On the Causal Role of Privation in Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics (EJP-18-444.R1)

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Abstract: 'Privation' (*privatio*) is defined by Thomas Aquinas as the want of some property in a subject that ought naturally to possess that property. In this paper, I explicate the ontological status of privation as a form of nonbeing in order to shed light on the challenging question whether privation, as a kind of absence, can play a causal role for Aquinas, and if so, how. According to Aquinas, I argue, privations in a subject serve to determine what sort of (efficient) causal relations that subject can enter into, but, as nonbeings, privations cannot be the cause of the subject's entering into those relations, and in this way they cannot be efficient causes of effects distinct from the subject.

**1. Introduction**

'Privation' (*privatio*) is defined by Thomas Aquinas as the want of some property in a subject that ought naturally to possess that property (see, e.g., *Summa theologiae* I q. 48, a. 5, ad 1).[[1]](#endnote-1)  Aquinas relies on the notion of privation to a considerable extent in grounding his distinction between two senses of ‘being’ (*esse*), one of which attaches to the truth of propositions, as well as in explaining the structure of the natural processes of generation and corruption. However, the concept of privation is problematic in such contexts because, prima facie, privations do not look like “real” things at all: they are *wants* of some property. Indeed, Aquinas explicitly denies that privations are “real beings” (*entia reale*). If privations are not real, positive beings, however, how can they play a genuine role in metaphysical explanations, and how can we be said genuinely to know about them or to predicate anything truly of and with them?

In this paper, I crystallize these questions into an examination of whether privation, a kind of absence, plays a *causal role* in Aquinas's metaphysical scheme, and if so, how. In order to answer this question, I look to the way in which Aquinas describes the ontological status of privation in portions of his accounts of being, truth, and natural change. Aquinas's ultimate view on the causal role of privation in these contexts, I shall argue, is that while privations in a subject serve to determine or constrain what sort of (efficient) causal relations that subject can enter into, privations, as nonbeings, cannot be the cause of the subject's entering into those relations. It follows that privations cannot be efficient causes of effects distinct from the subject. Thus, to illustrate, Homer's blindness (a privation) delimits the kinds of actions he can perform and the causal relations he can enter into. But Homer's blindness, as a lack or absence, is not the sort of thing that can bring it about that Homer *does* perform any of these actions or enters into any of these causal relations. Because it does not follow from Homer's *blindness* that he performs certain actions and enters into certain causal relations, it cannot be on account of his blindness that Homer affects things other than Homer.If to serve as an underlying condition delimiting causal interaction is as much to play a "causal role" as is to be a cause or an effect, I conclude, privations, for Aquinas, *do* play a causal role, but not as *causes.*

To frame my analysis, I chart a telling comparison between Aquinas' thinking on privation and the views of David Lewis and John Haldane, two prominent contemporary philosophers with mutually opposed takes on the metaphysical status of privations and absences. According to Lewis,

(L1) Privations (i.e. absences)[[2]](#endnote-2) are nonbeings.

(L2) Therefore, privations (or absences) cannot enter into patterns of counterfactual dependence with actual things or events.

In stark opposition to Lewis’ perspective, Haldane maintains:

(H1) Privations can be causes.

(H2) Therefore, privations (being absences of a certain type) can enter into patterns of counterfactual dependence with actual things or events.

Whereas Lewis’s position might accord with most philosophers’ intuitions about the ontological status of absences in general, Haldane offers convincing reasons, partly inspired by Aquinas, for singling out the peculiar dependence of privations on actuality as showing that at least a subclass of absences can be causally relevant in ways Lewis does not countenance.

Aquinas’s treatment of privation is interesting for the intermediate position it occupies between the options staked out by Lewis and Haldane respectively. On the one hand, Aquinas accepts (L1) but rejects (L2); yet, on the other hand, he rejects (H1) while accepting (H2).  Unlike Lewis, Aquinas appreciates the causally relevant character of privations; yet, unlike Haldane, he does not feel pressure to assign an independent sort of causal agency to nonactual or “non-natural” entities.  In the three sections that follow, the comparison between Aquinas's views and the theories of Lewis and Haldane will guide my examination of Aquinas's view of the ontological status of privation and how it underpins or reveals privation's causal role in relation to (respectively) Aquinas's accounts of being, truth, and natural change.

Before I proceed, I must remark on a noteworthy omission. As is well known, another domain in which Aquinas makes extensive appeal to privation is his metaphysical account of evil. I won't completely overlook this domain, but for reasons of space I will not explore it directly. Focusing on the putative status of privations as causes, I bracket (i) the topic of God's putative role in bringing about evil as a privation,[[3]](#endnote-3) and (ii) the complexities surrounding the nature of deficient actions and privative effects as pertinent, e.g., to cases of sin.[[4]](#endnote-4) These latter topics are defining but difficult themes in Aquinas's metaphysics of morality the elucidation of which is beyond the scope of my analysis.

**2. Being: Aquinas and the Actuality-Dependence of Privations**

What, more intuitively, can we make of Aquinas's definition of 'privation'? What is interesting about privation from a philosophical point of view?[[5]](#endnote-5)  We can approach an understanding of Aquinas’s take on these questions by way of some initial observations. Our language is replete with expressions signifying the want of some property.  Consider, for instance, the following perfectly ordinary assertions:

(1) Homer is blind [= Homer lacks sight]

(2) Your claim is implausible [= Your claim lacks plausibility]

(3) The bronze is unshaped [= The bronze lacks form]

Expressions of this sort are not merely prevalent.  As Haldane (2007, p. 180) points out, they also regularly inform attempts to make sense of events, processes, the obtaining or non-obtaining of states of affairs, and the existence or non-existence of substances and characteristics. To take just two examples:

(4) Homer stumbled because he is blind.

(5) The smoke alarm failed to go off because there was no battery in it.

In general, predications of privation appear to attribute to a thing a want of some property (as in [1]-[4]) or of some provision (as in [5]). The semantic and explanatory role that predications of privation play distinguishes them from mere negations. Thus, I can say of anything, of a rock as much as of Homer, that it is not sighted, and thus negate the corresponding affirmation ‘*x* is sighted’ as applied to any (unseeing) subject you wish. But clearly, saying that Homer is ‘not-sighted’ carries a distinct significance from saying that a rock is not sighted. For we might say (as, we will see, Aquinas does) that Homer is the kind of thing that *ought* to possess sight. The statement ‘Homer is blind’ uniquely attributes a state of deprivation to Homer, which is not similarly conveyed about a rock in ‘The rock is not-sighted’. Here, then, a predication of privation tracks an ontological distinction between those entities for which sight is natural, and those for which it is not.  On this basis, one can characterize the distinction between negation and privation by saying that negations are oppositions to states of affairs *simpliciter*, whereas privations are oppositions specifically to states of *natural possession*.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The notion of privation as spelled out in this way is importantly—to borrow a term from Haldane (2007)—*actuality-dependent*. The truthmakers of any privation will, on this understanding, include a determinate (actual) subject and a determinate property (e.g. capacity) or provision naturally enjoyed by or present in subjects that belong to a relevant class of entities of which the deprived subject is a member.[[7]](#endnote-7)  They may also include a determinate time or respect in which a subject is lacking something.[[8]](#endnote-8)  The actuality-dependence of privations is a putative feature of privations which Aquinas resolutely affirms. Among multiple texts in which Aquinas emphasizes this characteristic of privations is *Summa theologiae*I q. 11, a. 2, ad 1, where he writes: “No privation takes existence away completely, since, according to the Philosopher [i.e. Aristotle], ‘privation is a negation in a subject’ [*Metaphysics* IV.2, 1004a15].”[[9]](#endnote-9)  For Aquinas, then, privations are not mere absences; they are absences *in*actualities.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Yet isn’t this “rootedness in actuality” somewhat mysterious?  After all, what is it that we refer to when we predicate a privation of something?  One might not wish to go as far as Aquinas in thinking that predications of privation invoke the notion of properties that a subject *ought* to have.  Instead, one might think that in identifying the want of some property in an individual we purport to refer to an absence of some kind and nothing more robust involving the prior assumption of the suitability of a given subject to be receptive to such an absence.[[11]](#endnote-11) But if that is the case, such 'reference' is quite paradoxical from the point of view of a commonsensical, actualist metaphysics. Here, it would seem, our concept of absence goes beyond reality, segregating human discourse, which may make reference to absences, from metaphysical fact, which must strictly involve what is actual. Precisely this worry has been spelled out by David Lewis apropos of the role of privations or absences in causal reasoning:

Absences can be causes, as when an absence of food causes hunger; they can be effects, as when a vaccination prevents one from catching a disease; and they can be among the unactualized alterations of a cause or effect which figure in a pattern of influence.

 [However] absences are not events. They are not *anything*: where an absence is, there is nothing relevant there at all. Absences are bogus entities. Yet the proposition that an absence occurs is not bogus. It is a perfectly good negative existential proposition. And it is by way of just such propositions, and only by way of such propositions, that absences enter into patterns of counterfactual dependence. Therefore, it is safe to say with the vulgar that there are such entities as absences, even though we know better.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The crux of Lewis’ position is stated in the claim that “where an absence is, there is nothing relevant there at all.”[[13]](#endnote-13)  What is meant by this?  Lewis's view assimilates predications of absence and privation to the category of negative existential propositions.  Indeed, Lewis does not explicitly distinguish between predications of absence and predications of privation in the first place. Because he treats the notion of absence simply and univocally as the notion of a lack or of nothingness *per se*, he feels entitled to deny that absences can stand in any genuine or appropriate relation of relevance to actual objects, states, and events. The context of the above passage is Lewis’ late (2000) presentation of his theory of causation in terms of “influence.” On this theory, we might put it, a cause *C* is “relevant” to the occurrence of an effect *E* if and only if *how* alterations in *C* take place is part of a process resulting in *how* alterations in *E* take place.[[14]](#endnote-14) For Lewis, absences are putative causes for which this condition cannot be satisfied, because one can never point to an alteration *of* an absence that could influence alterations among actual events. As the above passage indicates, Lewis views absences rather suspiciously, as familiar denizens of our language that purport to be more than just that. But despite denying to absences a rightful place as genuine causal relata, Lewis does appear to grant here that it may not be *false* to appeal to absences in describing the conditions that surround the occurrence of an effect.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Interestingly, Aquinas can be seen to endorse two parts of Lewis’ view.  In the first place, Aquinas claims that privations (or absences) are not real beings. In his early work, *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas, truncating Aristotle's distinction in *Metaphysics* V.7 among four senses of being, distinguishes between two fundamental senses of ‘being’: being in a categorial or what commentators call an "ontological" sense, which denotes Aristotle’s category of substance or any of his categories of accidents, and another, "logical" sense of 'being' denoting everything which can be truly affirmed or denied.[[16]](#endnote-16)  Absences and privations are treated as belonging to this second sense of being, which “puts nothing forward in reality.”  Thus, at the opening of *On Being and Essence*, Aquinas writes:

‘[B]eing’ is said on its own in two ways: (a) what is divided by the ten genera; (b) what signifies the truth of propositions.  The difference between (a) and (b) is that according to (b), anything of which an affirmative proposition can be formulated can be called a being, even if it puts forward nothing in reality.  According to (b), privations and negations are called beings: for we say that affirmation *is* opposed to negation, and that blindness *is* in the eye.  But according to (a), only what puts forward something in reality can be called a being. Accordingly, blindness and the like are not beings according to (a).[[17]](#endnote-17)

As this text makes clear, Aquinas further agrees with Lewis in thinking not only that privations are not real beings, but also that they can somehow be accepted on semantic or logical grounds: privations are 'beings' insofar as they play a part in the formation of true propositions.  This view seems very close to Lewis’ idea that privations can function intelligibly in causal explanations even if they fail to pick out any genuine or actual causal relationships.

However, despite Aquinas's and Lewis's shared emphasis on the essentially logical role of concepts of privation and on the ontological status of privations as nonbeings, their views in this context differ fundamentally.  Unlike Lewis, Aquinas espouses, first, the view that the logical being of privations is specified in reference to a form inherent in a given *subject.* Further -- and this is the crux of the difference between Aquinas's and Lewis's views --the being of a privation is truly ascribed to a subject only on the basis of the *nonbeing* of a form in that subject, a form to which the privation is conceived as being opposed. Thus, for Homer’s blindness to be (a "logical" truth rooted in the formation of a proposition about Homer) is for Homer’s sight not to be (in the ontological sense, pertaining to what inheres in Homer).[[18]](#endnote-18)

As Aquinas’s distinction between two senses of ‘being’ suggests, predications of being or nonbeing in the logical sense may stand in certain relations of counterfactual dependence with predications of being or nonbeing in the ontological sense.  As Aquinas says in another passage where he develops the distinction,

[W]hatever is said to be a being in the first sense is a being also in the second sense: for whatever has natural existence in the nature of things can be signified to be by an affirmative proposition, e.g. when it is said that a color is, or a man is.  But not everything which is a being in the second sense is a being also in the first sense: for of a privation, such as blindness, we can form an affirmative proposition, saying: 'Blindness is'; but blindness is not something in the nature of things, but is rather a removal of being: and so even privations and negations are said to be beings in the second sense, but not in the first.  And ‘being’ is predicated in different manners according to these two senses: for taken in the first sense it is a substantial predicate, and it pertains to the question ‘What is it?’ [*quid est?*]*,* but taken in the second sense it is an accidental predicate … and it pertains to the question ‘Is there [such and such a thing]?’ [*an est?*].[[19]](#endnote-19)

For Aquinas, questions and statements of the ‘*an est*’, logical sort supervene on questions and statements of the ‘*quid est*’, ontological sort.  This entails the counterfactual dependence of the former on the latter.  Thus, if we follow Gyula Klima's convention[[20]](#endnote-20) and italicize ‘*is*’ and its cognates in order to denote being in the first, ontological sense and to distinguish it from being in the second, logical sense, we could say, e.g., that where there *are* no eyes, there are no attributions of sightedness; where there *is*no wall, there are no attributions of whiteness-in-the-wall, etc.  Or in standard modal parlance: if it were the case that *x* had no eyes, then it would be the case that there could be no attributions of sightedness to *x*; if it were the case that there is no wall, then it would be the case that there would be no attributions of whiteness to the wall. This pattern of dependence is reflected in predications of privation, which Aquinas classes as being of the *an est* variety.  Thus, blindness cannot be predicated of a thing which does not have eyes and is not naturally supposed to see; tears and holes (both privations) can only be attributed to materials of a certain kind, say fabric.[[21]](#endnote-21)  The key point is that no predications of privation can be *true* absent a subject *in which*, or *for which*, they are true.

This indicates that the patterns of dependence that privative concepts can enter into are, for Aquinas, not confined to the role that such concepts play in ordinary inferences about causation and the properties of objects, as when I merely infer on a certain occasion that I am hungry because of an absence of food. Concerning the absence putatively relevant to a person's case of hunger, Aquinas would say that here one must understand what it is for a *subject* to lack a feature or accident, which can be derived only from prior cognition of what it is for thatfeature or accident to inhere in a subject. In other words, to predicate hunger of a human individual is to identify, with respect to that individual, a (temporarily) missing member of the set of necessary and sufficient conditions on being a nourished human being. Hunger and lack of food, then, are not *mere* absences, equal among others in their non-specificity, but are absences *for*a given human being in particular circumstances. This allows us to maintain, plausibly, that *one* subject's hunger is invariably different from *another* subject's hunger -- though both are absences -- where one might be able to spell out the difference in terms of (e.g.) the temporal, environmental, physiological, and psychological properties associated with hunger in each subject.

It is significant in light of these reflections that Aquinas likens knowledge of a privation to knowledge of the definition of a thing, contrasting it with something that is known as a conclusion is known from its premises.[[22]](#endnote-22) Aquinas here seems to be suggesting that knowing how a subject falls short of having actuality in the way characteristic of its species, and what this implies about the nature of the species and of the deprived subject, involves more than knowing how appeals to absence may -- solely, for Lewis -- figure in inferences which display no special regard for what inheres in a subject or what it is to be a subject. By contrast with Lewis's view, for Aquinas it need not be *merely* by entering into propositions involving absences and wants that privations enter into patterns of counterfactual dependence.

The chief lesson concerning the causal role of privation that we glean from this discussion is that, for Aquinas, privations differ from mere absences in virtue of the former's dependence on actuality, a dependence entailing that any causal explanation one could make by appealing to privations must advert to an actual subject in which the privation inheres. This relevance to actuality on the part of privations makes it possible for privations to have a causal role in the first place, a role that Lewis and Aquinas reasonably eschew for mere absences.

**3. Truth: Exemplarity and (Knowledge of) Privation**

For Lewis, there is nothing we can strictly know about absences beyond the fact that they are not actual. Aquinas might seem to skirt this difficulty by suggesting that we can know about privations through observing how privations inhere in a subject. However, Aquinas espouses the view that being is convertible, or coextensive, with truth. This entails that *no truth* can pertain to nonbeing. Can we, therefore, be said to have true representations of privations as nonbeings? Without a proper answer to this question, Aquinas cannot hope to prevent the collapse of privations into mere absences, bringing us around to Lewis's alternative. As I shall try to show in this section, Aquinas upholds a complex theory of truth that allows him to explain our knowledge of privations even while the relation between being and truth entails that no truth can be ascribed to nonbeing. As we will see, Aquinas's account of how privations are known involves a distinct explanation of the causal role of privations in relation to the mind. Let us examine this account more closely.

Earlier, we encountered Aquinas's distinction between being in the 'logical' sense -- being as it attaches to the act of judgment or predication -- and being in the 'ontological' sense -- being as it denotes Aristotle's ten genera. This distinction translates into one between 'logical' truth -- or the 'truth of predication' (*veritas praedicationis*) -- and 'ontological' truth -- or the 'truth of the thing' (*veritas rei*). Aquinas maintains that, fundamentally, truth is in the mind, founded on a conformity or 'adequation' between the way judgments are composed in the mind and the way real-world forms inhere in real-world subjects.[[23]](#endnote-23) When the intellect combines its concepts into a complex judgement that conforms to the structure of the inherence relation holding between an extramental form and an extramental subject, the intellect thereby judges truly, or conforms to the way things are in the world, and it is in this sense, Aquinas says, that truth is 'in' the intellect. Due to this dependence of truth on there being a relation of things to an intellect, Aquinas claims that truth 'in the intellect' is to be regarded as truth in the 'primary' sense.

Aside from the way the ideas of finite intellects conform to the structure of extramental objects, there is another, more foundational sense in which, for Aquinas, truth depends on the relation of extramental beings to an intellect. This is the sense in which each created being corresponds to, and depends for its intelligibility on, the idea of that thing in *God's* mind. In this sense, what it is for each created being to be 'true' is for it to exemplify the idea of that thing as it exists in God's intellect. As Aquinas puts it, "Every thing is true insofar as it has the proper form of its own nature,"[[24]](#endnote-24) a nature represented, and produced, by God. In this, ontological sense of 'true', being, inasmuch as it is being, is something true, and is said to be 'convertible' with truth. It is the correspondence of things to ideas in the mind of God that makes them true.

Thus, for Aquinas, truth in general depends on a correspondence between a thing and an intellect in a twofold manner: insofar as the thing corresponds to an idea in God's intellect, and insofar as an act of judgment on the part of a finite intellect corresponds to the structure of an actual thing (as it is represented by, and dependent on, God's idea of it). Aquinas sums up this general "correspondence" theory of truth in (among other places) *De veritate*: “[1] to every act of true understanding there must correspond some being and likewise [2] to every being there corresponds a true act of understanding.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The double appeal to "correspondence" in this sentence marks an inversion of the way in which Aquinas's correspondence theory holds between God's ideas and beings, on the one hand, and between beings and our ideas, on the other. On Aquinas's view, the truth of our knowledge depends on what we know, on what beings we cognize or what our minds come to be 'adequated' with (a dependence suggested in [2]). On the other hand (as might be taken to be implied by [1]), the truth of things depends on God's knowledge of them, on what ideas exist in God's intellect to which the natures of things correspond. In each of these cases, there is no truth to be had without a relation of being to an intellect. This primary sense in which truth is in, or depends on, an intellect (ours or God's) is illustrated vividly by the implication that if we were not around to know things and if, *per impossibile*, God did not exist but other things still did, there would, on Aquinas's view, be no truth at all.[[26]](#endnote-26) For Aquinas, then, in the absence of any understanding on the part of an intellect, and even in the presence of things, there could, *contra* Lewis, not even exist the 'truth' that nonbeings *aren't* actual.

As noted, it might seem impossible, on Aquinas's correspondence theory of truth, to know anything true about privations, since privations are *non*beings and truth consists in the correspondence between being and understanding. But in fact we can see how Aquinas's theory of truth accommodates the concern that we cannot know privations, as nonbeings. Aquinas would say that since privations are nonbeings, they cannot have truth of being, or ontological truth: they cannot be true insofar as they correspond to a particular idea in God's mind. It follows that they can only be *logically* true.

Still, this explanation of our knowledge of privation cannot be deemed fully adequate. When we purport to say something true involving a privation -- as when we assert, 'Homer is blind' -- we aim to do more than vent the content of our thoughts or perceptions: we aim to express a truth about a state of affairs existing, as Aquinas would put it, "outside the soul." In this connection, privations, like absences in general, present Aquinas with the difficulty of accounting for how we can make true statements about nonbeings (as we purport to do), even though nonbeings are literally unable to affect the mind in any way that would make us directly cognizant of them.

Aquinas is aware of this difficulty. He addresses it in a suggestive and often-overlooked passage from *De veritate*, where he provides a rare elucidation of how it is that we come to know, and make true statements about, nonbeings. In the course of this discussion, he confronts the proposal (*QDV*1.8 ob. 6) that non-existence should be said to be the cause of negative propositions, i.e., that non-existence can cause such propositions to exist in the intellect. Aquinas rejects this possibility, saying:

Non-existing is not the cause of the truth of negative propositions in the sense that it causes them to exist in the intellect [*in intellectu*]. The soul itself does this by conforming [*conformans*] itself to a non-being outside the soul [*extra animam*]. Hence, this non-existing outside the soul is not the efficient cause of truth in the soul, but, as it were, its exemplary cause [... *non est causa efficiens veritatis in anima, sed quasi exemplaris*]. The difficulty is based upon the efficient cause.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Gloria Wasserman, in her compelling treatment of Aquinas's views concerning truths about nonbeings, proposes the following explanation of Aquinas's thinking in this context:

Perhaps what Aquinas meant in saying that certain negations and privations exist *extra animam* is that they are nonbeings to which there corresponds a *fundamentum in re* for the concept that the intellect has in thinking them.  Privations and qualified negations do not have being apart from an intellect, yet the intellect is not responsible for the unity of the intelligible character that privations have.  The *fundamentum in re* for the concept of certain privations and negations is the real existence of subjects that lack certain forms that should be present in them.  The real being that falls short of what it should be acts as the exemplar of the intellect’s combining in one concept negation together with a species.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Wasserman is right in bringing out that the logical truth of privations involves a complex state of affairs. More important, she insightfully accounts for the notion of nonexistence outside the soul by locating it in the "unity" of the representation of privation generated by the mind, for which unity the mind is not itself responsible.

However, scrutinizing Aquinas's precise wording in the passage from *De veritate* under consideration leads me to think that aspects of this interpretation are incomplete or slightly off target. Two important points here concern what Aquinas says about the nature of the 'exemplarity' involved in the cognition of privation and what it is precisely that counts as the exemplar in the present context. An 'exemplar cause', for Aquinas, is a formal cause that is extrinsic to what it forms, such as the blueprint of a house, which specifies the form of a house without inhering in it.[[29]](#endnote-29) As this characterization implies, however, exemplar causality embodies both formal and efficient causality, being, as in the case of the blueprint of a house, a form 'in regard to which' (*ad quam*) something is brought about.[[30]](#endnote-30) Now Aquinas writes, in the previously-quoted *De veritate* passage: "[T]his non-existing outside the soul is not the efficient cause of truth in the soul, but, as it were [*quasi*] its exemplary cause." The two key points regarding this passage that I alluded to above are as follows. First, notice what Aquinas says about the 'exemplarity' of this nonexistence outside the soul: such nonexistence is "as it were" (*quasi*) the exemplar cause. The "*quasi*" qualifier is crucial here. Just as Aquinas denies to nonbeings efficient-causal status, so he denies that nonexistence can truly be an exemplar cause. Privations, he is saying, are *like* exemplar causes, implying, however, that there is no true comparison between them (since privations are not intrinsically a type of cause). Though the significance of this qualification is easy to miss, it is entirely in keeping with Aquinas's uniform disallowance of causality to nonbeing. Second, as we glean from the passage just quoted, what accounts for the truth of the mind's privative concept is not, as Wasserman suggests, "[t]he real being that falls short of what it should be," but rather "non-existing outside the soul." Strictly speaking, it is the absence of due form, i.e. the privation, and not the deprived subject itself, that serves as the exemplar according to Aquinas.

Where does this leave us? What does it mean to assign to 'nonexistence outside the soul' the status of 'quasi-exemplar' of truth in the mind? How does this enable us to understand Aquinas's insistence that in the case of privation the mind conforms itself to nonexistence outside the soul without the truth of the soul's privative concept being efficiently caused by such nonexistence? In grasping what Aquinas has in mind, we might rely on the following intuitive analogy.

Students in beginning art classes are sometimes asked to do an exercise in drawing 'negative space', where they attempt to discern and trace the contours of all the empty spaces intervening between and directly surrounding the "positive" form of a chair. The objective is to avoid drawing the chair along any of its positive contours and instead create a representation that *tells of* the positive shape of the chair through the buildup and juxtaposition of the various traced-out "negative" spaces (Fig. 1).

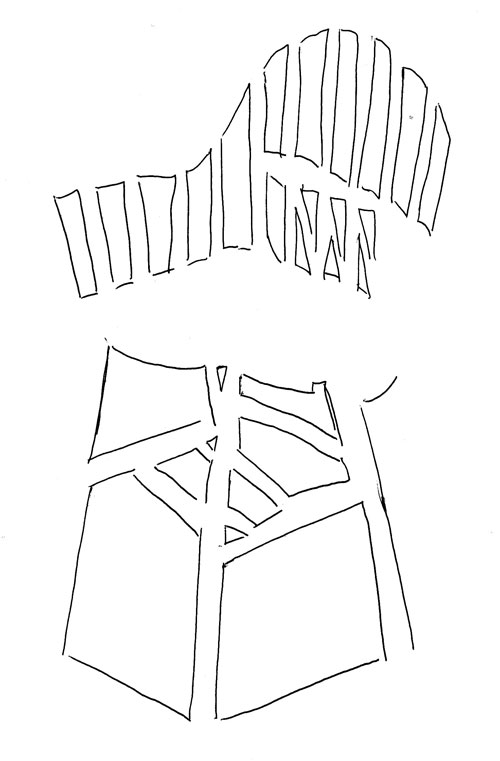


Fig. 1. Negative Space as an Illustration of Quasi-Exemplarity

Now, Aquinas would surely say -- as would we, I presume -- that the shapes delineated here, individually or collectively, correspond to nothing (no object) in reality. The lines in Fig. 1 do not represent the positive outline of any being, but rather delineate the absence of a particular form, namely the original, positive form of the chair. I believe that this illustration reveals just how Aquinas thinks about the logical truth of privation. Privations are nonbeings, absences of due form; however, as absences of *form* they are still spoken of as inhering in a subject. (The notion of nonbeing inhering in an actual subject is not as paradoxical as it may seem; think of a cavity "in" a tooth -- the inherence of a privation in subject is ostensibly something like that.[[31]](#endnote-31)) Privative concepts are efficiently caused by the mind, just as the "negative" image of the chair is purely a product of the artist's perceptions. But privation also corresponds to 'nonexistence outside the soul', having as its material cause the subject in which it inheres. Just so, the artist in our present example produces a representation of nonexistence whose "intelligible character" is owed to the positive form of the chair and is set against the artist's own subjective perceptions, hence "outside" the artist's soul. For Aquinas, then, the mind's alleged "conformity" to privative form apparently consists (in terms of our example) in the coincidence of the perceptions of the mind with the negative shape demarcating the positive form of the actual chair. Thus, to apprehend a privation in a subject is at the same time to apprehend the positive form to which the relevant privation is conceived as being opposed. This is the view underlying (e.g.) the claim that knowledge of Homer's blindness implies knowledge of what it means for Homer to possess sight.

As we have seen, privation plays a unique causal role in relation to the mind's apprehension of the former. Privations fall short of being causes *per se*, but constitute quasi-exemplar causes of the mind's representations. Our negative-space example is also useful for bringing out this causal role. The negative shapes of what we might call the "privative" representation of the chair in Fig. 1 do not amount to anything that can be sat upon, kicked, or moved across the room: Fig. 1 is not a drawing of something that could enter into efficient-causal interactions with anything else. Relatedly, the "privative" image of the chair cannot fulfill the role of a proper exemplar cause, because it is not something that could guide the building of a chair in accordance with its form as a blueprint guides the construction of a house, although the negative shape is telling of a positive form that could. This being so, the "privative" chair significantly does retain one feature of exemplarity: its imitation or modelling of a form -- the positive form of a particular chair -- through its determinate arrangement of shapes, an arrangement produced by the mind (of the artist) but beholden to the real structure of the chair. It is, I believe, this restricted notion of exemplarity that Aquinas has in mind in speaking of the 'quasi-exemplarity' of privations, and which makes clear the character of 'nonexistence outside the soul'.

For reasons stemming from his broader philosophical commitments, then, Aquinas, unlike Lewis, appreciates that privations, as one type of absence, have a "foundation in reality" (*fundamentum in re*) because, as Wasserman explains above and as we have seen in some detail, they are not absences *simpliciter*, but absences in a subject whose existing nature is responsible for the absences' intelligible character. The doctrine that privations have a more robust metaphysical and cognitive significance than they would if they were *-- à la* Lewis -- regarded as mere façons de parlerthus finds its theoretical moorings in Aquinas's doctrine of the convertibility of truth and being. Crucially, this view of the metaphysical character of privations brings along the notion of the "quasi-exemplarity" of privations residing "outside the soul." In this way, the ontological status of privations involves a distinct conception of their causal role, consisting not in their being *causes*, but rather in their being a kind of condition, an integral component of a complex state of affairs, undergirding truth in the mind. Despite the notable divergence of Aquinas's views from Lewis's account of absence and its relation to causality, Aquinas, as we can now appreciate, anticipates Lewis's view that absences cannot be genuine causes. In the next section I examine the form that this rejection of privations as causes takes in the more narrowly circumscribed domain of Aquinas's account of natural change.

**4. Natural Change: Privations, Principles, and Causes**

Let me begin by pointing out how it would have been natural for Aquinas, given his commitments concerning the actuality-dependence of privations canvassed thus far, to uphold the view that privations *are* causes.  Recently, John Haldane has invoked Aquinas’ views on being and privation to argue against Lewis’ views on causation by absence.  Haldane (2007, p. 184) distinguishes three claims relating to the intuition that only what is actual can have effects:

(i) There can be no causing without there being a cause.

(ii) Every cause must reside in, or depend on something actual.

(iii) There are privative causes.

He points out that if (i) and (ii) are interpreted as stating that there cannot be bare privative causes, then they are compatible with (iii), since, as he argues and as we have seen Aquinas maintain, privations are not *bare* nothings but are always lacks or deprivations of things *in* actuality.  Haldane goes on to argue that appeal to the mere notion of absence coupled with an intuitive commitment to the idea that there can be no causality without actuality is insufficient to rule out that privations can be genuine causes.  As he writes,

The dependence of ‘real’ privations upon actualities does not imply … that privations are not themselves causes; and certainly it does not show that privative explanations are translatable without loss of information into solely provisive ones.  Likewise, the fact that privations may only be efficacious in company with some provisive factors does not show that their role is eliminable in favour of more detailed or extensive specifications of the latter.  If, other things being equal, some set of conditions is necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of some effect, then the non-occurrence of that effect due to the non-obtaining of some member of the conditional set is not explicable by further elaboration of provisive conditions that did obtain.  And a counterfactual analysis in which reference to privative absences features essentially is not an alternative to admitting the existence of privative causes, rather it is recognition of them.[[32]](#endnote-32)

So, drawing on Aquinas’ views about the relation between privation and actuality, Haldane concludes that, at the very least, we should be open to regarding privations as themselves effective.  Why, then, does Aquinas himself reject this implication?

Of crucial relevance to this question is Aquinas's distinction between 'principle' (*principium*) and 'cause' (*causa*). In his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas generically draws the distinction in the following way: "[I]t should be noted that, although a principle and a cause are the same in subject, they nevertheless differ in meaning; for the term principle implies an order or sequence, whereas the term cause implies some influence on the being of the thing caused."[[33]](#endnote-33) A major insight stemming from Aquinas's reliance on this distinction in the naturalistic context is that privation plays an essentially 'principiative', rather than causal, role relative to the subject in which it inheres. Privations are initial conditions in a subject that underlie or frame causal processes involved in natural change without themselves acting as causes *per se*. This characterizes the role of privations relative to the subject in which they inhere. But, concerning Haldane's question about the efficiency of privation, Aquinas also holds that privations cannot function in a causal role relative to something other than the subject in which they inhere, i.e., that they cannot serve as efficient causes. For notice that, if causes are chiefly to be regarded as principles rather than as causes (*per se*), then their lack of causal influence in determining which changes a subject might undergo equally prevents them from playing a causal role in determining change relative to something other than the subject. As we are about to see, while privations determine what *kind* of causal relations a subject can enter into -- in virtue of, for example, a subject's blindness -- as principles rather than causes (*per se*) they cannot *bring it about* that the subject enters into those relations. Since privations cannot causally influence the subject in which they inhere, they cannot bring about change in things other than the subject with which the subject causally interacts.

As we see from the previously quoted definition of the distinction between 'principle' and 'cause', these notions may apply to the same subject, but each with its own connotation. In *On the Principles of Nature*, Aquinas applies this difference to the topic of natural change. He writes: “Privation is put among the principles and not among the causes, because privation is that from which generation begins.”[[34]](#endnote-34)  In keeping with his general definitions of 'principle' and 'cause', ‘principles of change’ are distinguished from ‘causes’ in that the former are said by Aquinas to constitute the origin of some type of change, whether or not the effects of the change follow from that origin in the sense in which effects follow from the action of a causal agent.  Aquinas proffers as an example of a ‘principle’ in this sense the transition of something that is black into something that is white. Blackness is not the cause of the qualitative change but is the state whence the change begins.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Aquinas takes there to be three essential “principles” in nature, of which privation is one:

Therefore, there are three principles of nature: namely, matter, form, and privation.  Of these, one—namely form, is that to which generation moves.  The other two have to do with that from which the generation moves.  Hence, matter and privation are the same in subject, but they differ in formula [*ratio*].  For the bronze and the unshaped are the same before the advent of the form, but it is called ‘bronze’ in accordance with one formula and ‘unshaped’ in accordance with another.[[36]](#endnote-36)

According to Aquinas, privation is a principle that is coextensive with matter and is present wherever matter’s taking on one form precludes it from taking on another (of which the said matter is thereby deprived).  However, unlike matter and form, which for Aquinas are principles *per se*, privation is a principle *per accidens.*

In fact, Aquinas's view of the nature of privations in this context is more nuanced than just this characterization implies. For Aquinas allows that privations may be regarded as both principles *and* causes “*per accidens*”:

[T]he first thing from which motion begins cannot be said to be a cause *per se*, even if it is called a principle. And, for this reason, privation is put among the principles and not among the causes, because privation is that from which generation begins. But it can also be called a cause *per accidens*, insofar as it coincides with matter... (3.80-85.)

The “*per accidens*” qualifier implies the same thing in both the cases of causes and principles. As Aquinas illustrates, a privation’s being a cause or a principle *per accidens* can be understood on the model of a builder’s musical abilities being incidental to the builder’s capacity to construct a house, either in principle or when he does so. In this case, musicality coincides “in the same subject” with possession of capacity as a builder.[[37]](#endnote-37) Aquinas thinks that privations coincide with matter in this way: both insofar as matter is implicated in a distinct causal process that carries it from potentially possessing a form to actually possessing it, and insofar as the matter is simply the state from which (but not in virtue of which) such a transition might take place.  In the former case, privation serves as a cause *per accidens*, and in the latter a principle *per accidens*.[[38]](#endnote-38)  This explains why Aquinas is comfortable with simultaneously labelling privations as causes and principles *per accidens*: the upshot of both designations is essentially the same, expressing the role of privation as kind of perpetual precondition or abiding concomitant underlying, but in no way constituting, *per se* causal processes effecting change in nature. Privation does not operate through the kind of agency located in material, efficient, formal, and final causes, but rather ubiquitously constrains—or rather, frames—the outcome of causal processes of the previous kinds.

This view of privations as principles/causes *per accidens* is thus rooted in the unique role that Aquinas envisions for privation in the naturalistic context: privations always underlie and are implicated in change insofar as any causal process brings about the instantiation of one form to the exclusion of another: what 'privation' ubiquitously stands for in such scenarios is the *lack* in the existing form of its (nonexistent) contrary.[[39]](#endnote-39) As Jeffrey Brower persuasively argues, expounding this picture as a key component of the explanation of natural change is the fundamental point of Aquinas's appeal to privation in the naturalistic context.[[40]](#endnote-40) Not only does the notion of privation here elucidate Aquinas's conception of natural change; it also serves to indicate how privations do not, at least by Aquinas's lights, function as efficient causes in their own right.

In this respect, the '*per accidens*' nature of privation in the naturalistic context lines up with Aquinas's hedged conception of privations as 'quasi-exemplar causes' in the context of his views on the logical truth of privation. But it also mirrors Aquinas's account of quasi-causality in cases of efficiency where there is no natural change, as in the case of evil being incidentally brought about by good through a deficient will. In *De malo*, Aquinas succinctly expresses his view of the role of the accidental cause of evil as follows: the "will causes evil by accident when the will is borne to something that is good in some respect but is linked to something that is unqualifiedly evil [i.e., insofar as it involves the failure to reach the perfection to which a thing or person is ordained]."[[41]](#endnote-41) For Aquinas, privation cannot be the efficient cause of an agent's bringing about evil, because we can only directly intend the good. The notion of privation becomes morally relevant in denoting an underlying state of deficiency of the will that is manifested in, but does not strictly cause, the agent's wayward behavior. The agent's will, the bearer of moral responsibility, suffers a contingent lack as the agent's intentions are diverted toward to the pursuit of something apparently good but rationally sub-optimal. Privation, then, does not explain the agent's (misdirected) pursuit of the good; it is needed to characterize the underlying change in the agent's moral condition as her actions are diverted from the morally and rationally proper choice.

As we see in the naturalistic context -- and as is correspondingly evident in the moral sphere, though in somewhat different terms -- Aquinas’s view of privations as principles/causes *per accidens* suggests a deeper relationship between privation and causation than Haldane countenances in simply proposing that privations can be causes.  Even prior to citing certain kinds of absences as reasons for a particular event (say, Homer’s stumbling because of his blindness), we need to possess the concept of what properly belongs to a thing of a given nature (or, in the case of human agency, what properly belongs to a the actions of a subject insofar as that subject strives toward the good). In a general vein, Homer and a mole may both be deprived of sight, but only in Homer’s case would we view blindness as relevant to events in which Homer fails to perform certain functions or enjoy certain experiences natural for ordinary, sighted members of his species.  What is needed, therefore, is a sense of the conditions that must be fulfilled, or must fail to be fulfilled, in order for certain causal processes to occur (or not to occur).[[42]](#endnote-42)  Granted a conception of those conditions—established by a conception of the kinds of privations a subject or its actions might naturally undergo—there is no need to attribute (counterintuitively) a distinct form of causal agency to privations, i.e. to countenance the notion of an intrinsic (as opposed to accidental or 'quasi') “privative causality.” It was not by a full-blown agency possessed by Homer’s blindness that Homer stumbled, for it does not follow from *blindness*, as I have said, that Homer (or anyone) might stumble. Instead, Homer’s blindness excludes his sightedness and all the capacities that accrue to those in whom sight inheres. So, while it was (e.g.) the movement of his feet and the boulder in front of him that (efficiently) caused Homer to stumble, these causes were effective *while* Homer’s blindness excluded the form of sight; they were not effective *in concert*with his blindness, as if the latter were another efficient causal factor of the same nature as the former causes.

**5. Conclusion**

Aquinas, I have argued, sees privation as functioning in explanations of natural change and causation as an underlying condition (principle), which things possess as they causally interact with other things, rather than as some form of causal agency in its own right.  Together with his views on privation in relation to his doctrine of the convertibility of truth and being, Aquinas’s treatment of privation as a principle of natural change and as a quasi-exemplar of truth in the mind suggests that accounting for being as intelligible requires a more complex metaphysical framework than can be based on a simple inventory of positively existing entities and their causal relationships. This is true even while privations do not themselves augment or stand in an extrinsic relation to real, positively existing beings. For Aquinas, the carves in reality (privations) are just as important as the joints (properly individuated subjects and their causal interactions). This, I submit, is a philosophical perspective worth recognizing, regardless of our metaphysical ideology.[[43]](#endnote-43)

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1. I use the following abbreviations for works of Aquinas cited in this paper: *DEE* = *De ente et essentia* (*On Being and Essence*); *DPN* = *De principiis naturae* (*On the Principles of Nature*); *In Sent* = *Scriptum super libros Sententarium* (*Commentary on the Sentences*); *In Meta* = *Sententia super Metaphysicam* (*Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*); *In Phys = In octo libros Physicorum expositio* (*Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*); *QDV* = *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (*On Truth*); *QDM* = *Quaestiones disputatae De malo* (*Disputed Questions on Evil*)*;*  *SCG* = *Summa contra Gentiles*; *ST* = *Summa theologiae.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To better bring out the relevance of Lewis’ view to the theme of this paper I am here glossing over the crucial fact, to be discussed below, that Lewis does not (as do Haldane and Aquinas) single out privations as a particular *subclass* of absences.  He appears to treat absences as all of a kind. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Brock (2018, p. 33) provides a helpful summary of Aquinas's view of God's causal role with respect to evil: "God does not directly cause evil.  What he directly causes is an unequal distribution of good. This brings evil with it, because some good things are able to fail and sometimes do fail.  God does indirectly intend and cause corruptions of things, but he in no way causes sins. He wills neither the occurrence nor the non-occurrence of the sins that occur, but only his own permission of their occurrence. He does so intending to bring good from them. He is not an indirect cause of them, since he provides what is needed to prevent them, though in a measured way, as his justice and wisdom dictate. Still, he is a cause of whatever there is of being and act in sin." [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 'Sin' (*peccatum*), for Aquinas, denotes any lack of due order, and is an extension of the concept of 'evil' (*malum*). On Aquinas's privation account of evil (radically distilled), evil causes privation by inhibiting a thing's perfection, through a deficiency of the thing's will (see *QDM* q. 1, a. 3). The role of privation in Aquinas's account of evil, I should emphasize, is continuous with his accounts of privation in the contexts we will consider but is considerably more complex. It is for this reason alone that I choose not to delve into it here. For a helpful recent account of evil and privation in Aquinas, see Still and Dahl (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There is not a great deal of targeted and sustained research on the notion of privation, not only with respect to philosophers like Aquinas, but generally. However, see Newlands (2014) for an excellent recent discussion of the notion of privation in Leibniz, largely in connection with the views of Aquinas. For two contemporary accounts of the logic and semantics of privation, see Horn (1989) and Gerogiorgakis (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This is how Aristotle characterizes the notion of ‘privation’ in *Metaphysics*IX, 1046a32-35: “Privation has several senses; for it means that which has not a certain quality and that which might naturally have it but has not got it, either in general or when it might naturally have it, and either in some particular way, e.g. when it *completely* fails to have it, or when it in any degree fails to have it.  And in cases of things which naturally have a quality but lose it by violence, we say they suffer privation” (Aristotle, 1984, vol. 2, p. 1652). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This dependence of privation, in contrast with negation, on a determinate (type of) subject is affirmed in numerous places by Aristotle (see, e.g., *Prior Analytics*, 51bs8-32 (Aristotle, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 82-3)): "[T]he expressions 'it is a not-white log' and 'it is not a white log' do not belong at the same time. For if it is a not-white log, it must be a log: but that which is not a white log need not be a log at all.") This classical view in fact reflects a currently acknowledged central feature of the semantics of privations. Cf. Tsohatzidis (1995, p. 86): “The distinctive purpose that *lack*-sentences are designed to serve is ... twofold: on the one hand, to suggest that the entities referred to by their subject terms may be viewed as belonging to certain not explicitly mentioned *categories*, and, on the other, to suggest that the *prototypical* members of those not explicitly mentioned categories do possess the properties that the entities in question are being described as not possessing ....” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Haldane (2007, p. 185) notes that, unlike mere negations, privations have more or less determinate individuation conditions and can be compared: “actuality-dependent privations [are] ones whose truth-makers include actual entities.  In the case of [privations] there are derivative identity and individuation conditions as determinate or indeterminate as those of the actualities upon which they depend. (Here ‘actualities’ covers whatever is admitted to positive ontology: substances, properties, events, processes, relations, or whatever.)  So, for example, a hole in a piece of fabric may differ slightly in size or contour from another adjacent to (though evidently not contiguous with) it.  Likewise, two omissions may differ slightly in their spatial, temporal, and/or functional or intentional features.”  [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Aquinas, 2014, p. 113.  In addition to the pivotal concept of actuality-dependence, there is another feature that plays a key role in Aquinas’ thinking about privations, namely, what Aristotle in the passage in n. 6 above indicates to be their susceptibility to variations of degree.  In contrast to attributions of blindness to a person, which generally presuppose complete loss of sight (though cf. *In Meta* IX.2.1785, for the view that blindness may come in degrees), value-based attributions like goodness or evil, or justice or injustice, admit of degree and comparison. In this vein, Aquinas distinguishes between “complete” and “partial” privation (*ST*I-II q. 18, a. 8, ad 1).  Aquinas’ treatment of evil as a partial privation expresses one of his most crucial motivations for his doctrine of privation generally, namely, to impugn the status of evil as a positive reality and as something that can completely nullify the goodness of being. While my emphasis in this paper is on Aquinas’ views on privation in relation to his doctrine of the convertibility of truth and being and his views on the nature of change, it must be acknowledged that another key dimension to his thought on privation which runs parallel to the former theme is his affirmation of the convertibility of being and the good (see, e.g., *ST* I q. 5, a. 3, reply).  Because Aquinas wants to establish that being is coextensive with goodness, he is concerned to show that evil cannot be a real form inhering in real substances.  Yet the fact that evil is partial privation can explain (i) how the intellect can *predicate* badness to acts and events (for reasons of a sort we will encounter below); (ii) how such predications can be true and dependent on facts about actually existing objects; and (iii) how no attribution of evil to a thing, action, or event can imply the complete nullification of goodness in being [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Haldane, 2007, p. 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Or, following Lakoff (1987, ch. 8), one might maintain that it is incorrect to hold (with the likes of Aquinas) that predications of privation pick out a genuine relation between language and the world, or how the world is genuinely supposed to be, but rather that they reveal a commitment to a certain folk theory of what the world is like.  This stance resembles the view of Lewis about to be surveyed. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Lewis, 2000, pp. 195-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Lewis, 2004, pp. 281; 283: “[W]henever any effect is caused by an absence of anything, we have the problem of the missing relatum. (And likewise whenever anything causes an absence.) ... A relation of counterfactual dependence is still a relation, a relation needs relata, and absences still fail to provide the needed relata.  The counterfactual analysis escapes the problem because, when the relata go missing, it can do without any causal relation at all.”  As we will see below, Aquinas too believes that a privation cannot be one of the relata of a causal relation.  However, there is, in contrast to Lewis, a more robust sense in which Aquinas appreciates the “relevance” of privations to actually existing objects. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Lewis, 2000, pp. 187-88.  This is just a summary statement of Lewis’ position; the details of his theory are more nuanced and are mostly inessential to the main points here under discussion. Lewis’ theory of causation as influence—which is meant to replace his older counterfactual analysis of causation—arises in great part out of worries concerning the implications for an analysis of causation of treating absences as causes.  (Cf. Nolan’s (2005) helpful synopsis of Lewis’ views on causation.)  [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In what sense could one *truthfully*appeal to an absence in giving a causal explanation of some state of affairs?  Lewis does not spell this out. One can surmise, however, what he has in mind.  As we see from the above passage, he affirms that absences “can be causes,” implying that it is *true* to regard them as causes.  Yet he also maintains that this view is fundamentally *incorrect*, there being no truthmakers for or consisting in absences to appeal to in statements about one thing’s causing another.  It would seem, then, that Lewis is operating with a pragmatic sense of ‘truth’ in this context, which might be illustrated by a claim such as ‘Donald Trump is no Abraham Lincoln’: one might take this statement to be true (in a pragmatic—no less than literal—sense), but surely this ‘explanation’ of his personality traits and behavior is not strictly *relevant* to any of the causal factors influencing Trump’s behavior and the expression of his public persona.  Lewis, then, appears to be suggesting that when one cites absences as part of a causal explanation of a state of affairs, what one says will strictly speaking be false insofar as no such absence could have positively influenced the state of affairs, but nevertheless one’s remark can be seen as*true to* the reality constituted by the state of affairs insofar as it is consistent with it and is intended to induce certain beliefs about and related to it.  For a similar account that denies (genuine) causation by absence but ascribes to absences a legitimate and natural role in “causal explanation,” see Beebee (2004). For an explanation of our intuitive inclination to speak of absences as causes and effects that locates this (mistaken) tendency in the epistemic similarity between genuine causation (between positive events) and causation by absence, see Dowe (2000, ch. 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Aristotle distinguishes between being taken as (1) accidental being (which Aquinas leaves out in his account of being in *On Being and Essence*), (2) being of the categories (which Aquinas is picking out in the above passage), (3) being as the truth of a proposition (which Aquinas is here contrasting with categorial being), and (4) being as divided between act and potency. Although Aquinas does not treat (4) in this context, elsewhere he affirms that act and potency divide categorial being: "in the case of all of the foregoing terms which signify the ten predicaments [i.e. categories], something is said to be so actually and something else potentially; and from this it follows that each predicament is divided by actuality and potentiality" (*In Meta* V.9.897; Aquinas, 1995, p. 323). And later Aquinas writes: "being as divided by the ten categories signifies the very nature of the ten categories insofar as they are actual or potential" (*In Meta* X.3.1982; Aquinas, 1995, p. 649). Notice, however, that the first sense of 'being' that Aquinas introduces in *On Being and Essence* does not mention actuality. The reason for this is that Aquinas wants here to emphasize that being in the first sense does not signify actuality but essence. This point is reflected in a threefold distinction Aquinas presents elsewhere between senses of '*esse*', which respectively denote (i) the nature of a thing, (ii) the 'act' of an essence, and (iii) what signifies the truth of the composition in propositions, as represented in the copula (see *In Sent. I* d. 33, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1). The relevant point is that in *On Being and Essence* Aquinas is not maintaining that absences and privations lack actual existence; what's asserted, rather, is that privations have no essence. Hence, they are neither actually existing entities nor potentially existing entities. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for spelling out and encouraging me to clarify this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *DEE*1.4-13 (Aquinas, 2014, p. 14). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Klima (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 2 *SN*d. 34, q. 1, a. 1; quoted in Klima (1996, p. 92). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Klima (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Haldane, 2007, pp. 184-85. I should note that accidental privation is dependent not only on substances (as are all accidents), but on positive accidental privation.  Thus, not only would the absence of a wall entail the absence of whiteness-in-the wall; the latter would be entailed by the existence of blackness-in-the-wall. It is also worth noting here that Aquinas’ distinction between *quid est* and *an est* predication can be compared helpfully to what Geach (1969, p. 65) characterizes as Frege’s distinction between different senses in which existence may be predicated: “Existence in the sense of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) is several times over emphatically distinguished in Frege’s works from the existence expressed by ‘there is a so-and-so’ (*es gibt ein --*).”  [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See *SCG* I, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The intellect "asserts truth by composing and dividing, for in every judgment some form signified by the predicate is either applied to the thing signified by the subject, or removed from it" (*ST* I q.16, a. 2; as quoted in Wood (2013), p. 24). For a central statement of this view in Aquinas, see *QDV* 1.1-2. For two excellent accounts of Aquinas on truth, see Wood (2013) and the classic and more in-depth Wippel (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *ST* I q. 16, a. 2; as quoted in Wood, 2013, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *QDV* 1.2. ad.1; as quoted in Wasserman, 2007, p. 10 (bracketed numbers mine). *Prima facie*, this statement might look false.  Surely there are beings -- some deep-sea creatures, say -- whose act of being does not correspond to anyone's particular act of understanding.  But, as we have seen, what Aquinas has in mind in making a statement such as the one above is that each being imitates a form in the divine intellect and that, insofar as the being in question imitates the divine intellect, it in turn is something that the human intellect can imitate. See *QDV* 1.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See *QDV* 1.2. I owe this observation to an anonymous referee. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *QDV* 1.8 (Aquinas, 1952). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Wasserman, 2007, p. 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. **"** In another sense cause means the form and pattern of a thing, i.e., its exemplar. This is the formal cause, which is related to a thing in two ways.In one way it stands as the intrinsic form of a thing, and in this respect it is called the formal principle of a thing. In another way it stands as something which is extrinsic to a thing but is that in likeness to which it is made, and in this respect an exemplar is also called a thing's form" (*In Meta* V.2.764 [Aquinas, 1995, p. 282]). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See *QDV* 3.1. For a highly informative and carefully researched account of Aquinas's view of ideas as exemplar causes, see Doolan (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. I borrow the tooth analogy from Still and Dahl (2016, p. 148). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Haldane, 2007, p. 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *In Meta* V.1.751 (Aquinas, 1995, p. 277). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *DPN* 3.80-85 (Aquinas, 2014, p. 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *DPN* 3.72-75 (Aquinas, 2014, p. 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *DPN* 2.1-8 (Aquinas, 2014, p. 3-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Cf. *DPN* 2.9-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Cf. *DPN* 2.1-17; 2.67-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Tellingly, Aquinas speaks of change in terms of both forms and contraries. See *In Phys* 1.10, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Brower, 2014, p. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *QDM* q,1, a. 3, c; as quoted in Still and Dahl (2016, p. 152). Concerning the bracketed bit, see Still and Dahl (2016, p. 150). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. In more recent work, Haldane (2011) appears to concede this point, while holding onto the view, which I believe Aquinas does not himself uphold, that there are genuinely ‘privative causes’. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the JHU Hammond Society. I am thankful to participants at this meeting for their insightful comments. I am especially grateful to Raffi Krut-Landau, Jeffrey McDonough, Stephen Ogden, and an anonymous reviewer for *EJP* for their most helpful feedback. I would also like to acknowledge Gloria (Wasserman) Frost and Gyula Klima, whose scholarly example and encouragement greatly influenced this paper. Finally, I'd like to dedicate the paper to Raffi Krut-Landau and Marie Barnett, for their valued friendship and on the joyous occasion of their marriage. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)