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# AQUINAS' *De malo* AND THE OSTENSIBLY PROBLEMATIC STATUS OF NATURAL EVIL AS PRIVATION

Iñaki Xavier Larrauri Pertierra

## 1. Introduction

The concept of evil as privation has been a popular metaphysical account of the nature of evil within the Catholic Church for centuries, with many theologians espousing it as a satisfactory explanation for moral evil. Its similar role in the case of natural evil, however, has been less earnestly adopted, and for various reasons; initially, the contentions centred around human pain and suffering, but more contemporary debates have extended the picture to cover general creaturely suffering within an evolutionary context. The main aim for this paper is to address these issues and give a logical justification for considering natural evils as privative in character – the specific issues explored here are general pain and its applications in physical disease, depression, and creaturely suffering by genetic mutation. Although, before beginning this task, we must orient ourselves properly by first outlining a Thomistic account of privative evil.

## 2. Privative Evil

### 2.1 Outlining the Thomistic Account

Evil, for Aquinas, is not an entity that attains substance or being, but a privation of what has/is being/a good.<sup>1</sup> For evil to be privative, and not just merely negative, then it must be a negation of a good that naturally belongs to an entity, meaning that any evil for a being would be a denial for that being of what is due its perfection.<sup>2</sup> Now, this does not mean that evil does not exist *at all*, just that it does not have any existence independent of a good it deprives, implying that evil is parasitical on the good.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, what is due some being for its perfection hinges upon the very essence/nature of that being itself. Therefore, different beings possess different requirements for what constitutes their natural state of perfection, which signifies the very term “good” as logically attributive; this concept, for Lee,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *De malo*, trans. Richard Regan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), Q. 1, art. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 2, co. See also, Glenn B. Siniscalchi, “Thomas Aquinas, Natural Evil, and ‘Outside the Church, No Salvation,’” *The Heythrop Journal* 56, no. 1 (2015): 77, <https://doi-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/10.1111/heyj.12145>.

<sup>3</sup> Siniscalchi, “Thomas Aquinas, Natural Evil,” 77.

does not signify some distinctive property, but the possession of whatever properties a thing (or act) must have to fulfill the standards appropriate to the kind of thing (or act) it is. In other words, to say that something is good is to say that it fulfills its possibilities or potentialities, and since the potentialities of a thing (or act) vary according to the kind of thing (or act) it is, the word “good” shifts its meaning in proportion to the kind of thing [or act] it is predicated of.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, all goods of creaturely perfection can only be considered as good, in the sense of “being” appropriate here, in relation to God, the highest good and the primary cause of all goodness.

Lee gives a good account of the logic behind the idea of evil as privation, in that the idea

is entailed by the theistic position that all positive reality is God and what he creates, . . . [such that if] evil were something positive, then . . . evil [would be] immediately caused by God . . . or that there is some being in the universe which is not immediately caused by God.<sup>5</sup>

Positive evil, then, is a logically incompatible concept with God as fully good and the cause of every being. Nevertheless, for Lee, “[p]ositive entities can also be called “evil” because they cause evil (as when we say that this bacterium is evil though it is good in itself).”<sup>6</sup> This is not meant to insinuate some fundamental equivocality, whereby good and evil can be predicated of a substance at the same time and sense, but that an act or natural process can be considered good or evil depending on the particular cause-effect relation to which one is referring. In other words, for Aquinas, ‘nothing prevents something absolutely good from being an evil for something else’.<sup>7</sup> This is why a bacterium causing sickness in a host *directly* causes the sustainment of its own existence (a good for the bacterium) through its acquisition of food and its concurrent metabolism, both of which might *accidentally* cause the host’s being sick (a privation of normal biochemical equilibrium for the host).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Patrick Lee, “Evil as Such Is a Privation: A Reply to John Crosby,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2007): 487, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq200781324>.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, “Evil as Such Is a Privation,” 470.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, 471.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 1, ad. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Siniscalchi touches on something similar when he comments that ‘[w]hat is good for higher forms of life is evil for lower forms.’ Siniscalchi, “Thomas Aquinas, Natural Evil,” 77.

That evil is an *accidental* effect of some good cause can be extended to the conclusion that God “causes” evil in an indirect and accidental way;<sup>9</sup> this is what is meant by evil occurring *per accidens*, or that God permits evil but does not will or intend it.<sup>10</sup> It does not even logically follow for evil, that which is opposed to the good as a general negation, to be caused by God in any direct sense, for if He is full goodness and Being,<sup>11</sup> and if His creative capacity stems solely from His own nature, then anything caused by him would inevitably be associated with Being and the good to some degree, both of which are fundamentally not of evil as negation and non-Being. This does not undermine God’s omnipotence, though, for the very notion of His potency/power is a proper attribute only to the causal powers of His Being, given that if God does not cause outside of his own power, and that his power relates to his nature, then God being *all*-powerful simply means the sequestering of the term “*all*” to what is within the realm of Being, not the non-Being of evil. Although non-Being is outside the purview of God’s nature and direct control, this does not mean He cannot influence the evils of the world, for He can interact with them indirectly, in an accidental way, through the direct willing of the good.

What has been given thus far, is a specific sense of an ontological/metaphysical account of evil as privative non-being. This sense can be better appreciated through the view of the privative theory of evil as not merely implying deprivation in a simple physical manner, as if what can be considered as evil is a mere material lacking. Of course, physical paucity can interfere with the normal biological functioning that is a good, but if we are to take evils as privations of particular goods,<sup>12</sup> and that such evils corrupt such goods ‘by nonactivity (i.e., by deficiency of active power),’<sup>13</sup> then even the introduction of toxic substances, which is not a material paucity, and insofar as it disrupts normal biological activity, would be considered an evil for that biological agent. What is apparent here, then, is a more accurate conception of privation as functional paucity, if that function belongs naturally to the being in question. Moreover, if we take both natural physicality and functionality as facets of the set of goods deprivable by privative evils, then we can begin to grasp the richness of the Thomistic picture of metaphysics and ontology painted by Aquinas’ understanding of good and evil.

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<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 3.

<sup>10</sup> For Siniscalchi, ‘[a]s a result of God’s will in creating good things, evil occurs *per accidens*. Evil may serve as the *occasion* for good, but it never serves as the *cause* of subsequent good.’ Siniscalchi, “Thomas Aquinas, Natural Evil,” 77.

<sup>11</sup> Being – capital “B” – refers to that which is properly of God, while being, or beings – lowercase “b” – refer to that which is properly of created reality.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 1, co.

<sup>13</sup> Aquinas, Q. 1, art. 1, ad. 8.

## 2.2 Remarks on the Purpose of Privative Evil

Yet, the questions of why there is evil, and why God has to permit it in the first place, are still left unanswered. Moral evils can be explained through the realities of sin and the deprived will of free agents, but the character of natural evil, which Siniscalchi describes as ‘a failure, defect or absence in the structure or process of a thing’,<sup>14</sup> poses problems due to the seeming absence of any freely willed act. The Thomistic account gets around this by explaining natural evil as punishment from God, thus inextricably linking it with moral fault; this punishment is, according to Aquinas, clearly introduced ‘in order that moral wrong should be avoided either by the one who is punished, or at least by others’.<sup>15</sup> Many theologians following suit have extended this argument to a more general application, such as with Echavarria when he comments that God ‘only “permits” evil in order to achieve greater goods or to avoid greater evils that might follow from its non-permission.’<sup>16</sup> Thus, according to Echavarria, God’s permission of evil ties up ‘with the total perfection of the universe’,<sup>17</sup> such that we can classify natural evils as those ‘without which the world would be less perfect, . . . [and] from which a greater perfection can be obtained than the perfection they remove.’<sup>18</sup> This is most likely what Echavarria meant when he noted that the universe could not have been created in any other way except with its associated evils.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, according to him, this interpretation of natural evil as divine punishment, occasioned by the sins of man, does not belong singularly to a philosophical jurisdiction, ‘but is a matter of faith.’<sup>20</sup>

There is an interesting link between Echavarria’s account of natural evil and the privative theory of evil, since the former justifies privation based on the belief that it is part of God’s plan for the universe’s perfection, while the latter explains privation as damage/harm incurred when greater goods are deprived in tandem with the propagation of lesser ones. This latter explanation follows from the abovementioned case of the disease-causing bacterium being a good and a natural evil in two different senses – the greater good, in this case, being the normal biochemical equilibrium that is deprived while the lesser good of the non-normal state for the biological host obtains. To illustrate further, for example, if normal, natural functioning is a

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<sup>14</sup> Siniscalchi, “Thomas Aquinas, Natural Evil,” 77.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 5, co.

<sup>16</sup> Agustin Echavarria, “Thomas Aquinas and the Modern and Contemporary Debate on Evil,” *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1054 (2013): 737, <https://doi-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/10.1111/nbfr.12034>.

<sup>17</sup> Echavarria, “Debate on Evil,” 739.

<sup>18</sup> Echavarria, 740.

<sup>19</sup> ‘God could not have created the material world – the lowest degree [of good] – without producing *per accidens* the evil entailed by such corruption.’ Echavarria, 749.

<sup>20</sup> Echavarria, 749.

greater good than just mere functioning, then we can see how continuing to walk on a broken leg would be damaging: the privation of normal bone integrity does not disallow a creature to try and walk on its broken leg. The damage is done when the good of the creature's mere act of walking is unattended by the greater good of that creature walking while the leg bone is intact. This lack of normalcy in the order of its movement can then lead to subsequently more damage if the leg is not treated. Of course, whether this privation completely nullifies the chance for universal perfection, by not potentiating the attainment of goods greater than those so deprived, is, as mentioned above, a matter of faith.

### 3. Whether Pain is a Privative Evil

Nevertheless, many philosophers find this account of natural evil faulty, especially regarding the experiences of pain and suffering. Their arguments centre around the non-intuitiveness of associating suffering with privation, given the phenomena of pain as something experientially real and affectively substantial. We will see further on that these criticisms argue from a fundamentally different phenomenological stance than Aquinas' metaphysical one, and this point demands analysis if the claim of pain/suffering as related somehow to natural evil as privation is to hold. First, though, we must come to terms with the conceptualisation of pain in this privative account of evil; an interesting debate between Lee and Crosby<sup>21</sup> will help with this task.

#### 3.1 Pain as a Functional Facet of the Good

Lee notes that 'pain . . . is not in itself evil but is the perception of and reaction to what is evil.'<sup>22</sup> When someone feels pain in a normal context, they are signalled to a harm or a possibility of harm that they ought to avoid. Thus, when pain functions in such a way as to warn beings of danger, it is part of that being's natural signal-response system that is oriented towards keeping said being alive. As such, pain functioning as part of this system is, for Lee,

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<sup>21</sup> Lee, "Evil as Such Is a Privation," 469-88. See also, John F. Crosby, "Doubts About the Privation Theory That Will Not Go Away: Response to Patrick Lee," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2007): 489-505, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq200781325>. Although not referenced here, to appreciate the full debate, see John F. Crosby, "Is All Evil Really Only Privation?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 75 (2001): 197-209, [https://www-pdcnet-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/collection/authorizedshow?id=acpaproc\\_2001\\_0075\\_0000\\_0197\\_0210&pdfname=acpaproc\\_2001\\_0075\\_0000\\_0201\\_0213.pdf&file\\_type=pdf](https://www-pdcnet-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/collection/authorizedshow?id=acpaproc_2001_0075_0000_0197_0210&pdfname=acpaproc_2001_0075_0000_0201_0213.pdf&file_type=pdf); as well as Patrick Lee, "The Goodness of Creation, Evil, and Christian Teaching," *The Thomist* 64, no. 2 (2000): 239-69, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2000.0014>.

<sup>22</sup> Lee, "Evil as Such Is a Privation," 473.

good.<sup>23</sup> Otherwise, if that orientation is lacking – as when one experiences phantom pains, or pains that do not signal entities that bring harm to one’s body – then the pain is disordered and is called evil in reference to the deprivation of normal orientation that obtains within the signal-response system. In effect, we may characterise pain response, in general, as a lesser good naturally in service towards the greater good of survival, the latter being what is more readily deprivable in the case of disordered/phantom pains.

For Lee, ‘pains are sensory representations of tissue damage, that is, non-conceptual representations . . . of some damage or injury, or imminent danger or injury, in some part of one’s body.’<sup>24</sup> The conceptual, affective dimension of pain sensation is where the experience of pain as damaging, harmful, and evil subsists in; according to Lee, the phenomenological sense of pain as bad is ‘the negative reaction to the perceived damage . . . [and] is part of the healthy functioning of an animal when it is injured’.<sup>25</sup> From this analysis, we can conclude that the very property of the pain response that helps us determine actual or potential harm to one’s self – the property of its negative affective component – is the very phenomenon that is usually referenced when people believe pain as such to be evil due to its repugnant quality.

### 3.2 The Case for “Contentful” Evil

Now, Crosby takes issue with this account, but to effectively understand and address it, we must first note his criticism regarding Lee’s ideas of good and evil. In Crosby’s interpretation, Lee understands that

[t]he common note of good is not some definite quality . . . but something “formal”, . . . for [Lee’s idea of] good expresses the eminent fulfillment of whatever norm is relevant to the being that is called “good” (or “real,” or “authentic”).<sup>26</sup>

This is consistent with Aquinas’ account of the good, for ‘things are more or less evil insofar as they are more or less deprived of good, not indeed efficaciously but formally’;<sup>27</sup> this formal sense of evil is the very corruption/privation of good as formal, which is where a being’s perfection/fulfilment subsists in,<sup>28</sup> so we can see why Lee and Crosby would agree on this

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<sup>23</sup> ‘[T]he function of [a being] which is naturally oriented to the survival and flourishing of the [being] must be, just insofar as it does contribute to that end, good.’ Lee, 476.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, 478.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, 478-9.

<sup>26</sup> Crosby, “Doubts About the Privation Theory,” 491.

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 1, ad. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, Q. 1, art. 2, co.

matter. However, Crosby asserts that “contentful good” is a ‘more fundamental kind of good that is not at all formal . . . and does not lend support to the privation theory’, and where good’s contentful sense does not presuppose ‘the distinction between an individual and its kind’.<sup>29</sup> He even goes on to say that when ‘we speak of a good person, . . . we have gone over to the contentful sense of good’,<sup>30</sup> which is distinct from good as predicable of workers, translators, professors, and so on.

### 3.3 Weaknesses in the Contentful Account of Evil (General Remarks)

Crosby’s contention seems to centre around his characterisation of formal good as solely accounting for goods that living beings are not initially born with but must undergo some process of fulfilment to attain; for Crosby, the fact that such beings can already possess goods belonging to their kind, such as when we talk about the good or dignity of a human life, without having to work for their fulfilment already signifies error in the formal account of good. However, Crosby’s distinction between formal and contentful good is impoverished, in part because it is based on a misrepresentation of privation theory when he considers dignity, and other naturally bestowed “contentful” goods by virtue of type membership alone, as un-deprivable.<sup>31</sup> It seems that, for Crosby, they are so because their non-being would be only possible through the non-existence of said beings, and ‘[s]ince existence does not belong to the nature of any contingent being, no . . . annihilated being loses something that belongs to its nature . . . [or] suffers a privation.’<sup>32</sup>

Replacing non-existence with death leads to the same conclusion, since the death of a living being leads to a fundamental change in form from the living being in possession of a particular nature to another being in possession of a non-living form – either as a corpse or as dispersed matter/energy. However, the death of a living being is such a privation because what is lost is a necessary facet of the nature of all living things, namely, their life. Even if the actual living form/nature no longer persists, to regard the situation as one wherein, for Crosby, ‘the condition for the possibility of privation seems to be eliminated’<sup>33</sup> is to relegate ontology to a purely physicalist interpretation; the condition still persists since privation is always a relational attribution, such that a deprived good need not necessarily only reference a physically extant being, but can also just simply point to the very being itself (in an abstract, memorial, and/or

<sup>29</sup> Crosby, “Doubts About the Privation Theory,” 492.

<sup>30</sup> Crosby, 494.

<sup>31</sup> Crosby, 492, 496-7.

<sup>32</sup> Crosby, 497.

<sup>33</sup> Crosby, 496.

temporal mode) that is being excluded by death and/or annihilation. Depending on where specifically one would place the exact locus of this privative evil, one could thus make a move from phrases like, “privation of a being’s health”, to, “privation of a being from a world”. Even Aquinas remarks on something similar when he noted that death is the ever-present *accidental* effect of Nature’s striving for the good of things emerging in being, since ‘Nature as a whole indeed causes things to come to be . . . and things to pass away because things cannot come to be without other things passing away.’<sup>34</sup>

Evidently, Crosby seems to be confusing “content” with “already fulfilled/present nature/form”, meaning that the ability of a living being to perfect their nature through their actions and choices does not entail that such beings start out with an ontologically blank slate. There are inherent attributes to a being simply by their particular nature/form, but this is not “content” as much as it is “of their form”. This natural state, of goods already belonging to a being that can still work to perfect its own nature, is still formal in character, and what Echavarria calls an entity being ‘ontologically open’.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.4 Weaknesses in the Contentful Account of Evil (Remarks Concerning Pain)

The foregoing discussion is relevant to Crosby’s analysis of pain and suffering since his claim that it disproves evil as privative hinges upon his content/form distinction. Crosby’s main thesis surrounding his argument that pains, especially when caused by disease, are contentful evils is that these ‘pains are the conscious subjective dimension of [a] disease’,<sup>36</sup> when the pains are present. He takes issue with the notion of pain as good insofar as it helps a creature avoid actual/potential harm because said notion betrays ‘an unusually cognitive approach to pain . . . [that] tends to posit a “space” between pain [as subject] and organic damage [as object]’, which obfuscates ‘the way in which certain pains constitute a *participation* in an illness.’<sup>37</sup> For Crosby, it is precisely within our subjective experience where pain is to be found, and since this subjectivity conditions our very ability to conceptualise subject-object relations,<sup>38</sup> like the pain-harm relation, then it must hold more weight as a perspectival tool with which to examine the nature of pain as evil. Thus, these disease-caused pains, for Crosby, ‘form part of a real evil . . . [due to the] fundamental negativity that [they elicit in one’s

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 3, ad. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Echavarria, “Debate on Evil,” 751.

<sup>36</sup> Crosby, “Doubts About the Privation Theory,” 499.

<sup>37</sup> Crosby, 498.

<sup>38</sup> Crosby, 499.

subjectivity] as forming a part or dimension of a [real] evil'<sup>39</sup> – a negativity that is contentful in an experiential sense, and which is felt without any “space”, whereby the pain significantly points back to itself.

Crosby's view is a good example in how arguing from the position of phenomenological primacy – through the importance given to one's subjectivity – inhibits one's ability to appropriately account for subject-object relations. What is missed in his account of pain as contentful evil is that one's subjectivity is conditioned by the bodily object of the brain – we can come to detach ourselves to see ourselves as differentially object and subject, but this does not nullify the fact that we first and foremost have a brain that houses our subject-object conceptualisations. Similarly, with disease, the subjective experience of pain may indeed be part of, as Crosby describes, ‘the unfolding of the evil of the illness’,<sup>40</sup> but from a metaphysical perspective, taking evil as privation, this very unfolding is simply the emergence of pain as the aforementioned signal pointing one towards objective harm/damage; the unfolding is *not* the bequeathal of the status of evil from the disease to the pain by mere virtue of their experiential association.

Nevertheless, even if one's conceptualisation of subject-object relations is rectified to give due importance to bodily objectivity, this does not necessarily prevent the phenomenologist from still claiming phenomenological primacy, simply because they could still take as fundamentally significant, as an assumed principle, experience and the explaining of one's intuitions through experience. However, taking a metaphysical approach does not necessarily preclude the experience of disease-caused pain as bad and repugnant – what the approach will caution about, though, is that just because we experience one thing *as* some attribute does not mean that this very thing *is* that attribute; a grounded approach would be where one's phenomenology is beholden to one's metaphysics, not the other way around. As such, Crosby's arguments concerning pain do not do much at all to contradict the privative account of evil or support the assertion that pains themselves are “contentful” evils.

#### **4. Whether Depression is a Privative Evil**

Moving forward, we will begin discussing depression's relation to privative evil due to the deep emotional suffering depressive affections elicit from those afflicted. Depression is an interesting case, for while one can characterise its pains as non-normally oriented, they are so

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<sup>39</sup> Crosby, 499.

<sup>40</sup> Crosby, 500.

in a non-physical way. Furthermore, many who are suffering from it claim both that depressive feelings persist beyond their ability to control and that said feelings do not seem to have well-defined objects.

#### 4.1 Depression as Phenomenological Reality and Privation of Normal Brain Functioning

Robson, in his analysis of depression, asks ‘[h]ow could these evils – these hopeless, terrible feelings – be accounted for under the evil as privation account?’<sup>41</sup> An immediate answer would be to consider depression as revealing a privation of normal mental functioning. Nevertheless, Robson goes on to counter, assuming, for the sake of argument, a mind-brain identity theory, that ‘[d]epression . . . [may] loosely [be] . . . the result of deficiencies, but depression itself is real . . . [and] an evil which has substantial reality.’<sup>42</sup> He substantiates this claim by arguing that while depressive feelings can be associated with faulty, non-firing synapses, ‘the feeling of depression itself . . . [cannot] be identified with the failing-to-fire synapse, but [only] with the rest of the relevant (positive) part of the brain.’<sup>43</sup> These feelings are certainly real – even if certain depressive tendencies can be associated with non-firing neurons, it is not the fact that said neurons *cause* the feelings, but that this non-firing allows for the firing of other neurons in a non-normal context.<sup>44</sup> We can thus say that these feelings, notwithstanding any wilful causality, are caused by a brain structure deficient in the greater good of its functional normalcy. This is not to say that the deficiency itself is causal, but that whatever positive being is left over – the non-normal structure – is causal.

The evil in this analysis, since it is not a positive entity, is associated with depression insofar as reference is made to the brain’s deficiency in normalcy. To be consistent with privation theory, the evil is an accidental effect, sourced from a positive, albeit attenuated brain structure whose mere functioning is a good insofar as it is an act/process in being. Robson is correct in asserting that ‘depression has to be caused by something positive’,<sup>45</sup> but he errs in conflating the phenomenological reality of the depressive feelings with positive evil by virtue

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Ian Thomas Robson, “Evil, Privation, Depression and Dread,” *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (2013): 558, <https://doi-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01516.x>.

<sup>42</sup> Robson, “Evil, Privation, Depression and Dread,” 559.

<sup>43</sup> Robson, 560.

<sup>44</sup> See Brian Davies, “Reply to Mark Robson on Evil as Privation,” *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (2013): 566, <https://doi-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01518.x>. Davies constructs a similar account to neuronal permission via non-firing, albeit this case in the context of human action. He notes that ‘[n]egligence can enter into an account of how certain events come about, not because there is something to be named “negligence” that has a life of its own and is able to wreak havoc, but because not paying attention to something can sometimes (and sometimes culpably) leave the way open to something able to wreak havoc.’

<sup>45</sup> Robson, “Evil, Privation, Depression and Dread,” 562.

of the simple observation of said feelings' destructive powers – he does so without correctly working through the metaphysical underpinnings of the privative evils associated with depression that condition Robson's analysis of depression as an 'awful phenomenology.'<sup>46</sup> This error in judgment is what most likely leads him to claim that 'evil's empirical reality needs to be matched by a much more robust metaphysical account of its nature.'<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, he fails to realise that his connection of depressive evils with the 'qualitative phenomenology of [their] accompanying feelings'<sup>48</sup> already presumes a sort of phenomenological primacy over metaphysics in accounting for evil's nature, which is an argument in terms well outside the appropriate Thomistic jurisdiction of the privation theory of evil. What Robson, thus, does not showcase is how evil as phenomenologically experienced necessarily entails it actually existing as something with ontological positivity.

## 5. Whether Evolutionary Pain is a Privative Evil

### 5.1 Explanatory Difficulties Associated with the Issue

After this account of the human evils of non-normally oriented pain and suffering, we can now start discussing how evil as privative explains the suffering experienced by animals throughout the evolutionary history of natural selection. The way forward is not as easy as one might think, though, for creaturely suffering, in a purely natural sense that doesn't consider human morality, can be traced back only to the creaturely/natural causes of predation, disease, and/or general misfortune; it might be tenable to relegate the natural evils experienced by people within a broad causal nexus of human will and culpability, but how can non-willed natural processes affecting animals be considered as having anything to do with evil? Is there a way to logically account for such evils without reference to divine punishment?

One may argue, Thomistically, that the progression of natural causal events already takes with it attendant privation, since deficient goods – entities with causal powers obtaining certain privations – always risk accidentally causing evil effects.<sup>49</sup> However, the suffering associated with seemingly random genetic mutations does not accommodate at all the notion of these pains pointing to a privation associated with a standard type/norm, since the mutations themselves not only contribute to the change in that creature's particular type, but also end up becoming part of it as mutated phenotypes. In other words, if a genetic mutation causes unavoidable

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<sup>46</sup> Robson, 564.

<sup>47</sup> Robson, 563.

<sup>48</sup> Robson, 563.

<sup>49</sup> Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 1, art. 3, co.

suffering, due to the nature of the mutated phenotype, and if normal pain ought to signal an evil that will induce harm and damage, then wouldn't the object of the pain, assuming it as the privative evil of the mutated phenotype, in this case be a facet of the positive nature of the creature and the cause of its harm and damage? If yes, then evil can become positively natural, but it will not concord with the concept of privative evils as unnaturally taking away what ought to belong to one's nature; if no, then the mutated phenotype must either be a good, which makes the unavoidable suffering and harm also goods, or a non-privative evil, since how can nature be its own privation? This argument, along with the general evolutionary notion of suffering as a necessary consequence of natural selection via survival of the fittest, has led certain theistic philosophers to either caution against the whole practice of labelling natural aspects as good or evil,<sup>50</sup> or diminish the omnipotence/omniscience of God.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, there may be a way to argue a case for privative evil even in light of this evolutionary account.

### 5.2 A Way Forward (i.e. The Importance of Knowing What You are Referring to)

If we start with the assumption that genetic nature influences the essence of biological beings, then we come straight to the view that natural essences have been in constant flux ever since the inception of life on Earth. This means that what is normally understood as distinct goods proper to different creaturely types can be reinterpreted as interrelated realities, derived from the millennia of incremental genotype modulations that has led to the myriad of biological creatures present today. In other words, the good of creaturely flourishing may be a general good belonging to the very genus of biological organisms, but inter-generational gene mutations, because they contribute to type changes, also contribute to changes in the set of distinct goods necessary for the flourishing of the members of each different generation.

Thus, any effect directly caused by mutations, whether beneficial or detrimental to the creature, are not privations of the goods that ought to contribute to a flourishing related *solely* to that creature's *specific* natural type, for the mutations lead to *those* kinds of goods; however, they can be considered as privations of goods for flourishing related to the very nature of that

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<sup>50</sup> See Ian A. McFarland, "The Problem with Evil," *Theology Today* 74, no. 4 (2018): 336, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573617731711>. For McFarland, 'God's will for particular creatures is bound up with our interactions with them, . . . [and our] response [to such interactions] is not enhanced by labelling matters good or evil, as such labelling tends to short-circuit the process of discernment in which humans seek to further God's good will for creatures in any given situation by attending as much as possible to the perspectives of all those concerned.'

<sup>51</sup> See Nicola Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199931842.001.0001> for an interesting survey of theological responses to the problem of evil that end up denying, implicitly or explicitly, the transcendence of the philosopher's Omni-God.

creature *as a biological being with life*. This is because any mutation that directly hampers an organism's capacity to survive<sup>52</sup> is a mutation of a life-preserving system into one that is less so. This means that the mutation-associated suffering/harm is a good in relation to its pointing to the object of the evil that is the mutation of the life-preserving system, while the suffering/harm is an evil in relation to it being deprived of a naturally avoidable character, for unavoidable harm diminishes one's life; furthermore, the mutation itself is a good insofar as we refer only to its product, the mutated phenotype, as being part of the creature's positive nature, while the mutation is an evil insofar as it is precisely the mutation and deprivation of a life-preserving system. In the case where both the suffering and the mutation are evil, the deprivation of the greater good of a normal, life-affirming bodily system happens due to the actualisation of the lesser good of the mutated phenotype's progression typical of the creature's *specific* form.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing discussion, we can see how suited a privative theory of evil is towards explaining multiple themes of natural evil and helping to interpret our intuitions regarding pain and suffering in multiple contexts. We have also uncovered a common mindset espoused by detractors of the privative theory, which is their granting of more warrant towards a purely phenomenological account of evil as opposed to a metaphysically grounded one.<sup>53</sup> In general, the possibility of natural evil hinges on it having always been connected with creation, and on the purpose of God for the universe' perfectibility. Without this possibility for perfection, we would not be able to experience progression through a natural hierarchy of goods, which Echavarria considers as 'necessary for the greatest perfection of the universe', and thus why God 'sometimes permits that the things that by their own nature can fall, do effectively fall from their own good.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The definition here will be "survival without *naturally* unavoidable suffering and harm" since this seems to avoid the absurd claim that any drastic reduction in a creature's absolute life span, due to the harm/suffering induced by the mutation, is now that creature's natural standard as a being with life (not as what is proper for its *specific type*, for the attenuated life span *is* proper for that creature's *specific type*), and one that sets itself as a definitive good necessary for the mutated creature's general flourishing (not the flourishing *typical* of that creature's mutated genotype, if there is such a thing) despite the unavoidable harm.

<sup>53</sup> Lee concisely remarks on this issue by stating that 'the position that evil as such is a privation is a metaphysical account of evil, and so its truth (if it is true) may not be apparent to immediate experience or consciousness'. Lee, "Evil as Such Is a Privation," 471n9.

<sup>54</sup> Echavarria, "Debate on Evil," 739.

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