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Privation, Teleology, and the Metaphysics of Evil

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Abstract

Drawing inspiration from Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and Thomas Aquinas, and in support of the definition of evil as the privation of being or goodness, this article proposes a complementary definition of evil. It argues that evil can be defined as the non-advancement of being, appetite, or natural inclination toward its proper perfection or completion. First, it explains what this definition entails, elaborates on its implications, and defends its plausibility. Second, it discusses typical objections to the privation account and shows how defining evil relative to appetite can help overcome them.

Keywords

appetite, Thomas Aquinas, evil, goodness, Maximus the Confessor, moral evil, natural evil, natural inclination, privation, Pseudo-Dionysius

According to the privation account of evil, evil is the privation of being or goodness. It is the lack of something that should be there. Blindness is the privation of sight; injustice is the privation of justice. The privation account of evil traces back to Christian figures such as Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine,[1] and perhaps also to the philosopher Aristotle.[2] It

1. See Mark S. M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 24–33; Alden A. Mosshammer, "Non-Being and Evil in Gregory of Nyssa," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 2 (1990): 136–67, https://doi.org/10.1163/157007290x00252; Peter King, "Augustine on Evil," in *Evil: A History*, ed. Andrew P. Chignell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 156–93.
2. See Jonathan J. Sanford, "Aristotle on Evil as Privation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2017): 195–209, https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq201732785.

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has roots, too, in the philosophy of Plotinus, insofar as Plotinus's philosophy diminished the metaphysical status of evil.[3] The privation account of evil was widely regarded by Christians as a necessary implication of the doctrine of creation. For if evil were a positive principle in the world, then either God created evil, which would mean that God is not all good, or something else created evil, which would mean that God is not the source of all that exists. The privation account of evil eventually became near universal in Western culture, and it remained so for over a millennium. It was applied to natural evils as well as moral evils.

Then, in the early modern period, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz rejected the privation account of evil, to varying degrees and for different reasons.[4] Western philosophers increasingly followed their example, and the dominance of the privation account quickly evaporated. Since then, however, no theory of evil has achieved anything like the consensus once enjoyed by the privation account. Alternative theories of evil have been proposed, and some of them have occasionally commanded strong interest, but none has ever achieved the same level of cultural dominance. Moreover, the privation account has never been entirely rejected. It has endured in continuous tradition, and it continues to endure. It endures especially in theologically informed theories of evil, because the privation account of evil remains the most obvious way to reconcile the absolute goodness of creation—and therefore, for Christians, the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the identity of the God who redeemed us with the God who created us—with the experiential fact of evil and suffering.

Over the past few decades, there has been a strong revival of interest in the philosophy of evil.[5] There has also been renewed interest in the privation account, partly due to renewed interest in Thomas Aquinas and medieval philosophy more

3. Plotinus himself held that evil's origin was not absolute nonbeing, but unformed matter. On Plotinus's account of evil and his influence, see Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 53–58; Dominic O'Meara, "Explaining Evil in Late Antiquity: Plotinus and His Critics," in Chignell, *Evil: A History*, 130–54.

4. Descartes retained the privation account of moral evil but rejected the privation account of natural evil; Spinoza completed the logical train of thought and rejected both. See Samuel Newlands, "Evils, Privations, and the Early Moderns," in Chignell, *Evil: A History*, 274–304. Leibniz initially rejected the privation account of evil but later endorsed it with a hugely significant deviation from traditional formulations. Evil, he argues, consists in the limitation inherent to finitude, not the absence of good per se. In this shift, Leibniz evacuated the privation account of its traditional meaning and endorsed a position that his predecessors had consciously rejected on the grounds that it would imply that there was something wrong or imperfect about God's work of creation. See Samuel Newlands, "Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52, no. 2 (2014): 281–308, https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2014.0033.

5. The recent publication of two massive edited volumes typifies and memorializes this revival of interest: see Chignell, *Evil: A History*, and Thomas Nys and Stephen de Wijze, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

generally.[6] Many philosophers and theologians continue to believe that the privation account offers the only satisfactory metaphysics of evil. Still, the privation account remains at the margins of contemporary philosophy. Even philosophers who are deeply sympathetic to its essential claims have rejected the privation account.[7] It remains alive in many theological traditions, but even within theology, it can no longer be taken as a consensus position: not necessarily because it is rejected, or even controversial, but often simply because it fails to receive much attention.[8]

The current moment presents an opportunity for the privation account to win a new hearing. But for that to happen, some clarifications and developments are necessary. Most of all, an important but underappreciated element of the tradition needs to be brought to the fore: namely, the practice of defining evil not just in terms of the privation of being and goodness but also in terms of the thwarting of teleology and the

6. For some recent defenses of the privation account, see Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz, "Evil Is Privation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 1 (1982): 3–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00148934; Douglas P. Davis, "The Privation Account of Evil: H. J. McCloskey and Francisco Suarez," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 61 (1987): 199–208, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaproc19876113; Donald Cress, "Augustine's Privation Account of Evil: A Defense," *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989): 109–128, https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies1989204; Patrick Lee, "The Goodness of Creation, Evil, and Christian Teaching," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 239–70, https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2000.0014; Siobhan Nash-Marshall, "Is Evil Really an Ontological 'Primitive'?," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 79 (2005): 157–171, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaproc20057923; Patrick Lee, "Evil as Such Is a Privation: A Reply to John Crosby," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2007): 469–88, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq200781324; David S. Oderberg, "The Metaphysics of Privation," in *New Scholasticism Meets Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Rafael Hüntelmann and Johannes Hattler (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 63–88; W. Matthews Grant, "The Privation Account of Moral Evil: A Defense," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2015): 271–286, https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq201572139; David S. Oderberg, *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* (New York: Routledge, 2019), esp. 119–44. For a sympathetic exposition, see Colleen McCluskey, *Thomas Aquinas on Moral Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 36–73. For criticisms, see G. Stanley Kane, "Evil and Privation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 1 (1980): 43–58, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00138764; John F. Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 75 (2001): 197–209, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaproc20017517; John F. Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory That Will Not Go Away: Response to Patrick Lee," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2007): 489–505, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq200781325; Todd C. Calder, "Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2007): 371–81, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20464387; Ian A. McFarland, "The Problem with Evil," *Theology Today* 74, no. 4 (2018): 321–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573617731711.
7. See, for example, Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?"; Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory."
8. For a theological critique of the privation account, see McFarland, "The Problem with Evil."

non-advancement of being toward its proper perfection or completion. In the Aristotelian tradition, all things aim toward the ends (*teloi*) proper to their nature, and the attainment of those ends coincides with their perfection or completion; this orientation of everything toward its proper perfection is often spoken of with reference to the idea of "teleology." Accordingly, the thwarting of teleology strikes at the heart of what something is. It follows that the non-advancement of something toward its proper perfection or completion is a metaphysical evil. Within the Aristotelian tradition, this implication of teleology has long been recognized, but its full significance has often been overlooked or neglected. Properly understood and properly developed, this element of the tradition holds great potential for addressing misunderstandings and clearing away confusions. It allows us to reframe the privation account and make it more attractive—and more plausible—to contemporary philosophers and theologians.

Judging from recent literature, this element of the tradition is not well recognized,[9] nor is it universally present in the writings of historically influential advocates of the privation account. It is, for example, largely absent from Augustine's account of evil.[10] (On some occasions, Augustine describes evil as *corruptio ordinis naturalis*, or "the corruption of natural order,"[11] a formulation which could be taken to imply the

9. For example, as a prelude to criticizing it, G. Stanley Kane provides a painstaking reconstruction of the privation account, and in that reconstruction, he describes the privation account entirely in terms of the privation of being and goodness, without any reference to teleology or appetite or inclination; then, in their response to Kane, Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz affirm that Kane's presentation of the privation account is "clear and accurate" and then proceed to defend the privation account without any appeal to teleology. See Kane, "Evil and Privation," esp. 43–48; Anglin and Goetz, "Evil Is Privation," 44.

10. For a précis of Augustine's conception of evil, taken from one of his mature writings, see Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 10–15. For a contemporary reconstruction, which is framed entirely in terms of the privation of being and goodness and makes no mention of teleology, see Cress, "Augustine's Privation Account," 109–10. For some other reconstructions, see Robert M. Cooper, "Saint Augustine's Doctrine of Evil," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16, no. 3 (1963): 256–76, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0036930600004105; Christian Schäfer, "Augustine on Mode, Form, and Natural Order," *Augustinian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 59–77, https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies20003111; William E. Mann, "Augustine on Evil and Original Sin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40–48; Philip Kheng Hong Djung, "Augustine's Account of Evil as Privation of Good," *Jurnal Teologi Reformed Indonesia* 4, no. 2 (2014): 43–55. These other reconstructions likewise emphasize evil as the privation of being and goodness, but Schäfer and Kheng give some attention to topics such as the relation of evil to the privation of form and order, and Augustine's claim that evil tends toward nonexistence (see Augustine, *De moribus manichaeorum*, 2.2–3; Schäfer, "Augustine on Mode, Form, and Natural Order"), and Mann draws attention to two notable texts where Augustine suggests—without drawing out all the implications—that sin can be conceived as a falling away from desire for what is good (see Augustine, *De natura boni contra Manichaeos*, 36; Augustine, *De libero arbitrio voluntatis*, 2.20.54; Mann, "Augustine on Evil and Original Sin," 45).

11. See Augustine, *De natura boni*, 4. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

departure of something from its natural teleological ordering, but when he uses this expression, Augustine seems to have in mind the way that evil disrupts the natural ordering of entities among themselves,[12] not the way that evil disrupts the internal ordering of an entity toward its proper end.[13]) And yet, historically, prominent advocates of the privation account frequently define evil in terms of the thwarting of teleology. The practice of defining evil in this way—a practice that presupposes a positive conception of appetite and inclination—is well attested. It can be found, for example, in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and Thomas Aquinas, three of the most important and influential advocates of the privation account. Each of them defines evil not merely as the privation of being or goodness, but also as the non-advancement of being toward what is proper and perfective.

For Pseudo-Dionysius, as Eric Perl puts it, evil "is fundamentally passivity"[14] and "the failure to desire the Good."[15] Pseudo-Dionysius's concept of evil follows from his concept of appetite and desire. In continuity with the Platonic tradition, he holds that appetite and desire (in Greek, *epithumia* and *eros*) are positive realities, metaphysically speaking.[16] They orient us toward the good and the beautiful, and therefore God. They are metaphysically constitutive of all creaturely activity. It is precisely through desiring the good and the beautiful that all things want what they want and do what they do.[17] It follows that evil cannot consist in the positive desire for anything. It can only consist in the absence of desire. While appetite and desire are oriented toward the good, evil is oriented toward nothing. It is aimless and purposeless.[18] In his description of demons, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius explains that their sin consists not in any positive desire for evil, but rather in their failure to desire what they should desire: "If they are declared to be evil, the reason lies in their weakness regarding their natural activity. Their deviation is the evil in them, their move away from what befits them. It is a privation in them, an imperfection, a powerlessness. It is a weakness, a lapse, an abandonment of the capacity they have to be perfect."[19] By identifying their sin with "their weakness regarding their natural activity" and "their move away from what befits them," Pseudo-Dionysius implies that their sin lies in their failure to use their natural powers to attain what their natures were created to attain. Their sin is not

12. Schäfer, "Augustine on Mode, Form, and Natural Order," 65.
13. As Mann notes (see note 10 above), Augustine does suggest that sin is a kind of falling away from desire for what is good, which is not far from describing evil as the non-advancement of being toward its proper end. Still, even if this understanding of evil can be found implicitly in Augustine, which is debatable, he does not make the point as explicitly as Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, or Thomas Aquinas.
14. Perl, *Theophany*, 60.
15. Perl, *Theophany*, 63.
16. For an overview of Pseudo-Dionysius on being, goodness, desire, and evil, see Perl, *Theophany*, 35–64.
17. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, IV.10; Perl, *Theophany*, 41, 60.
18. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, IV.32; Perl, *Theophany*, 63.
19. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, IV.23 (PG3:725B). Translation from Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 91.

anything positive. Nor does it involve any positive desire for evil. Their sin lies in their thwarting of their natural inclinations toward what is proper and perfective of their being, which implies that their sin is a privation and a lack, and not anything positive.

Maximus the Confessor, who was influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius and wrote a scholion on his discussion of evil in *The Divine Names*, defines evil in a similar way.[20] In his introduction to the *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*—which has been described as "essentially an entire essay on the nature of evil, the fall of Adam, and the origin of the passions,"[21] and which circulated in manuscripts under the heading "Definition of Evil"[22]—Maximus defines evil as a deficiency of activity. In the opening paragraph, Maximus offers what seems intended as a formal definition of evil:

> Evil neither was, nor is, nor ever will be an existing entity having its own proper nature, for the simple reason that it has absolutely no substance, nature, subsistence, power, or activity of any kind whatsoever in beings. It is neither a quality, nor a quantity, nor a relation, nor place, nor time, nor position, nor activity, nor motion, nor state, nor passivity that can be observed naturally in beings—indeed, it subsists in no way whatsoever in any beings according to their proper nature—for it is neither a beginning, nor a middle, nor an end. But so that I might speak as if encompassing it in a definition, evil is nothing other than a deficiency of the activity of innate natural powers with respect to their proper goal.[23]

The last line is the most significant. According to Maximus, evil can be defined not merely as privation or nothingness but also, and more specifically, as "a deficiency of the activity of innate natural powers with respect to their proper goal." For Maximus, evil is indeed nothingness, but it is a particular kind of nothingness: the

20. See Maximus the Confessor, *On the Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Maximos Constas (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 81n34. On Pseudo-Dionysius's influence on Maximus, see Ysabel de Andia, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 177–93; Maximos Constas, "Maximus the Confessor, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the Transformation of Christian Neoplatonism," *Analogia* 2, no. 1 (2017): 1–12.
21. Maximos Constas, "Introduction," in *On the Difficulties*, 11. Maximus's introductory remarks on evil were excerpted and circulated widely in later Byzantine anthologies. See Carl Laga and Carlos Steel, eds., *Maximi Confessoris: Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, CCSG, vol. 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1980), xi–xii; Maximus, *On the Difficulties*, 81n33. The popularity of Maximus's discussion of evil suggests that it was widely regarded as a reliable articulation of Christian convictions about evil.
22. Maximus, *On the Difficulties*, 81n33 (PG90:253A).
23. Maximus, *On the Difficulties*, 81–82 (PG90:253AB). Immediately after giving this definition, Maximus supplements it with a clarification that applies especially to moral evil: "Or, again, evil is the irrational movement of natural powers toward something other than their proper goal, based on an erroneous judgment." Maximus, *On the Difficulties*, 82 (PG90:253B).

non-advancement of a natural power toward whatever that power naturally inclines. And as with Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus's concept of evil flows naturally from his concept of desire. For Maximus, in its essential structure, desire is a metaphysically positive reality.[24] It follows, accordingly, that deficient desire is an evil.

Like Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus, Thomas Aquinas defines evil not merely as the privation of being and goodness but also as the non-advancement of being toward its proper perfection.[25] According to Aquinas, evil implies the absence of activity, or more specifically "the subtraction of due operation."[26] It also implies a departure from teleology. For Aquinas, "evil happens in the allowing of the proper ordering of things to fall away,"[27] when something falls away from "its natural and due disposition."[28] Aquinas's conception of evil follows naturally from his positive conception of desire, or more specifically, appetite (in Latin, *appetitus*). For Aquinas, appetite is constitutive of everything that exists, including God himself.[29] Through the divine appetite, God loves and rejoices in himself. Through the created appetites that he puts in creatures and created things, God orders creation and guides it to its proper fulfillment. Moreover, in keeping with a common (though not universal) medieval position, Aquinas characterizes goodness in terms of appetite: for Aquinas, to be good is to be appetible, that is, desirable.[30] His understanding of goodness has obvious implications for the metaphysics of evil. For Aquinas, goodness is teleological, and so evil must also be teleological, or rather anti-teleological: the non-advancement of being toward what is perfective or completing.[31]

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24. On Maximus's positive understanding of appetite and desire, see Paul M. Blowers, "The Dialectics and Therapeutics of Desire in Maximus the Confessor," *Vigiliae Christianae* 65, no. 4 (2011): 425–51, https://doi.org/10.1163/157007210x524286.
25. For Aquinas's views of the metaphysics of evil, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.48–49 (hereafter cited as *ST*) and Aquinas, *De malo*, 1.1–3. See also John F. Wippel, "Metaphysical Themes in *De malo*, I," in *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, ed. M. V. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 12–33. On Dionysius's influence on Aquinas's account of evil, see Fran O'Rourke, "Evil as Privation: The Neoplatonic Background to Aquinas's *De malo*, I," in *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, ed. M. V. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 192–221 at 211–19.
26. Aquinas, *ST* I.48.5.
27. Aquinas, *De malo*, 1.3.
28. Aquinas, *ST* I.49.1. See also Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 30.
29. On appetite in created things, see Aquinas, *ST* I.59.1; on appetite in God, see Aquinas, *ST* I.19.1. See also Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, 25–30.
30. See Aquinas, *ST* I.5.1. On medieval debates about the *ratio* of goodness, see Jan A. Aertsen, "The Goodness of Being," *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 78, no. 2 (2011): 281–95 at 282–86, https://doi.org/10.2143/RTPM.78.2.2141895.
31. By contrast, Augustine does not emphasize the teleological obstruction inherent to evil. He discusses the privation of being and goodness inherent to evil in general terms. On the differences between Aquinas's and Augustine's understanding of evil as privation see Cress, "Augustine's Privation Account," 117–18.

Drawing inspiration from Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and Thomas Aquinas, and in support of the definition of evil as the privation of being or goodness, this article proposes a complementary definition of evil. It argues that evil can be defined as the non-advancement of being, appetite, or natural inclination toward its proper perfection or completion, and then it demonstrates how this complementary definition reframes the privation account of evil, enhances it plausibility, and makes it easier to defend. First, it explains what this definition entails, elaborates on its implications, and defends its plausibility. Second, it discusses typical objections to the privation account, which often cause conventional defenses to stumble, and shows how defining evil relative to appetite can help overcome them. The argument of this article is motivated by two convictions. The first conviction is that neglect of teleology dooms the privation account to irrelevance and seeming incoherence. The second is that, conversely, the tradition of conceptualizing evil as anti-teleological holds great promise for making the privation account compelling and attractive to a wide range of contemporary philosophers and theologians: both in itself, as a plausible account of evil, and also as a foundational principle for tackling other issues, such as God's permission of evil and suffering.

Defining Evil Relative to Appetite: A Proposal

According to the Aristotelian tradition of metaphysics broadly speaking and Thomas Aquinas in particular, all being is intrinsically oriented toward its proper end—that is, toward whatever is perfective or completing of itself.[32] This intrinsic orientation, which includes the power and impetus to move toward that completion, is called appetite. "Appetite," Aquinas writes, "is nothing other than an inclination toward something," something both similar and suited to the subject of appetite.[33] In this way, the concept of appetite plays an essential role in a teleological understanding of being. Appetite is not just what moves things toward their proper end; it is what reveals their proper end. Without appetite, and without experiencing and observing something's natural inclinations, we would not know what the proper ends of anything were.[34]

This article's proposed definition of evil starts from this understanding of being and appetite. It defines evil as the non-advancement of being toward its proper end. And since being advances toward its proper end through appetite or natural inclination, this definition can be extended to encompass appetite and natural inclination. Evil can thus be defined as the non-advancement of being, appetite, or natural inclination toward its proper perfection or completion. This definition applies not merely to moral evil, but to all forms of evil and badness. It covers anything negative, defective, or in some way

32. See, for example, Aquinas, *ST* I.5.1.
33. Aquinas, *ST* I–II.8.1.
34. Within the Aristotelian tradition, sometimes "ends" are spoken of as though everything has only a single end; other times, "ends" are spoken of as though things can have multiple ends, one for each of their natural inclinations. This article speaks of "ends" in both ways, depending on the context.

bad: everything plausibly associated with the Latin word *malum* and its cognates.[35] According to this definition, whether an evil is natural or moral, physical or psychological, material or spiritual, it is evil because it somehow involves the non-advancement of being, appetite, or natural inclination toward its proper perfection or completion. In the words of Maximus the Confessor mentioned above, "Evil is nothing other than a deficiency of the activity of innate natural powers with respect to their proper goal."[36]

It follows that evil as such is literally nothing. It does not exist. The non-advancement of appetite is not anything positive. Therefore, evil is nothing. But the non-advancement of appetite is a particular kind of nothing. It is privation: the absence of something that should be there but is not. For appetite tends toward what is perfective or completing. So when an appetite fails to advance toward its goal—in Aristotelian terms, when there is no movement from potency to act—there is a lack of something that should be there but is not. Accordingly, this article's proposed definition of evil constitutes a version of the privation account, not an alternative to it.

A few clarifications are helpful. First, evil lies in the failure of appetite to advance toward its proper end. Whether or not its proper end is attained is secondary. According to this definition, evil does not consist in the failure of appetite to *attain* its proper end but rather in the failure of appetite to *advance toward* its proper end, however slightly. Acorns have a natural tendency to become oak trees, but the fact that an acorn is not yet an oak tree is not an evil. What would be an evil—for the acorn—is if the acorn's inclination to become an oak tree were impeded, say because its natural growth process was disrupted or somehow slowed to an unnaturally sluggish pace. But as long as the acorn's natural inclinations advance toward their proper ends at a proper pace, the acorn is not suffering an evil. It is flourishing. Evil is not the sheer non-attainment of final ends. Evil is the non-advancement of inclination toward those final ends.

Second, natural inclinations are not necessarily oriented toward perpetual actuation. Instead, they are oriented toward a periodic actuation that varies according to the inclination. We have a natural inclination to sleep, for example, but we do not have a natural inclination to sleep all the time. Consequently, the fact that we are not sleeping does not, of itself, imply that our inclination to sleep is failing to advance toward its proper end.[37] Likewise, we have a natural inclination to eat and drink, but we do not have a natural inclination to eat and drink all the time.

Third, since appetite is phenomenologically intentional (that is, it is *about* other things and therefore unintelligible without reference to something other than itself), so too is evil. Just as we desire objects under certain aspects but not others, so too the

35. In contemporary English usage and in much recent philosophy, the English word "evil" is commonly used to describe malicious wrongdoing of a particularly severe kind. This article uses the word in its more traditional sense as encompassing a wide range of negativities and not just malicious moral evil.

36. Maximus, *On the Difficulties*, 81–82 (PG90:253AB).

37. For a similar argument, in the context of discussing the metaphysics of goodness, see Oderberg, *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil*, 24.

same object can be evil under some aspects but not others. For example, bacon might be good with respect to our inclinations for tasty food but bad with respect to our inclinations toward bodily health (especially if we have a problem with high cholesterol). Furthermore, because a natural inclination implies a subject of that natural inclination, so too does evil. Evil is not free-standing. It is always relative to a subject. Consequently, the same object can be good or evil depending on the subject. What is good for humans might be bad for plants, and vice versa.

Finally, we must distinguish between metaphysical evil, or evil as such, and what the tradition has called positive evil. Metaphysical evil does not have any positive existence. It is something we can describe only with respect to an appetite that has failed to activate. By contrast, positive evil does exist. It is something whose existence is somehow defined by metaphysical evil. A bad leg, a bad day, a morally defective action: all of these are examples of positive evil. They are each an instance of something that exists but whose existence is somehow defined by metaphysical evil. Positive evil is not evil *simpliciter*, in an absolute sense, but rather in an analogous sense. Without this distinction between metaphysical evil and positive evil, it is easy to misconstrue claims proper to metaphysical evil as though they apply universally, causing great misunderstanding.[38] For example, the claim that evil is literally nothing can be easily misconstrued, leading to puzzlement about how something that clearly exists—for example, a broken leg, or the action of murdering someone—could be held to lack existence. But the privation account is not committed to saying that positive evil is nothing. It is committed only to saying that metaphysical evil is nothing.

Among positive evils, we can differentiate between *corrupting* positive evils and *corrupted* positive evils. *Corrupting* positive evils inflict (or threaten to inflict)

38. Misunderstandings of this sort are rife in the literature on the privation account, both among those criticizing it and among those defending it. There is, for example, long-standing disagreement about the proper interpretation of Thomas Aquinas on the question of positive evil. See Dermot Mulligan, "Moral Evil: St. Thomas and the Thomists," *Philosophical Studies (Ireland)* 9 (1959): 3–26, https://doi.org/10.5840/philstudies1959903; Douglas P. Davis, "Suárez and the Problem of Positive Evil," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1991): 361–72, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq19916538; Jorge J. E. Gracia, "Evil and the Transcendality of Goodness: Suárez's Solution to the Problem of Positive Evils," in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); McCluskey, *Thomas Aquinas on Moral Wrongdoing*, 65–73. This controversy partly stems from Thomas Aquinas using the same term, *malum*, to signify both metaphysical evil and positive evil. Gregory Reichberg explains:

> Thomas is able in good conscience to make these seemingly contradictory statements—sometimes on the very same page, as in *De malo*, q. 10, a. 1—precisely because *malum* shifts in meaning from one context to the other. In each case, the assertions in question have distinct referents. When it is denied that evil can in any way be desired, "evil" signifies a privation. Inversely, when it is affirmed that some people desire, love, or intentionally commit evil deeds, "evil" signifies something positive. In the latter instance, "a certain good [is] joined to the privation of another good." (Gregory M. Reichberg, "Beyond Privation: Moral Evil in Aquinas's 'De Malo'," *The Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 4 [2002]: 751–84 at 774, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20131786).

metaphysical evil. They are evil vis-à-vis something else. For instance, a hungry lion threatens the health and well-being of an antelope, and for this reason constitutes a corrupting positive evil for the antelope. Corrupting positive evils might be perfectly good in themselves, relative to their own natural tendencies and inclinations, but they are evil for something else, because they bring about the non-advancement of something else's tendencies and inclinations. The hungry lion might be healthy and strong, and perfectly good in itself, a good lion specimen, but it is a corrupting positive evil vis-à-vis the antelope because it threatens to inflict metaphysical evil on any antelope that crosses its path. Meanwhile, *corrupted* positive evils are not evil with respect to something external to themselves. Corrupted positive evils are evil vis-à-vis their own inner ontology, because one or more of their inclinations has failed to advance toward its proper completion. For example, a sick lion is a bad lion because its inclinations to bodily health and good proper functioning have been thwarted.

Unlike metaphysical evil, which is pure negation, and therefore pure nothingness, positive evils are a complicated mix of goodness and evil, of being and nonbeing. This point is easier to grasp when it comes to positive natural evils. It is easy to see the positive side of natural evil. For example, a wounded lion that can only limp is a bad lion, a defective lion. Yet to the precise extent that it measures up to the inner structure of its own inclinations, the wounded lion is a good lion. The lion may be injured, but it could still have good teeth, good claws, healthy fur, an impressive roar, and so on. It is more difficult to see the positive side of morally evil actions. But morally evil actions are not devoid of being and goodness, either. For example, consider the act of stabbing someone in the back in order to murder them. The physical action of stabbing someone in the back involves a great deal of being and ontological goodness. As our hand moves through the air, it exists. Having a hand is ontologically good, and being able to move our hand and hold a knife are good, too, and so is the actual movement of our hand. Our actions are directed toward evil ends, but our evil motives do not cancel out the being and ontological goodness of having a hand or holding a knife or moving it through the air. Of course, compared to the moral evil of our actions, we might consider this being and goodness to count for little. Nevertheless, there is ontological goodness even in morally evil actions.[39] For similar reasons, Thomas Aquinas maintains that, though God does not cause sin, God does cause sinful actions. Sinful actions exist, and since God is the ultimate cause of all that exists, God must cause sinful actions to the precise extent that they exist.[40]

Testing the Proposed Definition

The most important test of a definition is whether it works—that is, whether it fits with what it claims to define. When we consider typical instances of both natural evil and moral evil, we see that it does.

39. For a similar argument, see Grant, "Privation Account," 273–76.
40. Aquinas, *ST* I–II.79.1–2; Aquinas, *De malo*, 3.1–2. On this topic, see W. Matthews Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing the Sin Itself," *The Thomist* 73, no. 3 (2009): 455–96, https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2009.0015.

Natural Evil

In the literature on evil, the classification of "natural evil" (also called "physical evil," "ontic evil," or "premoral evil") is generally taken to apply to such things as physical corruption, pain, sickness, and emotional suffering. Essentially, it covers everything that could plausibly be called "bad" or "evil" besides moral evil. Some natural evils are a form of metaphysical evil. For example, not having anything to eat is metaphysical evil. It is a lack, which is nothing. Other natural evils are a form of positive evil. For example, a viral infection is a positive natural evil, or more specifically, a *corrupting* positive evil. It is not nothing. It is a positive evil that inflicts metaphysical evil.

A quick mental survey shows that defining evil relative to appetite plausibly explains why we consider typical instances of natural evil to be evils. Take blindness, one of the paradigmatic examples of natural evil. Why do we experience blindness as an evil? We experience blindness as an evil because it implies the non-advancement of the natural human inclination to see. It also leads to the non-advancement of other inclinations (e.g., our inclination to find and consume nourishment). If we were not naturally inclined to see, like plants or trees, we would not experience blindness as an evil. It is only because blindness thwarts our natural inclinations that we experience not being able to see as an evil. Sickness is another example of natural evil. Sickness disrupts various bodily functions and thwarts the bodily inclinations that accompany them. For example, stomach cancer inhibits our digestive abilities and in doing so thwarts our inclination for nourishment. Sickness also prevents us from carrying out our normal activities and thus interferes with other natural inclinations as well, such as our inclination to society. In sum, with both blindness and sickness, two of the most typical instances of natural evil, defining evil relative to appetite plausibly explains why we consider them evils.

Defining evil relative to appetite has another advantage. It makes sense of our conflicting intuitions about complicated instances of natural evil. For example, consider the case of a lion killing and eating an antelope. Is the event of the lion killing and eating the antelope good or evil? From the lion's perspective, it seems unambiguously good, but from the antelope's perspective, it seems unambiguously bad. Yet each of them is experiencing the same event. The scenario presents a challenge for any definition of evil: How could the same ontological reality be objectively good for the lion but objectively evil for the antelope?

Once we define evil in terms of teleology, the problem evaporates. If evil is the non-advancement of natural inclination, then evil is relative to inclination. Evil is not relative in a relativistic sense, as though there were nothing objective about evil. Evil is relative in the sense that the objectivity of evil is always grounded in the subjectivity of a subject. Consequently, the same ontological reality can be both objectively good and objectively evil depending on which entity and which inclinations it is measured against. Classifying the event as an objective evil from the point of view of the antelope in no way minimizes or denies the objective goodness of the event as far as the lion is concerned. We are simply evaluating the same ontological reality against the natural inclinations of two different entities.

Moral Evil

Defining evil relative to appetite can also explain why we consider typical instances of moral evil to be evil. Many ethical traditions place significant emphasis on the normative role of the tendencies and inclinations of human nature. That which cooperates with them is good; that which works against them is not. The natural law tradition, identified especially with Thomas Aquinas and his discussion of natural law in *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 94.2, is perhaps the best-known example of this approach to moral value. In such theories of moral value, moral goodness is a species of ontological goodness. It is the ontological goodness proper to a certain kind of being-in-motion. More precisely, it is the ontological goodness proper to rational actions and the rational agents performing them. Moral goodness comes from freely and intentionally choosing to act in harmony with our being and its ineradicable tendencies—that is, our natural inclinations.

Defining moral evil relative to appetite and inclination fits neatly with this account of moral goodness. Moral evil is the opposite of moral goodness. Moral evil cannot exist without ontological goodness, because evil is parasitic on the good, but moral evil, unlike moral goodness, is not a species of ontological goodness. Rather, it is a species of *absence* of ontological goodness. If moral goodness comes from freely acting in accord with our natural inclinations, then moral evil must come from freely and intentionally acting against the fulfillment of our natural inclinations. Thomas Aquinas defines moral evil in a similar way. He writes, "God is not offended by us except when we are acting against our own good."[41] And since Aquinas defines the good as what is perfective and desirable, we can translate this saying as, "God is not offended by us except when we are acting against the fulfillment of our natural inclinations." Moral evil might involve doing something that actively thwarts the fulfillment of our natural inclinations: for example, risking our life by driving recklessly. Or it might involve failing to advance our natural inclinations when circumstances demand it: for example, failing to save someone's life when doing so would not require extraordinary effort or sacrifice. Either way, moral evil involves choosing to act against the fulfillment of our natural inclinations. The voluntary nature of moral evil is what sets it apart from natural evil. Unlike natural evil, moral evil is *intentional*. Its non-advancement of our natural inclinations is deliberate and intentional and springs from our own free choice.

In life, we are constantly forced to choose between genuine goods. These choices often require us to sacrifice one natural inclination for another. But according to this article's proposal, there is no moral problem with the sheer thwarting of natural inclination in itself. The moral problem is with the *intentional* thwarting of natural inclination. Consequently, the proposed definition does not rule out the goodness of doing things that sacrifice one inclination for another (for example, a soldier jumping on a grenade to save the lives of others), as long as the foreseen negative effect is not intended. Granted, it is often difficult to discern whether a natural inclination is being

41. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III, 122.2.

thwarted intentionally or non-intentionally. Arguably, this difficulty is at the heart of deep and long-standing disputes about the proper application of double-effect reasoning, and especially when double-effect reasoning can be used to justify moral actions, and when it cannot.[42] The obscurity of particular cases, however, does not undermine the validity of the principle.

As with natural evil, the distinction between metaphysical evil and positive evil applies fully to moral evil. Some forms of moral evil are metaphysical. Metaphysical moral evil is literally nothing. It is the non-advancement of natural inclination toward its proper end. Metaphysical moral evil cannot be perceived directly. It can be known only as an absence. By contrast, positive moral evil has genuine existence, and it can be perceived directly. For example, the act of slander has positive existence. Slanderous words are spoken, and reputations are destroyed. The act of slander has real existence. Nevertheless, the act of slander is ontologically characterized by its associated metaphysical evil: namely, its nullification of our inclinations toward justice and truthful communication.

In sum, if we define moral goodness relative to appetite and inclination, which many philosophers and theologians do, the case of moral evil fits easily with this article's proposed definition of evil. It is well beyond the scope of this article to argue for a theory of moral value that defines moral goodness relative to appetite and inclination.[43] For our purposes, it is enough that such theories exist and claim a significant number of adherents, and that these theories make it natural to define moral evil relative to appetite and inclination, too.

Typical Objections to the Privation Account

Typical objections to the privation account of evil are much easier to overcome when evil is defined relative to appetite. Here we will consider two of the most common: the objection from the apparent positivity of pain and the objection from the apparent positivity of moral evil.

The Objection from the Apparent Positivity of Pain

One of the most common objections to the privation account is the objection from pain.[44] The objection runs as follows. Pain is an evil, and pain has positive existence;

42. For my own views on double-effect reasoning, see Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61–73.

43. For one attempt to do so, see Nicholas E. Lombardo, "Deriving Natural Law from the Decalogue, Natural Inclination, and God's Silence," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72, no. 3 (2019): 265–76, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0036930619000322. See also Lombardo, *The Father's Will*, 21–60.

44. Kane, "Evil and Privation," 49–51; Davis, "Suárez and the Problem of Positive Evil," 370–71; Gracia, "Evil and the Transcendality of Goodness," 155–57; Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?," 200–203; Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory," 497–501;

therefore, evil must be something more than pure privation. Defenders of the privation account often respond by pointing to the positive functions of pain. They argue that pain is not an evil but a response to an evil.[45] It is part of the healthy functioning of an animal. Pain warns us about threats to our well-being. Consequently, it is a good.[46] This line of argument, though, fails to satisfy critics. John Crosby, for example, notes that "it is precisely the character of pain as bad that makes it ideally suited to performing its work of alerting us to bodily injury" and that the cognitive potential of pain sensations "does not annul the more fundamental negativity that these experiences have as forming a part or dimension of a bodily evil."[47]

Defining evil relative to appetite is the key to breaking this impasse. By defining evil relative to appetite, we can maintain that pain is simultaneously both a good and an evil.[48] With critics of the privation account, we can agree that pain is an objective evil with respect to many of our natural inclinations, such as our inclination to bodily comfort, and that any benefit provided by pain does not cancel out its negativity. At the same time, however, we can also affirm that pain is an objective good with respect to many other inclinations, insofar as pain warns us about dangers to our physical well-being and helps us to avoid them. Saying that pain is a good from the perspective of some inclinations and an evil from the perspective of others may seem relativistic. It is not, however, because the inclinations in question are as stable and objective as the natures to which they belong. When the pain is severe, the negative aspects of pain

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Calder, "Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?," 372–75; Mark Ian Thomas Robson, "Evil, Privation, Depression and Dread," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (2013): 552–64 at 558–64, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01516.x. See also Adam Swenson, "Privation Theories of Pain," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2009): 139–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-009-9202-4.

45. That pain is an evil is disputed by Patrick Lee, a prominent advocate of the privation account. Lee acknowledges that pain is an evil in a qualified sense, but on the grounds that pain is ordered to the flourishing of the subject experiencing it, he maintains that "the sensation of pain itself is not a real evil." Lee, "Goodness of Creation," 257. Siobhan Nash-Marshall takes a similar approach by questioning the assumption that suffering constitutes an evil. See Siobhan Nash-Marshall, "Evil, Pain, and the Problem of Properties," in *Aquinas and Maritain on Evil: Mystery and Metaphysics*, ed. James G. Hanink (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 58–71.
46. Lee, "Goodness of Creation," 257–60; Lee, "Evil as Such," 473–79. See also Anglin and Goetz, "Evil Is Privation," 5–7.
47. Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory," 499. Lee acknowledges that pain accomplishes its warning-system function precisely by being repugnant to us, but he disagrees that the aspect of repugnance makes pain a real evil. See Lee, "Goodness of Creation," 257–58.
48. Critics of the privation account are right to affirm that pain is an evil, but they err when they absolutize this judgment and leave no room for pain to be a good as well, from the perspective of other natural inclinations. For examples of this absolutizing tendency, see Gracia, "Evil and the Transcendality of Goodness," 157; Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory," 501.

might overwhelm its beneficial aspects (for example, when a patient suffers intense pain as the result of a terminal illness), but those beneficial aspects remain positive, even if the positive benefits are negligible in the circumstances. Therefore, no matter how severe and practically useless some sensation of pain might be, it is possible to affirm, without engaging in doublespeak, that pain is simultaneously both a good and an evil.

In this way, by defining evil relative to appetite, we can coherently explain why the case of pain does not disprove the privation account of evil. In the process, we can accommodate many observations from critics of the privation account, and thus, hopefully, satisfy their concerns.

The Objection from the Apparent Positivity of Moral Evil

According to another typical objection, moral evil goes beyond mere privation. It is something positive.[49] Evil actions do not merely lack goodness. They are positively oriented toward evil objectives. This positive orientation implies that moral evil cannot be defined only by reference to privation. Commenting on the story of Cain and Abel, John Crosby expresses this objection as follows:

> I think I speak for the moral common sense of mankind when I say that what makes Cain's murder evil includes indeed, but is not restricted to, the lack of the brotherly love due to Abel. How can we fail to see that what makes it evil is also its turning against the good of Abel's life and against the divine goodness shown to Abel? How can we fail to see that if anywhere in the world there ever exists contrary opposition, then here in the opposition between the brotherly love that Cain owed Abel and the murderous envy that Cain in fact showed to Abel? How can anyone reasonably deny that good and evil are here related to each other, not as having and lacking, but as strictly contrary opposites?[50]

Advocates of the privation account have long recognized the apparent positivity of morally evil actions, and they maintain that this apparent positivity in no way undermines the privation account.[51] Crosby does not agree. For Crosby, the privation account is irrefutably disproven by our commonsense intuition that evil actions and evil desires are more than merely privation, and that they are just as real as good actions and good desires.

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49. For examples of this objection, see Kane, "Evil and Privation," 49–51; Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?," 200–203; Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory," 497–501; Calder, "Is the Privation Theory of Evil Dead?," 372–75.
50. Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?," 203.
51. For Aquinas's approach to this complex issue, see Reichberg, "Beyond Privation"; Stephen L. Brock, "Dead Ends, Bad Form: The Positivity of Evil in the *Summa Theologiae*," in *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Critical Guide*, ed. Jeffrey Hause (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 29–46 at 37–42. For a contemporary approach, see Grant, "Privation Account," 282–83.

With Crosby's concerns in mind, let us consider again the story of Cain and Abel. According to Crosby, the privation account cannot explain Cain's behavior, because Cain's behavior can only be explained by reference to positively existing evil motivations and not merely the absence of good ones. To defend the privation account against Crosby's objection, then, we need to show how the privation account can indeed supply the basis for a plausible description of Cain's actions.

Let us begin with Cain's motivations. What prompts Cain to act? The most typical answer is envy. When Cain strikes down Abel, he is seeking something that he finds desirable: namely, the alleviation of his envy. Envy is a kind of sadness,[52] and while on some occasions sadness is appropriate and even to some extent desirable (e.g., after the death of a loved one), all things being equal, it is good to be free from sadness. So, very plausibly, we can imagine Cain seeking to kill Abel not because he intends evil qua evil, but because he wants to remove the source of sadness.[53] These objectives are, in themselves, fully in keeping with Cain's natural inclinations. We are naturally inclined to avoid sadness, and taking steps to remove sadness advances our inclinations toward their proper end. The problem is that Cain's actions also negate other natural inclinations, most notably his inclinations toward love of neighbor and love of family. It is this negation that corrupts his actions. The problem is not that Cain desires too much. The problem is that he desires too little. If Cain had instead chosen to act in a way that would free himself of his sadness without thwarting his inclinations—for example, by reflecting on how his brother's good was also his own good and thus coming to rejoice in his brother's divine favor—his actions would not have been defective.

In sum, the problem with Cain's actions is not with the inclinations that Cain intends to advance. The problem is with the natural inclinations that he not only fails to advance but actively thwarts. It is this active thwarting that renders his actions morally evil. And since this non-advancement of his inclinations is a privation, it follows that the privation account of evil can in fact provide a plausible description of Cain's motives and actions.

At this point, critics might counter: this description of Cain's motives and actions is a sleight of hand. It distracts our attention from the real issue, which is that Cain performs a positive act of murderous envy. Cain's killing of Abel is not a mere privation, a mere lack of goodness. It is a positive act of evil. It is clever and creative as well, and it shows the working of a cunning mind. He does not just rise up and kill Abel in the

52. On the definition of envy as a kind of sadness, see Aquinas, *ST* II–II.36.1.

53. Crosby argues that "many a morally bad act aims at an end that lacks, in the apprehension of the agent, any and every aspect of good." Crosby, "Doubts about the Privation Theory," 502. Many morally bad acts do indeed aim at objectives that lack any and every aspect of *moral* goodness. Yet his argument requires more than just this premise to work. It also requires the premise that morally bad acts can aim at objectives that lack any and every aspect of *metaphysical* goodness, and this premise is problematic. It is very hard to imagine how rational agents could ever act for any purpose if there was not something about their objective that appeared to possess some degree of metaphysical goodness.

spur of the moment. He gets Abel to come out in the field with him so that he can kill him (see Gn 4:8). Moreover, critics might counter, this description of Cain's behavior makes it seem as though his choices have a rational explanation, as if killing his brother because he envied him was a rational thing for him to do. But Cain's choices defy intelligibility. They cannot be explained rationally. By trying to do just that, this narrative misrepresents the nature of moral evil.

These objections do not touch the version of the privation account given here. First, denying that metaphysical evil exists does not entail denying that evil actions exist. Morally evil actions are not pure privations. They are positive evils. They each positively exist, and they each possess elements of being and goodness. Consequently, in killing Abel, Cain does indeed perform a positive act of murderous envy, exercising his cleverness and his creativity in the process, but this fact in no way undermines the privation account of evil. The privation account is committed to claiming that metaphysical evil lacks actual existence, not that positive evils lack actual existence. Second, by specifying what Cain intends to accomplish in killing Abel, and that he intends the positive benefits that come from killing Abel but not the non-advancement of his inclinations, the privation account is not committed to explaining what cannot be explained.[54] It is merely specifying *what* Cain intends. It does not attempt to explain *how* or *why* he intends it.

Conclusion

Defining evil as the non-advancement of being, appetite, or natural inclination toward its proper perfection or completion has many philosophical advantages. It provides a plausible thematization of what all forms of evil have in common. It unites metaphysics and ethics by defining evil in a way that applies to both natural evil and moral evil. It is rooted in tradition, but also responsive to contemporary criticisms. It provides a metaphysical foundation for the framing of ethics in terms of human inclinations, virtue, and the freedom for excellence.[55] And by illuminating and complementing more conventional presentations of the privation account of evil, it allows for a strong defense of the privation account against the objections most typically raised against it.

Defining evil in this way has significant theological advantages as well. By making it easier to see how evil lacks positive existence, it makes it easier to affirm the absolute goodness of creation, even in the face of all the evil and suffering that we experience, thus dampening the perennial temptations toward Marcionism or Manichaeanism. Defining evil in this way also lays the foundation for a contemporary theology of

54. Carlos Steel levels this charge against Thomas Aquinas. See Carlos Steel, "Does Evil Have a Cause? Augustine's Perplexity and Thomas's Answer," *The Review of Metaphysics* 48, no. 2 (1994): 251–73 at 269–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20129672.

55. Here I have in mind especially the ethical vision laid out by Servais Pinckaers. See Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. M. T. Noble (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

creation that can fully accommodate evolutionary science. In particular, defining evil relative to appetite helps to explain how natural evils such as suffering and death, which are intrinsic to the evolutionary process, could have been included by God in creation. If natural evils were evil from every possible angle, it would not be possible to imagine God purposefully including them in creation—as evolutionary science indicates that God must have done—without compromising his own goodness. But once it is granted that the same ontological event can have both good and evil aspects relative to different appetites, as in the case of predators killing and eating their prey, the natural evils of suffering and death can be seen as compatible with an omnibenevolent will. All that needs to be posited is that God wills only the good aspects of natural evils, never the bad, and that the good aspects willed by God outweigh the bad.[56]

In sum, there are many reasons to return to the ancient tradition of thinking of evil in terms of teleology and the non-advancement of being towards what is perfective or completing. This tradition has been overlooked and neglected, but it has much to offer contemporary philosophy and theology.

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56. On the legitimacy and usefulness of applying double-effect reasoning to God's choices in the created order, see John Zeis, "The Theological Implications of Double Effect," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2015): 133–138, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq2014111139.