "God does the deed from which everything follows," including the sinful aspects. Leibniz's point is that even if God is not immediately involved in bringing about the privative, deficient aspect of sin, God *is* causally involved in bringing about that from which the privative, deficient aspect of sin

[68] For more on this issue, see Newlands, "Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil."
[69] Leibniz, CP 23
[70] Leibniz, CP 23

follows. Call this the entailment premise. Furthermore, Leibniz suggests that being causally responsible (to some degree) for an effect suffices for being causally responsible (to the same degree) for entailments of that effect. Call this the closure premise.[71] If these premises are correct, it follows that distinguishing the positive from the privative aspects of a sinful act doesn't absolve God from causal responsibility for moral evil after all, pace privation theory.

In response, privation theorists could challenge the closure or the entailment premises. Leibniz himself rejects some closure principles in moral theory. In a lengthy piece written around the same time, Leibniz argued that *favoring* and *willing* are not closed under (known) entailment.[72] So God might favor and even will an event, but not favor or will some of the consequences of that event. The privation theorist could piggyback on this and argue that moral responsibility is also not closed under known entailment, since willing in favor of an event is a necessary condition for being morally responsible for that event. If successful, this reply would get God off the hook for *moral* responsibility for sins, but what about *causal* responsibility? Is causal responsibility closed under some kind of entailment? Leibniz himself clearly thinks so, claiming that denying the closure premise for causal responsibility "is as though someone were the cause of the number three and wanted to deny that he was a cause of its oddness."[73]

The privation theorist could instead challenge the entailment premise of Leibniz's argument. Can the sinful aspects of an action fail to obtain, once every non-sinful aspect

[71] Specifying more precisely the relevant closure principle in question is not easy. It cannot be as simple as closure under logical entailment, since every necessary truth is logically entailed by every truth, though clearly my being responsible for setting the cup on the table doesn't make me responsible for the Pythagorean theorem. At issue is whether causal responsibility is closed under relevant entailment, though specifying some general, non-question-begging criteria for relevance is difficult. Perhaps this is why Leibniz says so little about it and uses the vague "follows from" operator instead.
[72] Leibniz, CP 63-65
[73] Leibniz, CP 23. Hobbes makes a similar point (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 475-76).

of the act has been posited? If so, what is the independent source of the sinful aspects? One might be tempted to appeal to the free actions of creatures as the independent source of the sinful aspects, but that reply misses the force of the entailment premise. The claim is that the sinful aspects of actions are brought about in virtue of other, non-sinful things and aspects of things being brought about. In other words, the moral qualities of an act don't float free from its non-moral features. I freely and intentionally raise my voice to my daughter in unwarranted anger, and by doing *that*, I make my shouting a sin, a moral evil. Holding the non-moral features of my circumstances, actions and intentions fixed, I could not do the very same thing without sinning, which is what the entailment premise claims.[74]

Privation theorists might try to resist this last reply, but doing so leads to Leibniz's second main objection to privation theory. For if the sinful aspects of an act *don't* follow from its non-sinful aspects, where do they come from? Leibniz suggests that the only available answer is *nowhere*. But then not only is God off the hook for causing the sinful aspects of sin – so are we. *O felix culpa* indeed!

Thus, Leibniz argues, privation theory succeeds in absolving God from responsibility of sin at the cost of absolving creatures from responsibility for sin too, an obvious *reductio ad absurdum*. "I do not see why [on privation theory] one holds the sinner himself to be a cause of sin; he does the deed…and *who can do anything about the fact* that this deed is not in harmony with the love of God?" (emphasis mine).[75] In a piece probably composed around the same time, Leibniz repeats this charge:

[74] For an even stronger version of this objection that denies any distinction between the moral and physical aspects of a simple thought or volition, see Papin, *Essais de Theologie*, 63-64.
[75] Leibniz, CP 23

> I am amazed that these people [i.e., Scholastics] did not go further and try to persuade us that man himself is not the author of sin, since he is only the author of the physical or real aspect, the privation being something for which there is no author.[76]

In the background of Leibniz's complaint is the idea that efficient causes give realities to their effects; causes cause by transferring being (and hence goodness) to their effects. But according to privation theory, evils lack reality, so how can evils have *any* efficient cause? As Bayle asks, "Does nothingness have properties, a cause, a concept?"[77] Leibniz concludes that, on privation theory, moral evils would be entirely uncaused, in which case neither God nor creatures are responsible for any of it.

The obvious rejoinder to Leibniz and Bayle is that while privations themselves aren't real, the good things that lack an appropriate perfection *are* real, and *those* are what enter into causal relations.[78] So while nothing can cause a privation *per se*, humans can cause real things to lack perfections they ought to have, and, in that sense, humans can cause privative moral evils. However, Leibniz could simply push his point a step further. If creatures can be causally responsible for causing privative moral evils because they can cause real subjects to lack appropriate perfections, then the same holds true for God. After all, privation theorists admit that God does sometimes cause real subjects to lack appropriate perfections, such as when God metes out punishment. If that punitive activity suffices for causing privations, then the mere fact that moral evils are privative does not prove that God is not the cause of moral evils. So if, as tradition teaches, God is

[76] CP 111. See very similar objections in Papin, *Essais de Theologie*, 85 and Bayle, "Lubin," rem. B.
[77] Bayle, *Objections to Poiret*, 161. For reasons to attribute this text to Bayle, see Mori, *Bayle Philosophe*, 55-69.
[78] Scholastics agreed that evils, qua evil, had material and (accidental) efficient causes, even though they lacked formal and final causes (Aquinas, ST I, q 49, art 1; De Malo I, art 3; Suarez, DM XI.iii.13).

nevertheless not causally responsible for moral evils, it must be due to something besides the fact that evil is a privation of being and goodness.

As I noted in section 2, privation theory was used by Scholastics to explain how a creature can be the cause of the sinful aspect of a sin without producing a positive aspect that would require the causal cooperation of God. On this weaker interpretation, privation theory doesn't try to prove that God *isn't* causally involved in sin; it merely shows how God need not be causally involved in sin, given other philosophical commitments to divine concurrence. If so, Leibniz is in danger of objecting to privation theory for failing to do something it wasn't supposed to do in the first place.

On the other hand, the objection from Leibniz and Bayle raises a concern relevant for our own intellectual context. For if we want a philosophically satisfying demonstration that the God of traditional monotheism is not the author of moral evils, traditional privation theory offers little help, Leibniz and Bayle point out. Perhaps this perceived failure of demonstrative explanation prompted Leibniz and others to look elsewhere for ways to show that God is not the author of sin, tossing aside the causal role of privation theory as yet another example of Scholastic pseudo-explanation. Whether that is a fair reason to jettison the theory depends partly on what one expects the theory to do.

5.4 Objection from False Presuppositions

Of all the early modern critics of privation theory, Spinoza offered the most sweeping rejection, trying to undermine its very foundations. This is not terribly surprising; Spinoza has a track record of offering penetrating criticisms of traditional religious doctrines. Before Spinoza earned his reputation as a dangerous, freethinking

atheist, he published a book on Descartes in which he summarized Descartes' view of error as "a privation of the proper use of liberty."[79] On reading Spinoza's book, a young Calvinist named William Blyenbergh naturally assumed that Spinoza was agreeing with Descartes on this topic, and he wrote a letter to Spinoza criticizing the appeal to privation theory. Blyenbergh argued that

> either Adam's forbidden act…is not evil in itself, or else God himself seems to bring about what we call evil. And it seems to me that neither you nor Monsieur Descartes solve this difficulty by saying that evil is a non-being with which God does not concur.[80]

In other words, either there is no moral evil or else God is the cause of moral evil, a dilemma that privation theory does not dissolve.

Spinoza's reply to Blyenbergh cuts to the very core of privation theory. Recall that privation theory assumes the existence of human-independent standards of goodness or perfection, such as God's own character or species-specific purposes or ends. Like Descartes, Spinoza rejects this supposition in physics. But unlike Descartes, Spinoza rejects it in every realm, including the moral. Spinoza replies to Blyenbergh, "privation is not an act of depriving; it is nothing more than a state of want, which in itself is nothing. It is *only a construct of the mind* or a mode of thinking which we form from comparing things with one another" (emphasis mine).[81] In other words, there are no genuine privations because the world has no natural, instrinsic "oughts," as Scholastics had thought.

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[79] Spinoza, *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, 257
[80] Spinoza, *Letters,* 18
[81] Spinoza, *Letters,* 21. This line of thought was already present in the appendix to his book on Descartes, in which he claims, "Therefore, since evil and sins are nothing in things, but are only in the human mind which compares things with one another…" (*Metaphysical Thoughts,* 328).

In his later *Ethics*, Spinoza is even more emphatic: "All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end" (IApp). According to Spinoza, a privation is merely the lack of that which we have become accustomed to expecting in similar cases. A privation is "nothing but denying something of a thing which *we judge* to pertain to its nature, and negation nothing but denying something of a thing because it does not pertain to its nature" (emphasis mine).[82]

So whereas the Scholastics and Descartes distinguished negations and privations based on the perfections a thing *ought* to have, Spinoza claims that the only difference between negations and privations is one of human custom and convention. Blindness isn't a privative evil for humans because it is part of the natural perfections or purposes of humans to be sighted. Rather,

> [w]e say, for example, that a blind man is deprived of sight because we easily imagine him as seeing, whether this imagination arises from the fact that we compare him with others who see, or his present state with his past when he used to see. And when we consider man in this way, by comparing his nature with that of others or with his own past nature, then we affirm that seeing pertains to his nature, and for that reason we say that he is deprived of it…for to say that sight belongs to that man at that time is quite as illogical as to say that it belongs to a stone.[83]

Hence, on Spinoza's view, *all privation is mere negation*, plus a bit of comparative judgment.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza extends his account of privations to good and evil more generally: "As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or

[82] Spinoza, *Letters*, 21
[83] Spinoza, *Letters,* 21.

notions we form because we compare things to one another."[84] Hence his criticism of physical privations extends to moral privations as well: moral evil is privative only in the sense that some actions fail to express qualities we have come to expect from similar instances in the past.

Spinoza ultimately concludes that all evil is metaphysical evil, a lack of power in things whose existence stems from God's rich and plentiful nature. This explanation for the nature and source of evil does not require privation theory, and it returns us to the "evil as limitation" view.[85] This is a good thing from Spinoza's vantage point, since privation theory rested on claims about natural teleology and morality that he thinks are indefensible. Thus, in the final analysis, Spinoza actually concedes Blyenbergh's original objection and embraces one horn of the dilemma: there is no distinctive category of moral evil, as it was traditionally understood.

Almost no one in the 17th century followed Spinoza in rejecting privation theory as part of a broader rejection of moral realism. Few wanted to go *all the way* with Spinoza, as it were. But his dismissal reminds us of the broader metaphysical and moral assumptions behind privation theory, assumptions that many after the 17th century would join him in challenging.

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[84] Spinoza, *Ethics,* IV Pref. Hence it was a bit misleading of Spinoza to write to Blyenburgh that, "I think I have specifically shown that that which constitutes the specific reality of evil, error, and villany does not consist in anything that expresses essence, and therefore it cannot be said that God is its cause" (*Letters*, 23), which sounds like the causal role of traditional privation theory. But his view is far more radical, for Spinoza would say the same about the "specific reality of goodness."

[85] Spinoza even offers the traditional cosmic diversity justification for such evils of imperfection: "But to those who ask, 'why did God not create all men so that they would be governed only by the command of reason?' I answer only, 'because he did not lack material to create all things, from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest; or, to speak more properly, 'because the laws of nature have been so ample that they sufficed for producing all things which can be conceived by an infinite intellect'" (*Ethics,* Appendix to Part One).

Spinoza's rejection also highlights his surprising point of agreement with the Scholastics against Descartes. Both Spinoza and Scholastics sought a unified account of the natural and moral world-order. (Recall, for instance, how Scholastics extended talk of "evils" and "privations" into scientific accounts of the behavior of moving bodies and hot water.) Spinoza agrees with Scholastics that our explanation of the moral and natural realms should be so integrated; he simply disagrees that privations, teleology, and traditional moral realism are part of the appropriate *explanans*. However, Spinoza and leading Scholastics would be equally critical of Descartes' attempt to preserve privation theory in the *moral* realm while rejecting it in the natural realm.[86]

On this matter, Spinoza's side ultimately prevailed, and Descartes' effort to partially retain privation theory was abandoned. The eclipse of privation theory was already underway even in Descartes, its most famous early modern spokesman. Other early moderns like Leibniz rejected Spinoza's more sweeping criticisms of moral realism, though when they go on to explain God's blameless role in the existence of moral and physical evils, they do so without the use of traditional privation theory.

Coda: The End of Privation Theory?

Although the early modern motivations for rejecting privation theory varied, by the start of the 18th century, privation theory was quickly fading from discussions of God's relation to evil – even among those who continued to use other, now fractured pieces of the traditional account. Samuel Clarke, for instance, presented a fairly standard version of the traditional theodicy in 1705 – just 54 years after Descartes's *Meditations* –

[86] This marks yet another instance of what Spinoza describes as thinking about humans as "a dominion within a dominion" (*Ethics,* Preface to Part III).

that is notable mostly for its complete lack of appeal to the ontological and causal roles of privation and its presumption that this absence needs no explanation:

> For liberty implying a natural power of doing evil as well as good; and the imperfect nature of finite beings making it possible for them to abuse this their liberty to an actual commission of evil; and it being necessary to the order and beauty of the whole and for displaying the infinite wisdom of the creator that there should be different and various degrees of creatures whereof consequently some must be less perfect than others, hence there necessarily arises a possibility of evil, notwithstanding that the creator is infinitely good.[87]

One of the benefits of studying the history of philosophical concepts is that we can see how and why concepts have changed. It also helps us evaluate the philosophical merits of such shifts. Are the early modern arguments against privation theory as cogent as their proponents took them to be? I've noted some points at which Scholastics might resist their criticisms, but full evaluation is a task I leave to the reader.

In closing, I will point out a more general concern about the dismissal of privation theory that contemporary theists might have. Suppose that, as some early moderns believed, privation theory was imbedded in a larger philosophical system that is no longer tenable, and that shorn from its systematic context, privation theory cannot help explain how and why God is not the author of moral evil. Would this provide theists a sufficient reason to abandon the privative concept of evil altogether? Asked another way, did the privation theory of evil do other work that still needs doing for theistic philosophers?

I believe the answer to that last question is "yes," and the tendency for even historically sensitive theists to overlook the non-causal role of privation theory points to another legacy of the early moderns. During the most influential 17th and 18th century discussions of evil, explanations of God's *causal* contribution to evil became *the* main question about the existence of evil in a divinely created universe. Later, when evil was

[87] Clarke, *Demonstration*, 78

taken more often to be a reason to disbelieve in God's existence, the discussion remained centered on the *cause* of evil. Descartes once again helped pave the way here: he uses privation theory only in its causal role. Although subsequent early moderns objected to even this use of the theory, many contemporary theists end up echoing Descartes by focusing exclusively on questions about the *source* of evil.

However, as I noted in section two, privation theory also served an ontological role in medieval philosophy, and theists ought to wonder whether this role for the privative concept of evil has yet been superseded. At the beginning of this paper, I quoted Augustine's opening question from *On Free Choice of the Will* asking about the cause of evil. Augustine eventually offers an answer to this causal question, but his immediate reply shifts the focus of discussion: "I will tell you [whether God causes evil] once you have make clear what kind of evil you are talking about."[88] Augustine suggests that understanding the cause of evil depends on understanding the nature of evil. Even if one disagrees that *what* answers must always precede *how* and *why* answers, Augustine is surely correct that there are questions for theists about evil that do not collapse into questions about the cause of evil.

Historically, privation theory provided an ontology of evil that avoided two tempting pitfalls, alternatives that remain present today in content if not in name. According to views like Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, good and evil are ontologically co-fundamental. Although there are many variations on this theme, the good principle or being is often portrayed as being in conflict with the equally fundamental evil principle or being, a battle that has very real consequences for the denizens of our world. A contemporary version of this is captured by the thought that

[88] Augustine, *On Freedom of the Will*, 1; see also 4.

there couldn't be good if there weren't evil. I have yet to teach a course on the problem of evil in which some students did not voice and defend that claim.[89] Another tempting thought about the nature of evil is the neo-Platonic one discussed in section three: evil as limitation. On this view, evil is wholly a matter of inability and impotence, and lessening evil in the world is entirely a project of improving our capacities and knowledge. *If only we knew and could do more,* runs the humanist refrain.[90]

But monotheists traditionally reject both of these ideas. According to them, good and evil are not equally fundamental. God alone is fundamental, and God is wholly good, in which case goodness must be more fundamental than and independent of evil. Nor does all evil arise from ignorance and weakness; our characters are lamentably more corrupt than that. The ontological dimension of privation theory offers these theists an alternative. Goodness is prior to evil: evil is ontologically derivative, that whose way of being is defined in terms of a lack of goodness. Some evils are more than mere imperfections or lacks: privations are lacks of appropriate perfections, goods that things ought to have and whose preservation and restoration requires more than just minimizing our limitations.

Here, then, is a live question for contemporary theists: if Manichean dualism, neo-Platonism, *and* privation theory are all rejected, what *is* the ontological nature of moral and physical evils? This question is independent of – though related to – more familiar questions about *whence* evil and what greater goods *justify* evils. Surely theists ought to

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[89] As Derk Pereboom once said to me, "Deep down, everyone's got a little Zoroastrianism in them."

[90] In popular writing, this sentiment is captured aptly (though not necessarily endorsed) by Pascal Bruckner in "Condemned to Joy":

> In this upheaval of temporal perspectives [following the shift from 17th century Christianity to 18th century Enlightenment], poverty and distress lose all legitimacy, and the whole work of enlightened nations becomes eliminating them through education and reason, and eventually science and industry. Human misfortune would be rendered an archaic residue.

be interested in addressing explanatory questions about evil that are not solely questions for theodicies. Telling a convincing causal and justificatory story about evil is an important project, but so too is providing a convincing ontology of evil.

A great deal of recent work in philosophy of religion has addressed the nature of goodness from a theistic perspective.[91] Surprisingly, there has been no corresponding inquiry into the nature of evil, despite the long-standing monotheistic belief that the nature of evil cannot be explained in the same way as the nature of goodness. Or perhaps this neglect isn't that surprising, after all. For once theists began to take questions about evil to be fundamentally and perhaps solely causal questions, it was easy to forget how or why previous centuries had wrestled so hard with independent ontological questions. But Manichean and neo-Platonic understandings of evil are alive and thriving today – I hear them regularly in the comments of my students. Do contemporary theists have an alternative ontology to offer? In attacking privation theory, the early moderns may have unwittingly helped wipe away the most prominent answer – and even an appreciation for the question. For those uneasy about *this* early modern legacy, the time may be ripe to revisit the privation theory of evil after so long and thorough an absence.[92]

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[91] An excellent starting point for those interested in this project is Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*.

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