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Evil as privative: a McCabian defence

Anastasia Phillipa Scrutton

School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

Not all theists who are members of the Abrahamic faiths will sign up to a particular metaphysics of evil: some may be sceptical theists, and others may be uninterested in metaphysical questions altogether. In this paper, I argue that theists in the Abrahamic faiths who are interested in metaphysics and who are not sceptical theists should endorse a privative account of evil. This is because a privative view of evil is the only metaphysic of evil that is compatible with the theism of the Abrahamic faiths. In order to persuade you of this, I will explain the religious importance of the privative view, and show how the three alternatives to the privative view that might initially appear compatible with theism are not, after all, compatible with the particular theism of the Abrahamic faiths. Privative views are often objected to on the basis that pain is an evil that does not seem like a privation. I will put forward one (non-exclusive) defence of the privative view of evil in response to this objection, drawing on the work of Herbert McCabe.

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Introduction

The privative view of evil holds that evil is the privation of good, where a privation is an absence of something that is proper to a particular thing. On such a view, evil exists in the same sense that a hole in a water pipe exists. The hole is not a thing but the absence of a thing; nevertheless it would be ludicrous to claim that, because a hole is an absence of a thing, it is unreal in the sense of illusory. Furthermore, evil can have real life effects, just as a hole in a water pipe can cause lots of water to come through your ceiling. In this way, evil is a bit like coldness: we know from physics that coldness is the absence of heat, rather than a thing in itself, but that doesn't mean that coldness doesn't give us chilblains or frostbite.[1]

The privative view is, among other things, a response to a problem of evil, though not the problem of evil philosophers of religion today are most familiar with. The problem of evil philosophers of religion are most familiar with asks why a good, all-powerful God would allow evil to happen in the world (Hume, 1779, 45). The problem of evil the privative view responds to asks how evil can exist if God created everything apart from Godself, and God is good (see Augustine, *Conf.* 7. 5.7). I will call this the metaphysical problem of evil. The metaphysical problem

CONTACT Anastasia Phillipa Scrutton t.scrutton@leeds.ac.uk

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of evil differs from the more familiar problem of evil in two respects: rather than divine omnipotence, it focuses on the idea that God created everything (apart from Godself); and rather than whether and why God would allow evil to happen, it is concerned rather with whether God is the creator of evil. The privative view responds to the metaphysical problem of evil by claiming that God did create everything except Godself, but that doesn't entail that God created evil, since evil is not a thing but an absence. In asserting that God didn't create evil, it maintains God's goodness with respect to the metaphysical problem of evil. It leaves the more familiar problem of evil unanswered, though it may be a necessary part of an answer to it.

In the first part of this paper I will argue that a privative view of evil is the metaphysics of evil that is most compatible with the theism of the Abrahamic faiths. In order to do this, I will show why three alternatives to it – dualism, the idea that a good God could create evil, and the idea that evil is illusory – are not acceptable for this kind of theism. These are not the only *possible* alternatives, since someone could argue that (for example) good, rather than evil, is privative, or that both good and evil are illusory. However, these are the three significant alternatives that have been put forward by people with (Abrahamic or other) theistic worldviews, since the other alternatives are more obviously inconsistent with most kinds of theism.[2]

In the second part of this part, I will argue that the privative view of evil is also plausible in the face of what is often taken to be the greatest objection to the privative view: that the privative view cannot make sense of the phenomenology of pain which (it is argued) is an evil which does not have a privative nature. Drawing on the thought of Herbert McCabe, I will argue that a privative view should look at particular evils contextually and holistically rather than atomistically, and that the privations should be understood in teleological terms. The pain of injury, then, can be understood as privative because it occurs in the context of injury, and because the injury is antithetical to the animal's functioning and flourishing. I will argue that this is the normal and intuitive way in which we evaluate pain, and that we should not evaluate it differently when we come to do metaphysics.

Before embarking on these argumentative strategies, I will briefly outline what the privative view of evil I am defending is and why the privative view is important.

What the privative view of evil is and why it matters

For Augustine of Hippo, coming to understand that evil is the privation of good was nothing less than an epiphany: as he describes it in *Confessions* 7, the privative view of evil paved the way for his full acceptance of the Christian faith. Perhaps someone might wonder how a metaphysical theory could be of such personal importance to anyone. For Augustine, the answer lies in that he saw it as the only available alternative to Manicheanism (a form of dualism), which compromised God's sovereignty and the belief that God created everything, and Stoicism, which held that evil experienced – for example, the evil of acute pain – was not an evil at all when seen through a wise person's eyes. This is why, in the *Confessions* and in his later work, Augustine reinforces the point that whatever exists is created by God and is therefore good, while maintaining the nature of evil as evil:

> Everything that exists is good, then; and so evil, the source of which I was seeking, cannot be a substance, because if it were, it would be good. Either it would be an indestructible substance, and that would mean it was very good indeed, or it would be a substance liable to destruction – but then it would not be destructible unless it were good. (Augustine, *Conf.* 7.12.18)

According to the privative view, evil is parasitic upon good, since evil can never have an existence independent of good. Thus, Augustine says: 'Where there is no privation of the good, there is no evil. Where there is evil, there is a corresponding diminution of the good' (Augustine, *Ench.* 4). Good and evil are not symmetrical entities, since good can exist without evil, whereas evil can never exist (in so far as we can say it exists at all) without good. In Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz's words, 'A healthy normal frog is an unqualified good but a sick frog is not an unqualified evil' (Anglin and Goetz, 1982, 4).

Evil is privative, and privations are a kind of absence, but not all absences are privations (or evil): something is only an evil (and is only privative) if the thing that is lacking is proper to that object. I cannot fly but that is not an evil (or a privation) because I am a human and not pterodactyl (see Aquinas, *ST*, I, Q48, A5; Ibn Sînâ, cited Inati, 2000, 67).

That privations are only absences of *due* goods is closely connected with another feature of the privative view – namely, that the kind of privation that comprises an evil is a *teleological* privation. In other words, evil is an absence of something being in some respect fully that for which that being was created. Evil suffered – for example, illness – is a privation of health, where the person's full flourishing involves them being physically healthy. Evil perpetrated – for example, a cruel violent act – is a privation of moral goodness, because the perpetrator's full flourishing involves them being morally virtuous.

In modern English we tend to reserve the word 'evil' for severe badnesses, such as ethnic cleansing or the acute emotional and physical suffering of someone who has a painful terminal disease. However, for Augustine and Aquinas and others, an evil is any privation of the good. Even a frustrated desire for an innocent pleasure such as an ice-cream can count as a privation and so an evil (Oderberg, 2020, 118–122), though we might want to speak of degrees of privation and thus of evil: a frustrated desire for ice-cream is a minor privation and a trivial evil whereas ethnic cleansing is a significant privation and terrible evil.

Can privations admit of degrees? Consider the following, whimsical, illustration of the privative view of evil given by Herbert McCabe: 'If I have a hole in my sock, the hole is not anything at all, it is just an absence of wool or cotton or whatever, but it is a perfectly real hole in my sock' (McCabe, 1987, 29). The point of McCabe's illustration is that not only things but absences of things can be real in key respects: we can speak of them meaningfully; they can have real life effects (for example, perhaps the hole in McCabe's sock made his feet cold, or cut off the circulation of his toe). However, the illustration is relevant to the question of whether privations admit of degrees, since people might have a bigger or a smaller hole in their sock – that is, a larger or less large privation. This demonstrates that privation admit of degrees: I might have a stronger or less strong desire for ice-cream; McCabe might have a larger or a smaller hole in his sock. This illustration does not speak directly to how privations differ when they refer to terrible rather than trivial evils: a terrible evil does not seem to be like a trivial evil but to a greater extent. I suspect an axiological account will be worth considering here. However, notably the

question about the difference between trivial instances of evil and terrible ones is equally relevant to non-privative conceptions of evil as to privative ones: what I have shown is that the privative view is just as able to admit of degrees as non-privative views of evil are.

The privative view of evil has received attention primarily (though with some significant exceptions) in Catholic circles, and it may be tempting to write it off as an instance of obscure theorizing without real-life relevance. But, as the example of its significance for Augustine suggests, this fails to recognize its real-life religious significance. From the perspective of its proponents, it is what enables theists to believe that God is God, and that besides God there is no other (Is. 45.5). It is thus a cornerstone for trust in God, and for the belief that it is genuinely within God's power to save and to redeem in the midst of darkness. Conversely, if the privative view of evil is untenable, then this is a significant challenge to the theism of the Abrahamic faiths. While much ink has been spilled in relation to the question of why a good, all-powerful God would allow evil, the more metaphysical problem of evil to which the privative view is a response has received curiously little attention.

Considering the other options

The privative view of evil is a response to the metaphysical problem of evil, and the metaphysical problem of evil draws attention to the apparent tension between the following propositions:

P1: God creates everything that exists (apart from God)

P2: God is good

P3: Evil exists

Three alternative options to the privative view have been put forward to deal with the apparent tension noted above, all of which attempt, but ultimately fail, to maintain theism. Option 1 denies P1 by proposing two creators, and/or that evil is an equal and independent force to goodness that is self-sufficient and so doesn't need a creator. Because both of these options suggest that good and evil are independent opposing forces we can call both options 'dualism', where 'dualism' refers to the idea there are two kinds of reality (here, good and evil). Option 2 maintains P2 but denies an underlying presupposition of Augustine and other privationists when they assert P2 – namely, that a good God would not create evil. Option 3 denies that evil exists by claiming that it is illusory, and that those things that appear evil are in fact good or neutral.

In the first half of this paper, I will show why each of these alternative options is unacceptable for the theism of the Abrahamic faiths.

Option 1: good and evil are independent and equal opposing forces

Proponents of the privative view of evil such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas proposed the privative view primarily in response to dualistic accounts of good and evil such as those put forward by the Manicheans and the Albigensians. At the root of

a dualistic account is the idea there are two deities, creators or forces, one of which is good (whom we call God) and the other of which is evil. God is the creator of goodness and the other deity or force is evil itself or the creator of evil. Good and evil are locked in a cosmic battle which is why we see (more or less) equal amounts of good and evil in the world.

Dualism has an intuitive plausibility since it makes sense of the existence of both good and evil in the world. However, it is not a viable option for theists in Abrahamic faiths since it compromises both the idea that God created everything apart from God, and (relatedly) divine sovereignty or the idea that God is the supreme power or authority. Divine sovereignty is the claim that, apart from God, there is no god, that is at the heart of all three Abrahamic traditions: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God'; 'There is no god but God' (Is. 45.5; Qur'an 37.35; see also Ex. 9.14; Deut. 4.35; 32.39; Is. 43.10; Joel 2.27; Qur'an 47.29), and that begin these traditions' three creeds, the Shema Yisrael, the Nicene Creed and the Shahada. That God is sovereign, or is the ultimate power and authority, is one of the foundations of the Abrahamic faiths, and so dualism is not a viable option for theists in these traditions.

Option 2: God could be good but could create evil

A core theistic belief is that God is good (P2). Privationists presuppose that a good God would or could not create evil or, in Augustine's words, that 'All of nature, *therefore*, is good, *since* the Creator of all nature is supremely good' (*Ench*. 4, my emphases). This presupposition is at the heart of the metaphysical problem of evil: if a good God could create evil, then the metaphysical problem of evil would cease to be a problem, and only the more familiar problem of why God would allow evil in the world would remain.

Perhaps we could reject this presupposition. Al Ghazali seems to suggest this possibility when he says:

> It is that God does with regard to men what He wills and it is not incumbent on Him to do whatever is good for them. It has already been stated that nothing is compulsory on God but His dealings are not intelligible to men, because there is nobody to question Him what He does but men are subject to questions. The Mu'tazilites say that it is incumbent upon God to do whatever is salutary for men. (Al Ghazali, *Revival of Religious Learnings*, Volume 1 Chapter 2 Section 3)

Here, Al Ghazali seems to reject the idea that God would not cause or create evil, perhaps on the grounds of God's freedom or because God is radically transcendent and so not subject to the moral law. God's goodness, on the view I have just presented, then, does not preclude creating evil.

Why should we prefer Augustine's presupposition that a good God could or would not create evil to the option suggested by Al Ghazali? This question has not been much explored, despite seeming to be a serious – perhaps the most serious – alternative to the privative view for theists in Abrahamic faiths.

A possible reason to prefer Augustine's view to Al Ghazali's is that the presupposition that a good God could or would not create evil maintains the meaningfulness of our language about goodness. According to this argument, if we say that God is good, we are using the language analogically. What we mean when we say that God is good is of course

not the same as what we mean when we say that a human is good, or that my dog is good, or that Fatema had a good holiday. However, analogy is a literal rather than a metaphorical mode of speech: we are still saying something literally true of God in speaking of God's goodness rather than using metaphor (see Aquinas, *ST* I, Q13, A3). If our language about the goodness of God is entirely discontinuous with our language about the goodness of humans, dogs and holidays, in terms of its meaning, then 'good' has ceased to be the same word; it only shares the superficial similarity of being composed of the same letters.

This is relevant to the question of whether a good God might cause or create evil since language about the goodness of humans, dogs and holidays involves the thought that the humans, dogs and holidays in question give rise to good rather than evil effects: a good holiday gives rise to happy and relaxed holiday-makers; a good dog gives rise to a contented family (if they are a pet dog) or (if they are a sheepdog) to a well-formed flock of sheep. Likewise, language about God's goodness indicates that God is the source of good things, and not the source of evil ones. Perhaps someone might raise a concern here that a human might be good (for example, because their intentions and motives are good) but their effects not good because their effects are not always within their control. However, God's omnipotence means that God's effects are always within God's control, and therefore God's intentions and motives (on the one hand), and God's effects (on the other) cannot come apart. Therefore, if we wish to maintain the meaningfulness of language about goodness, we should maintain that a good God would not create evil.

However, on its own, this line of reasoning may not be persuasive since, according to Peter Geach, 'good' does not name some property or nature that is found in common across various entities; rather, the meaning of 'good' always changes according to that of which it is predicated (Geach, 1995; see Alexander, 2012). A 'good businessman' might mean that the person is good at making money at the expense of others, perhaps (for example) because they pay their employees too little, rather than because they a good person as such (that is, morally good). As Herbert McCabe puts it, goodness:

> is different from redness in that what it is like for one thing to be good isn't the same as what it is like for another. The fact that wine can be made from good grapes has no tendency at all to suggest that wine can be made from good deckchairs. (McCabe in Davies and Kucharski, 2016, 90).

If we accept that 'good' is always attributive in this way,[3] a defender of Al Ghazali could reply that, *qua* God, God's effects are good, without entailing that God's goodness need have anything in common with goodness as we mean 'goodness' when we say that a person, dog or holiday are good in the sense of having good effects.

Perhaps a more promising line of defense of Augustine's presupposition that a good God would not create evil is to consider the language of divine love in the first instance, rather than of divine goodness. The Abrahamic faiths agree that God is loving. Passibilists and impassibilists disagree on whether this love should be viewed as an emotion or as involving emotion, such that God would experience suffering (in Godself) in situations where creation suffered or was failing to flourish fully – just as a loving human parent might well suffer if their child was unhappy or were behaving in a bullying or hurtful way to others. But passibilists and impassibilists alike tend to agree that what love involves is (at least) that the lover wills the

good of the beloved. While love, like good, is polysemous to some extent (I can speak of loving cheese without the connotations of willing the good of the cheese – more likely I just want to eat it), when we speak of loving persons (rather than loving impersonal objects such as cheese), if we are using the language properly we always mean that we will the good of the beloved. Where this is lacking – for example where the 'lover' becomes possessive and controlling to the detriment of the 'beloved's' good, then we might say that they do not really love them; they are perhaps obsessed by them because of some insecurity in themselves (or something of that kind). Love, then, seems to involve willing the good of the beloved where the beloved is a person – and we can say that this applies to divine love as much as human love. Willing the good of the beloved precludes doing things that are not for their good *(ceteris paribus)* and so, if we agree that God is loving, we must agree with Augustine and the Mu'tazilites against Al Ghazali that God does not do things that are not salutary for humans. Our understanding of divine love should inform our understanding of divine goodness, and so we can also run this argument with divine goodness once we take into account divine love, even if we cannot run this argument with divine goodness in isolation if we accept Geach's argument about 'goodness' always being attributive.

Perhaps Al Ghazali might appeal here to the idea that God might create evil for the sake of some greater good. The Qu'ran speaks of evil enabling God to test humans (Qu'ran 67.2), suggesting that evil serves or can serve God's ultimately good purpose, and in the passage quoted above Al Ghazali already appeals to the idea that God's actions may not be intelligible to us, and so perhaps point to mystery and the possibility that there might be some good purpose to evil that is invisible to human eyes. More recently, G. Stanley Kane also suggests something like this option when he asks:

> Why could not Augustine, in replying to the Manicheans, have simply asserted that God did indeed create evils when he made the world but that he was morally justified in doing so since these evils are logically necessary to the fulfilment of a divine purpose that is surpassingly good? He provides exactly this sort of explanation in arguing that God's *permitting* evil to occur is justified. God was justified in permitting physical evils to occur, he tells us, because such evils are unavoidable in a created order where all grades of being and goodness are realized. But if, on the assumption that evil is privative, this justifies God in *allowing* evil to occur, would that not also, on the assumption that evil has a positive nature, justify God in directly *creating* evil?' (Kane, 1980, 55)

In response to Kane, we might observe that permitting and creating are not the same thing – as the ethical distinction between act and omission implies. Murdering a homeless person, and finding them already ill and leaving them to die, are both moral evils – but the former is more abhorrent and the person more culpable than for the latter. Excepting among thoroughgoing consequentialists, this is well-accepted. Therefore it does not seem that Kane can move so easily from God permitting, to God creating, evil – he would need to do more work in order to justify why God might not only permit evil, but even create it.

Apart from not being sufficiently justified, is there anything that might rule out Kane's position? Anglin and Goetz think there is: they note that (*contra* Kane) there can't be any logical need for anything inherently (as distinct from privatively) evil in a surpassingly good universe:

(1) Any function which something inherently evil might serve in the fulfilment of a surpassingly good divine purpose could equally well be served by a privative evil.
(2) The only way an omnipotent being's goodness would not be compromised if he created something inherently evil would be if that thing were logically necessary to the fulfilment of every surpassingly good purpose.
(3) Necessarily, God is good.
(4) Thus, God does not create anything inherently evil.
(5) Thus nothing is inherently evil. (Adapted from Anglin and Goetz, 1982, 9)

According to Anglin and Goetz's argument, God's goodness would only be maintained if creating inherent evil were logically necessary to the fulfilment of every surpassing good, but it isn't, because privative evil would do just as well for that purpose.

Anglin and Goetz's argument works in showing why God can't be thought to create inherent evils. Augustine and Aquinas would go further, and probably argue that Anglin and Goetz's argument is too modest, conceding too much at the outset by allowing that a good God *could* create (inherent) evils. Augustine and Aquinas' understanding is not merely that God could create evil but would choose not to. It is that God *could* not do evil, which includes creating evil, whatever God's reason for doing it, since it is not in God's nature and not consistent with God's perfect goodness.

What are we to make of Augustine and Aquinas' thought that God not only would not, but also could not, create evil? Against this view, we might point to the fact that philosophers of religion sometimes appeal to the idea (for example, in arguing for the free will defense or soul-making theodicy) that persons are more virtuous if they are able to commit evils and struggle and, furthermore, if they overcome the temptation to do so, than if they are not able to do evil and feel no temptation towards evil in the first instance. It would be a problem to think that God is *less* virtuous than some of God's creation.

However, I do not think it is obviously true that persons are more virtuous if they are able and want to commit evils but don't than if they are simply not able to do evil because it is not in their nature. Imagine someone who embodies to a very high degree a number of significant virtues – perhaps gentleness, kindness and honesty – and who embodies them in such a way that indicates a certain kind of integrity: these virtues flow naturally from their character. Now imagine another person – someone who embodies these virtues but who has to fight against cruel, dishonest and violent instincts in order to do so. Whom do you like, trust, and admire the most? It seems to me that I would probably like, trust and admire the first person, the person who is naturally kind, gentle and honest, more than the second person – and that I certainly wouldn't like, trust and admire them any *less* than the second person. Perhaps I might end up liking, trusting and admiring the second person just as much, precisely because it is a struggle for them – but I think that this like, trust and admiration would relate to my perception that their desire to overcome these vicious urges is rooted in some virtues (such as the desire to be a good person and not harm others) that are more fundamental than the vices.

If this intuition is right, then it challenges the association between virtue (on the one hand) and the desire and capacity to do evil (on the other hand). This in turn suggests that divine goodness would not be lacking, but may be straightforwardly more abundant, if God were not able to do evil on account of it not being in God's nature. Notably this is a very specific kind of 'not able' to do evil. It isn't an externally-imposed limitation like

the limitation my dog Lola experiences when she is put on a lead when we walk through a field of sheep. Instead, it is a limitation that arises from God's nature, like the limitation of an animal-lover who 'couldn't bring themselves to hurt an animal', only more so.

Asserting that God *could* not do evil would require not only shows how this would not compromise divine goodness (given our conceptions of human goodness) – something I have tried to do above – but would also require a conception of divine omnipotence and freedom that does not entail God is able to do evil as well as good. There is not space to provide such an account here – but it is enough to note that this understanding of divine omnipotence and freedom is in keeping with Augustine and Aquinas' thought and that of much of the Christian tradition (see Gaine, 2003).

So far in considering Option 2, I have argued (*contra* Al Ghazali) against the idea that God might create evil on the basis of the meaningfulness of our language about love and goodness when predicated analogically of God. I have also argued (*contra* Kane) against the idea that God might create evil for the sake of a surpassing good, pointing out that Kane overlooks the act/omission distinction, and (following Anglin and Goetz) that he does not succeed in showing why God needs to create inherent evils when privative evils would serve the same purpose. Finally, I have argued that, on at least one, significant conception of God's nature, God is simply not able to create or cause evil.

A final option for someone seeking to endorse Al Ghazali's idea that God creates evil is to argue that what we call 'evil' is not in fact evil but actually good. However, in so doing, they would be denying P3 (that evil exists) and appealing to Option 3 (that evil is illusory). I will now show why this is not an acceptable option for theists in Abrahamic faiths.

Option 3: evil is illusory; what we call evil is really good and not evil

The metaphysical problem of evil is a problem because, in spite of the fact that God created everything and God is good, evil exists (P3). One alternative option to the privative view of evil is to deny that evil exists in the sense of being illusory, or being a good-in-disguise. Metaphysically, the idea that evil is illusory is a form of monism – the idea that (in contrast to dualism), there is no reality independent of God, and, furthermore, that what appears to be evil is actually (when seen as part of a whole) good.

Monism is most famously espoused by Spinoza, for whom creation follows necessarily and perfectly from the eternal divine essence. On this view, God alone is free (in the sense of not determined by external causes), while creation is determined by God – and so perfect. Spinoza thought that what we call 'evils' are not objective realities but mental entities, and, furthermore, that we are erroneous to call them 'evils' since, when we do so, we are wrongly judging things on the basis of their utility to ourselves, or else of general, misconceived imaginings of what that type of thing should be like. Consequently, 'all the explanations commonly given of nature are mere modes of imagining, and do not indicate the true nature of anything, but only the constitution of the imagination' (Spinoza, *Ethics*, i, *appendix)*. Our perception of evil is only the result of our lack of knowledge; 'if we use our understanding and Reason aright, it should be impossible for us ever to fall a prey to one of these passions which we ought to reject' (Spinoza, *Short Treatise*, pt. 2, ch. xiv). At the same time, since Spinoza thinks that creation is determined, and that there is no evil, he

does not think that our lack of knowledge that results in our misperception of things as evil is itself evil: the confused and inadequate ideas are part of an overall good, characterized by diversity or plenitude, which follows the same perfect necessity as the rest of creation (Spinoza, *Ethics*, ii, 36).

A more recent proponent of the idea that evil is illusory is Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Christian Science movement, who claims that 'evil is but an illusion; it has no real basis [. . .] If sin, sickness and death were understood as nothingness, they would disappear' (Eddy, 1934, 205; 480). Thus, in the case of pain, 'When a sufferer is convinced that there is no reality in his belief in pain – because matter has no sensation, hence pain in matter is a false belief – how can he suffer longer?' (Eddy, 1934, 346). Unlike Spinoza, Eddy thinks that the evils that exist in our minds are real evils, and so fails to give a consistent account of all evils as illusory – on her view, evil ultimately does exist, because it exists in our minds (see Hick, 2010, 24–25).

Although not so much a single movement as a cultural tendency, we can also see the idea that evil is illusory in what Barbara Ehrenreich calls 'bright-siding': the pressure sometimes placed on sufferers to reconceptualise illnesses and misfortunes that befall them as blessings or opportunities. Ehrenreich began researching this tendency when, diagnosed with breast cancer, she wrote a post about how angry she felt at a number of things, including the fact that environmental carcinogens are allowed in industrialised societies because of the profits they yield to the powerful and wealthy. Responses rebuked Ehrenreich for her 'bad attitude' and for failing to 'enjoy life to the fullest', and advice she received about dealing with cancer included trying to see it as a good and not an evil: 'cancer is your ticket to your real life. Cancer is your passport to the life you were truly meant to live' 'Cancer will lead you to God. [. . . .] Cancer is your connection to the Divine' (cited in Barbara Ehrenreich, 2009, 32; 29). Similarly, at networking groups, boot camps and motivational sessions aimed at the unemployed, 'People who had been laid off from their jobs and were spiraling down towards poverty were told to see their condition as an "opportunity" to be embraced' (Ehrenreich, 2009, 45). In the example of bright-siding, we see the idea that evil is illusory, and is in fact good, not primarily as a metaphysical position (as in Spinoza), but as a pragmatic coping strategy, intended to make sufferers (or those around them) experience suffering less by seeing it in a different way.

How does the idea that evil is illusory differ from the idea that evil is merely the privation of good? The privationist might also say that evil is not 'real' – though, in the case of the privative view, what is meant by 'real' is 'having no positive existence' or 'not being a substance'. In this sense, we might hold that other absences – for example, coldness (the absence of heat), darkness (the absence of light), holes (the absence of physical matter surrounded by physical matter[4]) and blindness (the absence of sight) are also not real: they are not 'an independent entity or positive property' (Davies, 2006, 185). Yet that claim is very different from the claim that coldness, holes, blindness or evil are unreal in the sense of illusory – and privationists would (or at least should) want to deny that evil and instances of evil are any more illusory than those other things. Like coldness, evil, for the privationist, is real in the sense of being an absence we need to reckon with in ways other than merely shifting our perception of it. This is how the illusory view of evil differs from the privative one.

A significant problem with the illusory view of evil is highlighted by Ehrenreich:

> Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual [some of the 'positive benefits' other people posited]. What it gave me, if you want to call this a 'gift', was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force [. . .] that I had not been aware of before - one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate. (Ehrenreich, 44, my emphases)

As Ehrenreich suggests, the biggest problem with the idea that evil is an illusion is that it is immoral. In part this is because it places an additional burden on victims: not only do they suffer, but they are encouraged to 'blame only ourselves for our fate', and/or to turn their suffering into a good thing. In addition to this, the illusory view of evil demotivates people to fight to overcome evils – for example, social evils such as poverty, and class and racial oppression; illnesses such as cancer and covid-19. Why fight for social justice or do research to prevent or cure illnesses if you think the evil they cause is illusory and part of an overall good? In doing this, the view that evil is illusory serves oppressive structures (for example, those that keep poor people poor), and so stabs oppressed people in the back.

John Hick makes a similar point. He argues that, on the illusory view of evil:

> evil is no longer recognized as being genuinely *evil* and ultimately inimical to God's will and purpose. Evil can thus become domesticated within the divine household and seen as a servant instead of a deadly enemy; and then the theodicist finds himself calling evil good and preaching peace where there is no peace. (Hick, 2010, 16)

The idea that evil is illusory, then, is itself an evil – and a very real one.

We might wonder what *kind* of reason the charge of being immoral gives us to reject the illusory view: is it an evidential reason, or is it a pragmatic one? While it could be justified on pragmatic grounds, I think it is an evidential one for theists in the Abrahamic traditions, though one that relies on revelation rather than reason and thus has a theological rather than a philosophical grounding. In particular, because it favours the oppressor and perpetuates injustice against the oppressed, it contradicts the revealed truth that God is on the side of the widow and the orphan, and that it is an imperative on people in these traditions to be on the side of the oppressed and not the oppressor too (see e.g. Deut. 14.29; Ps. 68.5; Luke 1.46–55; Qur'an 90: 13–18). In place of this, the idea that evil is illusory or, properly seen, actually good, places an additional burden on the oppressed, and undermines the traditions' concerns with social justice. For this reason, we should reject the idea that evil is illusory or part of a greater good.

Summary

In summary, there is a paucity of possibilities for theists in Abrahamic traditions who wish to maintain both God's goodness and the idea that God created everything apart from Godself, and it seems that the privative view of evil is the only viable option. While opposing a privative view of evil, Robson concedes that there is an absence of reasonable alternatives: 'I must admit to having little constructive to say about the nature of evil, but perhaps the partially cleared ground will be empty enough for someone else to build on' (Robson, 553). And while opposing other aspects of

Augustine and Aquinas' account of evil, in relation to their privative view of evil Hick rightly says:

> As a characterization of evil, within the framework of Christian theology, this privative definition must be accepted as wholly sound. It represents the *only possible* account of the ontological status of evil in a universe that is the creation of an omnipotent and good God. From this standpoint evil *cannot* be an ultimate constituent of reality, for the sole ultimate reality is the infinitely good Creator. Evil can only consist in a malfunctioning or disorder that has somehow come about within an essentially good creation'. (Hick, 2010, 180, my emphases)

Where 'theism' refers to the full-blooded theism of the Abrahamic faiths, including their radical monotheism, commitment to divine love and goodness, and the revelation of God's care for the oppressed, Patrick Lee is correct to say that 'If evil is not privation, then theism is incoherent' (Lee, 2007, 271).

How can the privative view account for the subjective experience of pain?

Against the privative account, John Crosby asks us to consider the following case:

> Take the piercing pain of a patient suffering from bone cancer. It is practically impossible to interpret such pain as a mere lack of a feeling of wellness that a healthy person should have. The pain is obviously something more than any such lack; it is something in its own right. The pain seems clearly to be the contrary of the feeling of wellness and not just the lack of it. (Crosby, 2002, 200)

This objection points to the apparently positive (in the sense of forceful or active, rather than good) quality of many subjective experiences of pain: the bone cancer's 'piercing pain' feels to the patient active and forceful, not merely like an absence or a lack. Numerous anti-privationists have made this point. For example, Todd Calder says: 'pain is not simply the absence of feeling or best characterized as an absence of health or pleasure, it is a positively bad sensation or feeling' (Calder, 2007, 373). In similar vein, Stanley Kane claims that 'it is clearly inadequate to describe a limb aching with pain as suffering *merely* a privation of good health or normal feeling. When pain occurs in the body, there is something new and different in a person's experience which is not present when the body has simply lost feeling' (Kane, 1980, 49). This is a problem for the privative view, since the subjective experience of pain is generally itself regarded as an evil – and so there is an apparent inconsistency between a theory about evil and its reality.[5]

I will call this the 'phenomenological objection', because its focus is on the disparity between (at least one instance of) evil's phenomenology, and the privative view. This objection, which has been discussed since at least as early as Suarez, constitutes 'the most serious objection to the privation theory' (Oderberg, 2020, 128; 129).

It is worth noting that the phenomenological objection only applies to some cases of evil, since others (such as poverty) seem clearly like privations. The phenomenological objection seems to point away from a privative view of evil and towards a dualist one, or even towards the idea that good is the privation of evil – but a dualist or good-as-privation-ist would have to explain why some evils seem like privations and not positive evils. However, none of this detracts from the force of the phenomenological objection,

since the privationist claims that *all* evil is privative, and therefore needs to make some kind of sense of evils that seem not to be.

In what follows I will consider two responses to the phenomenological objection, rejecting the first but arguing for the second.

Response 1: phenomenology is not a guide to metaphysics

One response a privationist could make to the phenomenological objection is that phenomenology is not always a guide to metaphysics. Here the analogy between evil (on the one hand) and coldness and darkness (on the other) is important. Physicist David Goldberg says of coldness and darkness:

> There's cold in the same sense that there's dark. You can't open the door to a room and have the dark spill out. Dark is the absence of light. [. . .] If you leave your door open when the air-conditioning is on, you're not letting the cold out. You're letting the heat in. (Goldberg, cited Price, 2015).

The privationist could point to the fact that we don't look to phenomenology for our understanding of what coldness and darkness are; we look to physics, and believe what physics tells us, even if the phenomenology of coldness and darkness seem at odds with that (for example, even if coldness seems to nip at our skin, or darkness seems to fall at the end of the day). Analogously, she might argue, we should look to philosophy and theology, not phenomenology, for a theory of evil. On this view, the phenomenology of pain is like a stick in water that is straight but looks bent: the phenomenology of an evil such as pain misleads us about the real nature of evil.

This privationist response is not successful because it misses a disanalogy between evil and coldness/darkness: it's (at least in part) in the phenomenology of pain that the evil of painful experiences lies, whereas it's not in the phenomenology of coldness or darkness that coldness and darkness lie. In other words, 'the way pains feel is a central part of what makes it bad' (Swenson, 2009, 141–142). The privationist therefore needs to engage with the phenomenological objection in a way that takes the phenomenology of pain more seriously in relation to the metaphysics of evil.

Response 2: we need to look at pain teleologically and contextually

The privationist might instead reply that the anti-privationist is looking at the case of pain too atomistically and without due attention to either the context in which it occurs, or to the teleological framework of the privative view.

Pain always occurs in a context. In the case of bone cancer, the context is one of having a debilitating and life-threatening disease. That can rightly be considered an evil for the person, because it is anti-teleological or contrary to their flourishing as a human being, where being a human being involves being an animal organism part of whose function is to live as long and healthily as possible. According to Response 2, this overall anti-teleological aspect of their situation is wherein the privation lies. It is a privation precisely with respect to their teleology, or their flourishing as the kind of being they are.

Of course, not all pain occurs in the context of having a debilitating and life-threatening disease. Pain might occur as a result of torture – here, the overall evil of

the situation could be characterized in terms of an overall privation of flourishing of two people in relation to one another; of the torturer's failure to flourish as a human being with compassion for others; and of the way in which the tortured person is impeded in their flourishing (for example, their mental equilibrium) because of the trauma they are undergoing. Or, again, pain may occur in the context of a sports injury, in which case the overall badness of the situation would relate to (e.g.) the person's inability to continue to go running, which would again comprise a privation of their flourishing along one teleological dimension (a fully flourishing human, on this view, is one who is among other things fully able).[6] Or, again, pain may occur in the context of a phantom limb, in which case the overall context of badness is one in which the person is suffering an epistemic privation, where flourishing as a human being involves having a sound perception of reality.

This contextual and teleological emphasis is apparent in McCabe's explanation of the evil or badness of a broken washing machine:

> Now notice that whenever we say something is bad we are saying that is *doesn't* come up to expectations; we are saying, in fact, something negative about it. A bad washing machine is one that won't wash the clothes properly [. . . .] if someone [. . .] says his washing machine is a bad one, you don't know yet whether it tears the clothes into strips, or soaks them in oily water, or just doesn't move at all when you switch on, or electrocutes the children when they want to go near it. It can be bad for an indefinite number of reasons so long as the one negative thing is true: that it doesn't come up to expectations for a washing machine.
>
> So badness is a negative thing. Please notice carefully that this does not mean that a bad washing machine always has to have a part missing: it is not negative in that sense. A washing machine may be bad not only because it has too little, as when there is no driving belt on the spin drier, but also because it has too much, as when someone has filled the interior with glue. (McCabe in Davies and Kucharski, 2016, 90)

The privation, then, relates to the being's overall *telos*, rather than to particular features about the bad state of affairs in question.

Someone might object here that glue in a washing machine is, in this scenario, the *cause* of the overall badness of a broken washing machine, whereas pain in the context of bone cancer (or a phantom limb, or a sports injury, or torture) is an effect or composite part of an underlying badness or evil, and so there is a disanalogy between McCabe's example and the idea I am putting forward. Yet this does not seem to be a significant disanalogy: I think McCabe's point could be extended to cover situations in which the added thing is an effect or composite part rather than a cause of the wider evil. Thus pain, like glue, may well be an added thing rather than a privation, but because it is the situation as a whole that is a bad or an evil, and because the overall situation can be seen in privative terms from a teleological perspective, the fact that aspects of the bad or evil situations are added things rather than absences does not detract from a privative view. The glue in the washing machine is a bad, and the pain in bone cancer is a bad, and both are added things rather than absences – but the badness of both is rooted in the overall badness of the situation and this overall badness should be seen in teleologically privative terms.

A possible objection to Response 2 is that it misses the mark by locating evil in some generic big picture and so deflects attention away from the evil of pain as such, whereas 'At least part, and certainly a major part, of the reason for considering *pain*

evil (as opposed to the conditions in the body or elsewhere that produce pain) is precisely that it is painful' (Kane, 1980, 50). According to this objection, when we think about the case of the bone cancer patient, our focus shifts from seeing the evil of the feelings of pain they experience, to a more general overview of their condition. There may even be an ethical concern here that the view shifts from a first-person to a third-person perspective of the condition that does not take the person's own experience as primary.

In response to this objection, the privationist could reply that we do approach pain in this way even when we are experiencing it. Someone might experience their pain in a way that involves more suffering (where 'suffering' here means 'feeling pain and minding it') if they understand it to be part of a terminal illness than if they understand it to be very temporary or to be therapeutic (as in the case of an operation or a sports massage). Someone may experience the pain of a hangover as worse than another kind of headache because they know it to be partly their fault, or else as better than another kind of headache because they think the previous evening made it all worthwhile. The pain of childbirth may be made better by the fact that the person wants to bring a baby into the world. In other words, we do evaluate situations involving pain – including our own pain – in this holistic and contextual way anyway – and so there is no reason our account of the metaphysics of evil should deviate from this. Because we do this in relation to our own experience of pain, there is also no reason to think that this constitutes a shift away from the sufferer's own perspective.

Furthermore, our holistic and contextual evaluations of situations also have a teleological dimension. Someone who experiences the pain of a hangover as involving less suffering than the pain of another kind of headache because of the pleasure they got from the previous evening has a particular understanding of what a good human life looks like – for example, that it might involve the pleasure of nice wine and of relaxing in the company of friends. Conversely, someone who feels guilt-ridden for having a hangover so that the pain of their hangover involves more suffering than it otherwise might may have an underlying belief in the importance of (say) moderation or early-morning productivity. And someone who experiences the pain of childbirth as involving less suffering than it would have were it not attached to bringing a baby into the world might have an implicit belief in the value of human life or in the niceness of babies. Our everyday evaluations of the good or evil of situations, then, are both contextual and teleological – and there is no reason why we should depart from this way of evaluating the good or bad of situations when we are doing metaphysics.

Thus Response 2 is, I argue, an adequate response to the phenomenological objection to the privative view, consistent with our best common-sense intuitions about pain and suffering. Other responses to the phenomenological objection have been put forward (Anglin and Goetz, 1982; Alexander, 2012; Oderberg, 2020). My aim is to complement at least some of these by adding a further line of defence, pointing to the teleological aspect of the privative view emphasised especially by McCabe.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that a privative view of evil is necessary for the theism of the Abrahamic faiths and that, happily for people in those traditions, it is also plausible.

I have done this by showing why other theistic responses to the metaphysical problem of evil are not acceptable for the theism of the Abrahamic faiths, and that the phenomenological objection can be successfully met with (at least) one response.

Other objections to the privative view have been raised, but the phenomenological objection is the most serious, and so it is enough to demonstrate that it can be answered to show the privative view's plausibility. Furthermore, responses to the other objections have been given elsewhere (see e.g. Grant, 2015), and, in addition, some of the same moves I have made in relation to the phenomenological objection (e.g. Response 2) could be made in response to them. I therefore suggest that, while not considering all objections to the privative view in this paper is an absence, it should not be considered a privation.

Notes

1. For a consideration of the ways in which privations such as evil can be seen as causative, see Oderberg, 2020. Oderberg argues that privations can be causes and effects 'when the positive states that ground privative truths are considered', but not 'when the privation is considered in itself as a negative being'. Concomitantly, he regards evil as a possible cause and effect 'when the positive states that ground privative truths are considered', but not 'when evil is considered in itself as a privation' (199).
2. By theism, I mean the belief that there is a god. Manicheanism and Spinoza's monism as well as traditional Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all forms of theism. By 'the theism of the Abrahamic faiths' I mean traditional Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which have particular beliefs about God that are revealed through these faiths' scriptures, including that God is loving, sovereign, cares for the poor and oppressed, and so on.
3. For counter-arguments, see e.g. Pigden, 1990.
4. For an overview on theories about the ontological status of holes, see Casati, 2019. For the purposes of this project it is sufficient to say that I think holes (like evil) are real in one sense of 'real' (namely, that it is true there are holes), but not real in another sense of 'real' (they are not constituted by being). For a related view of holes, see Martin, 1996.
5. According to some privationists, the privationist should think that pain itself is not an evil, but that the suffering that accompanies it is (see Samet, 2012). Broadly speaking, here pain is a somatic response to a stimulus, while suffering is affective: in suffering the organism 'minds' that they are in pain. Neurologically, suffering and pain relate to two different subsystems (Hardcastle, 1997). Experientially, suffering and pain sometimes come apart: for example, morphine patients and people who have take other opiates sometimes report knowing that they were in pain, but not minding it (i.e. not having suffered as a result of it). I do not have space to discuss this line of argument in this paper. If one agrees with it, what is said about pain in the section above could be applied to suffering in the context of pain. Suffering, on this view, can be understood teleologically: the suffering caused by physical pain is changed qualitatively and potentially quantitatively if one evaluates the suffering that is causing the pain as having a positive dimension to it, or, conversely, as being entirely meaningless.
6. This implies there is an objective state of affairs about the badness or otherwise of disability, and would be in tension with the claims of some disability theorists that disability is or can be a 'mere difference' rather than a 'bad difference' (Barnes, 2016). An Aristotelian is likely to want to hold that there are objective goods and bads for an organism qua organism. However, perhaps an account might be developed that meets the concerns of at least some disability theorists in which disability is considered a bad for the person qua organism, but a good for the person qua person when considered holistically and understood in relation to their life as a whole. This would have the additional advantage of allowing us to see disability

as an overall good for people with disabilities who themselves perceive them as a good, but as a bad in the case of people with disabilities who perceive them as a bad, avoiding imposing an evaluation on either group of people.

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Notes on contributor

Anastasia Phillipa Scrutton is an Associate Professor in Philosophy and Religion at the University of Leeds. Her work includes philosophy of religion, theology, and religion and mental health. Recent publications include Psychopathology AND religious experience?, forthcoming in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology.*

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